

**OLIVE STEVENSON:**

**A CHAMPION FOR SOCIAL WORK**

**Book review of: Olive Stevenson, *Reflections on a Life in Social Work* –**

***A Personal and Professional Memoir* (2013)**

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## **Reflections on a Life in Social Work: A Personal and Professional Memoir**

Olive Stevenson

Hinton House, Buckingham, 2013

135 pp., £16.99, ISBN 978-1-90-653157-7

Olive Stevenson devoted her life to social work, entering her career as an assistant house mother in a small children's home in Croydon in 1948, when she was aged seventeen, and continuing to be actively involved into the early 2000s and her death in 2013: over 60 years of engagement, during which time she witnessed the development of social work from the post-war welfare state settlement and the 1948 Children Act through to the present. In the process, Olive distinguished herself as a 'practitioner, teacher, researcher, scholar and consultant', being 'without doubt the leading social work academic of her generation' and, through her roles in public life, 'a public intellectual' (Ferguson, 2013, pp. xi, xviii).

Olive's stroke in 2010 prevented her from completing the Memoir but she was able to review it and agree to its publication in its unfinished state. To this has been added a Preface by Phyllida Parsloe, an extended and informative Foreword by Harry Ferguson and a reflective Postscript by Jane Campbell. Additionally, the volume contains two previously unpublished lectures by Olive, one on the relevance of Clare Winnicott's teaching to contemporary social work practice (2009) and the other a personal and professional reflection on growing older (the Graham Lecture, 1999). The volume concludes with a comprehensive bibliography of Olive's published work. Such a combination of pieces could lead to a rather disjointed, even unsatisfying, book but nothing could be further from the case. The two lectures published as appendices complement the Memoir beautifully. Winnicott was a central influence on Olive's life and understanding of the nature and purpose of social work and this handsome lecture reveals why this was the case and why social work should incorporate Winnicott's teaching as central to today's practice. The lecture on ageing fills out

aspects of the Memoir and takes the reader forward reflectively to Olive's later and last years. The contributions of Olive's colleagues and friends, and especially of Ferguson's Foreword, pull the whole together skilfully, crafting a worthy testimonial to Olive's life.

Olive wrote with directness, clarity and insight. To this is added in this volume a highly personal thoughtful reflectiveness and sensitivity which is both moving and results in an extraordinary richness for the reader: Olive's final gift to social work. She writes '[s]o this memoir is a particular kind of journey, which tries to describe the making of a social worker from childhood' (p. 2). The Memoir takes a chronological approach but pauses on occasion to consider certain themes such as religion or the impact of ill health, health care and bereavement on her family and herself during her childhood. The narrative ends at 1973-4 with a full chapter on her role as a member of the Maria Colwell inquiry and her authorship of the groundbreaking chapter on inter-agency working and – bringing her very much to public attention – a dissenting minority report. There is then a thematic chapter addressing unresolved issues for social work; the 'wrong turnings' (p. 71) that Olive believed social work has taken and how these might be addressed. In effect, the narrative is resumed in the Graham Lecture (Appendix ii), in which she also tackles at greater length some issues that receive little attention or explanation in the Memoir, for example national politics and political change, especially the impact of the disheartening Thatcher years (pp. 112-6), the position of women and what she considers her rather slow response to feminism, and her reflections on being lesbian (pp. 107-11). The lecture carries the reader through in this intensely personal and self-reflective way to Olive's growing involvement as a professional with issues of ageing and elder abuse and her own experience of older age and anticipation of her final years and death.

Olive received her social work education (1952-3) at the London School of Economics under the tutorship of Clare Britton (later Winnicott). From this she developed a

psychodynamic perspective that underpinned her practice throughout her career. But this psychodynamic approach did not entail some kind of exclusive, analytical relationship with the client focused on the inner world. Instead social work's distinctive contribution is to bring the inner and outer worlds of the service user together and to respond to both with judgement, compassion and use of oneself through a 'dynamic interplay between emotion and intellect' (p. 1). This is Olive's – and Winnicott's – central message to social work:

A social worker moves between the inner and outer worlds of the person(s) they are seeking to help; that is, they may focus on the feelings, attitudes etc. of the person(s) or on the adverse social circumstances in which such person(s) exist, or, most likely, both. They are not either psychotherapists or social reformers (except indirectly) but employ some of the attributes (but not the depth of expertise) of both. (p. 75)

