

Risk, social policy and welfare

Kemshall, H. (2002) Open University Press, pbk £15.99 hbk £50.00, 159 pp.

In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries risk has become a central concern in public services in general and in health and welfare services in particular. Hazel Kelmsall is exceptionally well qualified to document the development of concerns about risk in public services and the impact of these concerns on their organisation and delivery. Not only has she edited two texts designed to improve the ways in which risk is managed by health and welfare professionals and agencies (Kelmsall and Pritchard, 1996, 1997), but she has also critically documented the impact of risk on the probation service and practice (Kelmsall, 1998).

Writing a book on social policy and risk is immensely challenging. The author has to understand and be able to convey the changing nature of public services in the UK and to balance this with an analysis of the changing nature of risk and risk management in these services. Hazel Kelmsall provides an excellent account of both changes in public services, especially the development of post-Fordist services based on more responsive public services and more responsible citizens. She clearly demonstrates the ways in which these changes have reconfigured risk. A more responsive public service is not only more exposed to risk as it is expected to reach higher standards often on lower resources, but is also subject to greater scrutiny through audit systems which are often linked to naming and shaming mechanisms. Similarly, more 'responsible' citizens are expected to manage their own risks through more responsible behaviour, e.g. healthy living or insurance against various types of risks.

While I found this book extremely interesting and will use it as a source book, I am not sure that the uninitiated reader will find it easy reading. Part of the difficulty relates to the density and complexity of the material, especially the discussion of the changing nature of public services. While some discussion is clearly necessary, I felt that at times there was too much detail and, since the relevance of these discussions for risk was not always clear, the risk issues tended to be overwhelmed. This tended to obscure some important risk debates. Central to Kemshall's analysis of the restructuring of public services is the observation that risk and vulnerability are replacing need as the key principles of welfare rationing and provision. An important issue is whether this change will bring benefits and, if so, for whom. Elsewhere Kelmsall (2000) addresses this question in a sophisticated manner. She argues that it really depends how risk is defined and used. If risk is defined in a narrow hazard-oriented way then risk management can be a mechanism of protecting the agency and its employees from blame and litigation at the cost of restricting users' choices and rights. If on the other hand it is defined in a broader, more creative way, for example as reasonable risk-taking, then it can be used as a way of empowering users. In this book there is only a very short discussion of empowerment and no real discussion of the ways in which risk can be used to achieve empowerment. I am sure that Kemshall wanted to avoid recycling her previous work (for example there is only one reference to the probation service), but this is a pity as it is of such outstanding quality.

References

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