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Book review

Noordegraaf, M & G. Vierwind (Eds): *Hulpverlening aan jeugd en gezin. Systeemgericht werken met adolescenten.* (2013)(*Doing social work in the field of youth and family. A systems-approach of adolescents.* Bussum: Uitgeverij Coutinho. - 1e druk, 247 pp.
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This book is a product of the researchers in the program (lectoraat) 'Youth and Family' from the Christian University Ede. The readability is very good (if you read Dutch, that is..) in part by the systematic set-up of the book, in part by the large amount of practical illustrations. A drawback may be that a lot of different authors contributed to this publication so that the style and the usage of words changes regularly.

Structure of the book

Different authors contributed to this book from the perspective of 1. Practice, 2. Theory and 3. Techniques.

In the first part of the book different practices are being described: pedagogical support for families with children in the age between 12 and 18, outreaching help to vulnerable families and residential youthcare.

Pedagogical support

Developments in Holland show a stronger sense of responsibility from the side of the government for the upbringing of children. From 2007-2010 there even was a Department for Youth and Family. In recent years the interference of the government got decentralized to the local government. This gives youthcare in Holland a specific 'Dutch' flavor. The practice of this youthcare work is illustrated on the basis of examples collected by bachelor students. Their collection of data seems to suggest that the most important factor for adolescents is: being seen and recognized in his/her uniqueness. In some European countries the interference of the government is even bigger (for instance, in the UK or Sweden) and in some countries much less.

The contents of this chapter fit the general trend in research in Europe on 4 levels: 1. The profile of the social worker is central: friendliness, empathy, reliability and methodicality are key in working with adolescents, 2. There is a strong emphasis on solution-based methods, 3. There is a strong concern for effective factors and 4. Normative aspects: being a role-model.

Being present in vulnerable families

The same set-up of the chapter is used as in chapter 1: First the description of the work field, then effective factors, then tensions and lastly recent developments. Characteristics of Dutch aid to vulnerable families are: focus is on families with children younger than 18, with multiple problems, in an integrative way, at home, involving the entire family, to prevent outplacement of children. Effective factors here are empathy, empowerment, custom build programs, practical help, context-sensitivity. Most tensions are about the balance between control and contact. Finally most important developments include decentralization and networking.

Residential youth care

The workfield of residential youth care in Holland can be summarized in the; as-as-as-policy. 'As close as possible near home', 'as short as possible' and 'as light as responsible'. In the history of youth care in Holland this means a development from reactive to proactive working with youth and their parents/network. Still, Holland belongs together with Denmark, France and Germany to the countries with the highest percentage of children placed out of home. Three forms of evidence-based methods are being used in Holland: MDFT (Multi-Dimensional Family Therapy), FFT (Functional Family Therapy) and MST (Multi-System Therapy). Apart from that more loosely-coupled factors are: Systems-approach is explicit in organizational mission, employees should share this mission and focus on it, parties work together, obligatory cooperation of the parents, adhere to the norms of the parents. The age-old question remains: What is the optimal level of parent-involvement? In this chapter the relationship between practice based research, evidence based methods and basic assumptions becomes clear.

Starting with this rooting in practices the textbook then moves on to theories. Theories are drawn from (developmental) psychology, sociology and ethics. Sociologically seen the most important factors influencing family life in Western Europe are; the tension between autonomy and connectedness; the vision on the importance of the family; economic factors; and the dynamics between individual life and family life. The (mixed blessing) of thereflective, negotiating family life at the beginning of the 21st century seems to be the privilege of a highly educated and high-income society. In this chapter the work of Anthony Giddens serves as a framework.

The theme of autonomy and connectedness returns in the chapter about psychological theories concerning the relations between the adolescent and his parents. The relationship between adolescents and their parents is here described as a function of de development of the adolescent AND the development of the parents. Interesting is that a couple of themes here come together: the balance between safety and connectedness (see vulnerable families), autonomy and connectedness as related to the late-modern society (sociology) and the requirements on the social worker (here there is made a case for the importance of making your own prejudices explicit, where it touches the ethical dimension). This chapter gives an insightful overview of the central concepts of adolescent-parent interactions: e.g. Systems-

theory, adolescence, pedagogics, parenthood and life-phases helping the social worker to get more 'eyes and ears' for the clients.

Another theme that returns is the theme of 'good communication' or ethics of communication. This chapter describes the effect, the influence and the power of words. Here Levinas and Weil are used as a mirror to analyse the important factors in communication: Mentioned are e.g. giving attention, reverence and recognition with the intention to do justice to the client as a unique Other. The normative level and personal development here seem of crucial importance to the quality of social work. What here is presupposed is that the parent will normally pass on his convictions about recognition.