Defending this position and, indeed, her internal conflict over whether she did enough to defend it and with it the position of her friend Clare Winnicott resonates through the book (Ferguson, 2013, p. xxv, is clear she did). Olive considers that social work in Britain, in the way it was articulated if not actually practised, fell unduly under the influence of American analytic social work practice of the time, exposing it to accusations of irrelevance to people's real lives, trenchant sociological critique, the growth of radical social work and disparagement and rejection of psychodynamic approaches (pp. 72-9). This was one of the failings of social work during the 1970s and Olive argues it was abetted and compounded by the introduction of genericism. In the process, specialist skills were lost in over-crowded educational curricular (p. 90), social workers were simply not equipped for 'developing specialisms *within* genericism' (p. 71) and the newly formed local authority social service departments (SSDs) 'muddled through, quite unprepared for the succession of calamities and increasing frequency of inquiries into child deaths' (p. 71). This has led, by way of reaction,

to today's managerialist, techno-rational and risk averse profession and Olive's despair sometimes breaks through: the failure to innovate and develop specialist child care skills (p. 90) and a situation 'when we scarcely recognise psychoanalytic ways of understanding behaviour and interaction' (p. 78). She identifies basic good practice from her years as a child care officer in Devon in the 1950s that has been lost in many areas in subsequent decades: proper suitcases for children's possessions when moving them, not black bin bags (p. 33), the scope for sensitive communication with children when driving them, not using third party drivers, (p. 94), the key relationship-based role of continuity fulfilled by the child's social worker as 'bridging person', not fragmenting tasks between different workers (p. 94).

Olive proposes some solutions to the malaise of social work that centre around social work education, staff supervision and understanding key psychoanalytical concepts. She calls for proponents of psychodynamically informed approaches to evidence what they advocate (p. 81). Perhaps Olive's call is now being answered as evidence accumulates (Ferguson, 2013, p. xxvi; Mishna *et al.*, 2013), including developments in neuroscience research (Montgomery, 2013; Trevithick, 2014). The Munro report (2011) has placed systemic and relationship practice firmly centre stage and mounts a concerted attack on over-proceduralised managerialist practice. The evidential case is now clearly being made but social work generally, and child deaths particularly, deal in the public arena with the containment of 'dangerous knowledge' (Cooper, 2014, p. 271). The pull for both policy makers and practitioners to adopt defences such as procedure-based practice with limits on professional discretion, judgement and responsiveness will always be powerful (Cooper, 2014; Dugmore, 2014) and it remains to be seen if the overwhelming weight of evidence can eventually lead to a genuine change in the culture, policy and practices of social work.

No doubt every reader will respond differently to this volume, with sparks of recognition that chime with their own experience or insights that throw light on what was

previously a puzzle. I received my social work education in the mid-1970s, that dire period in Olive's estimation when genericism was being established. I defend genericism to this day and see rather a dreadful failure in the national provision made for specialist post-qualifying education. I was startled, therefore, to see Olive saying that genericism and creation of SSDs 'at the time seemed progressive and worthwhile; in retrospect it is easy to see how unprepared society, government and social work academia were for this very large undertaking' (p. 89). Unprepared? I value to this day the stimulating and very sound social work education I received at Exeter University but Olive's comment – the perspective of a senior academic not a rookie student such as myself – brings home to me the immensity of these changes and, indeed, the importance of my own PQ education – core provision by my employing probation service – in helping to root me theoretically.

In 2005 Olive was awarded an Honorary Doctorate at Kingston University, where I was at the time a social work lecturer. Instead of viewing this as a one-off ceremony, she then made herself available as a consultant to staff, supporting research projects and chairing the School of Social Work's annual research conference. At the end of each conference, she would present a summary of the day's proceedings and these short addresses were revelatory in their clarity and incisiveness. She acted as my main supervisor for my own PhD (2005-6) and I retain feelings of gratitude and privilege to have worked so closely under her guidance. Following her stroke in 2010, she still attended an annual conference and, while not in a position to chair it, she led a small group discussion in which she shared her own experiences of illness, health care and disability. She inspired those around her and I believe she will inspire all those who pick up and read this book.

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