
The title of this book is quite deceiving. Upon picking up Challenging Social Work, I originally thought the main focus would be on ethical dilemmas in an ever-changing technologically advancing world. For example, I (and my colleagues who saw the book) thought I was about to embark on an Internet excursion that placed emphasis on the need for the social worker to be technologically competent. I was expecting McDonald to plea for social workers to learn more about encryption and password protection. If this is what the reader seeks, this book is not for him/her. However, if the reader is seeking a comprehensive theoretical analysis of how macro international economic concepts impact the foundation of social service delivery, then the reader will not find a better book. Thus, the primary audience of Challenging Social Work includes professors of social work involved in graduate-level instruction. In the United States we see a national movement among social workers to embrace a “global perspective”. Those interested in this perspective need to read McDonald’s refreshing analysis.

As our world grows smaller, the evolution of the world economy has an increasing impact on the local delivery of social services. Perhaps the greatest contribution McDonald has for the profession is the clarity she offers in creating linkages from macro/global concepts to micro service delivery. In addition, and
just as critical, McDonald also demonstrates how the international economy has an impact on other social work/sociological institutions. I found her discourse on the impact of international economics on social work culture utterly fascinating. Masterfully employing theory, McDonald illustrates how the economy affects perception and how these perceptual changes impact on a social worker's vision of service delivery to groups such as immigrants (documented or undocumented). I found her thoughts refreshing.

McDonald provides at least two major contributions to the field. The first is her analysis of sustainable communities. The new "free market" and outsourcing has had a profound effect on lowering the prices of commodities for economically struggling consumers, but conversely it has eliminated unskilled and semi-skilled labor positions. These positions, as it turns out, are the mainstay of those consumers who most benefit from lower prices. Thus, those who need low prices the most no longer have sustainable incomes to afford the lower prices. We might have been better off with higher prices and jobs that provided greater than subsistence income. McDonald creates the clearest vision of this phenomenon I have ever read.

Second, McDonald offers an analysis of devolution or "New Public Management" (NPM). By this, she means the process by which the government moves from centralized control of social services to decentralized or local control. The recent written material regarding the implications of this process could easily fill a warehouse. However, I found McDonald's analysis enlightening and inspiring. McDonald contends that government officials are thoughtful and calculating with a focus on an agenda. However, I see them as unthinking and pursuing an end in which they possess no theoretical grounding. Instead, I see governments (particularly the US) as pursuing devolution only as it serves their values. For example, in the United States, the federal government moved policy making to local and state government. As a result, I have witnessed an improvement in client satisfaction and an improved ability to become economically independent. Many of the programs (education, in particular) were not to the liking of the centralized government. As a result, some policy control was removed from local officials. (Some social workers have speculated that local control over policy decisions was usurped by the centralized government in order to transfer funds to finance the Iraq War. This isn't a decision based on a theoretical framework, as McDonald might suggest.) Thus, I do not believe the system that McDonald describes is 100 percent accurate. The federal government is saying "we want the local government to make and be responsible for all policy decisions—except if we do not like them".

There is a great deal more to be said about Challenging Social Work. However, the centerpiece of this book is its global perspective. This is particularly important for social workers in the United States who tend to be quite ethnocentric. I strongly recommend Challenging Social Work to professors who want to maintain global literacy for themselves and their students. Every academic program should take steps to ensure that their library adopts McDonald's fine work.

Richard Hugman takes an innovative look at recent developments in ethics in the caring professions, particularly from the standpoint of feminist ethics (or the ethics of care), the ethics of ecology (highlighting sustainability and the value of all sentient life) and fresh scholarship in postmodernism (virtue ethics and discursive ethics). After a succinct and accessible summary of the four major philosophical movements in the first chapter, Hugman moves to these more emotionally centered, process-oriented perspectives in the middle chapters. In the last few chapters, he narrows the focus to discourse ethics, influenced by the work of Habermas in the 1990s, and affirms its utility as a more inclusive, participatory, context-driven framework for professional ethics.

In the self-authored preface, Hugman asserts that ethics discourse should be accessible to all helping practitioners: “Ethics is too important only to be left to specialists” (p. xi). His premise, however, appears compromised by the decidedly intellectual nature of this book. This is an extremely academic work and, as such, is quite useful as a synopsis of recent approaches and the impact they make on professional ethics. As a textbook, though, the work would be most accessible to higher level students who are already versed in philosophical history; dealing as it does with such variety and depth of philosophical development and perspectives. It would likely present too hard a challenge even for Master’s-level students. One handy feature of the book, which does serve as a mitigating factor for its inherent complexity, is the Glossary of Terms, where Hugman gives wonderfully succinct definitions for abstract philosophical concepts (notably, a definition for “solipsism” that is approximately 10 words!), which would definitely endear him to doctoral students and scholars alike.

A strong contribution of the work is Hugman’s exploration of discourse ethics as a more practical and fruitful approach to ethics for the helping professions, affirming as it does the place of both rationality and compassion in processing ethics for specific professional situations (example: this worker, and this client, versus a hypothetical worker and client). Hugman infuses the principle of compassion, representing the importance of human emotion, into a previously purely rational approach to ethics, such as the Kantian categorical imperative. In building his case for discursive professional ethics, Hugman discards a solely abstract framework of intellectual principles and affirms the importance of an approach that “has to be teased out in the context of specific relationships” (p. 71).