After part I (practices) and 2 (theories) the book now moves on to Techniques. Keeping practices and theories in mind what is good social work in practice? 4 subjects are explored: Dealing with questions of meaning; dealing with loyalty; dealing with connectedness in relations; dealing with 'delicate subjects'.

The chapter about questions of life in social work first sketches the outline of the field of meaningful questions. The point of departure is the presupposition that people are 'seekers of meaning'. The article then moves on to the basic attitude a social worker needs in order to be able to address questions of meaning in practice. Important factors seem to be: 1. Being available and present, 2. Collaborative investigation, 3. Endurance, 4. Not offering easy solutions. Goals for working with questions of meaning are: getting clearer on the system-of-meaning a client has; learning how to endure unsolvable questions; redefining the meaning of lived-through experiences. The most important and difficult task for a social worker here seems to be to 'just listen'.

Loyalty is the next subject to be discussed. Here the work of Nagy is central. Central conviction is here that people become people in connection with others. Good social work addresses loyalty in relational terms, uses it for clarification purposes not for diagnosing, presupposes loyalty in parent-child relations, creates space for relevant shortcomings, does the parents justice, knows their own dynamics of loyalty.

'Connective questions' are the subject of the next chapter. This approach draws heavily on Attachment (Bowlby), Recognition, Narrative psychology, and Empowering. Techniques to be used here include: multilateral bias, genograms, non-judgmental language, connective questions as interventions. Good social work seems to involve here: exploring the connections the client has and activating the potential for improving the situation. Here the relationship of trust with the social worker becomes central.

'Addressing delicate questions' is the final chapter of the book. It describes what makes situations delicate, how a delicate situation can be recognized, addressed and dealt with in a conversation. For a good understanding you would have to read these practical chapters for yourself.

Discussion

After this, quite extended, overview of the contents I will now try to reveal the underlying presuppositions. A couple of concepts keep coming back in this publication, e.g. the central role of families; the systems-approach; the importance of (the intergenerationist influence of)

recognition; people as ‘seekers of meaning’; people become themselves in contact / relations with others.

Although families in Holland are more and more reconstituted, the question remains to what extent this preference results from the Christian worldview of most of the contributors. Subsidiarity or ‘contexts of responsibility’ is an important factor in the shaping of the (Christian-)Dutch society. So working with families always begs the question; What right do you have as a social worker to intervene in families? It would be interesting to see how cultural-diverse this question would be answered.

Apart from this more ideological question the structure of the book is remarkably in line with how Prof. Dr Hans van Ewijk described the future of social-work-research (already mentioned above): This publication teaches a lot about: 1. The desired profile of the social worker: e.g. friendliness, empathy, reliability and methodicality are key in working with adolescents, as well as being available and present; seeking collaborative investigation; being resilient, not offering easy solutions, knowing his own dynamics of loyalty². There is a strong emphasis on solution-based methods e.g. empowerment, custom build programs, practical help, multilateral bias, genograms, non-judgmental language, connective questions as interventions. 3. Effective factors uncovered in this publication are a.o. Alignment (of systems-approach) in organizational mission is crucial, employees should share this mission and focus on it, parties work together, obligatory cooperation of the parents, adherence to the norms of the parents resulting in e.g. MDFT (Multi-Dimensional Family Therapy), FFT (Functional Family Therapy) and MST (Multi-System Therapy). Sociological factors: the tension between autonomy and connectedness, the vision on the importance of the family, economic factors, the dynamics between individual life and family life, psychological concepts of systems-theory, adolescence, pedagogics, parenthood and life-phases and the normative quality and personal development, 4. Normative aspects: being a role-model including professional skills: addressing loyalty in relational terms, using it for clarification purposes not for diagnosing, presupposing loyalty in parent-child relations, creating space for relevant shortcomings, doing justice to parents, ultimately: being able to build relationships of trust.

At the one hand the amount of relevant factors in social work & being able to handle them are awe-inspiring. On the other hand: All these relevant factors and demands require a lot of research to establish more firmly the underlying dynamics, practice-based methods and effectiveness of social work.

Social work is portrayed in this book as: coping with the building-stones of social life, needing a lot of training to attain excellence in social work as a craft, but moving from being ‘mere application of social policy’ or ‘being a mystical personal skill / talent’ to a more solution-focussed, research-informed and consciously normatively-laden profession. My expectation would be that the (international) discussion of the findings in this book will enhance the professional status of social work.

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