

BOOK REVIEW

De-professionalism and austerity: Challenges for the public sector

By Nigel Malin

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As Nigel Malin observes in his latest book 'De-Professionalism and Austerity: Challenges for the Public Sector', 'If austerity finished tomorrow it is likely that de-professionalisation would continue driven by the neo-liberal approach to service provision' (p.26). This timely, insightful and authoritatively written book provides an incisive analysis of the role of global neo-liberalism and associated austerity measures in forging the de-professionalisation of work within the public sector.

Drawing upon the lived experiences of public sector professionals working within health, social care and education in Britain the book provides a sophisticated and detailed theoretical and empirical analysis of contemporary processes of de-professionalisation. Conceptualising de-professionalism as a multi-dimensional process the book utilises a range of theoretical and interdisciplinary perspectives to gain an insight into how the identities of public sector professionals have been shaped by an employment culture forged by neo-liberal capitalism, austerity, inequality and globalisation.

Here de-professionalism is theorised as being situated within five key dimensions; *the transfer of power dimension* which is exhibited by reductions in levels of autonomy at work accompanied by feelings of powerlessness; *the status and market strength dimension*, associated with measures for lessening the need for specialist knowledge and expertise; *the transformative-contextual dimension* evidenced by feelings of insecurity and a lack of belonging; *the managerialism dimension* related to loss of professional autonomy and subordination to external supervision and the *reconstituting professionalities dimension* also regarded as 'the de-professionalisation of society' across European societies (Demailly & De La Broise, 2009). More broadly, this denotes a European wide transformation in the mode of bureaucratic professional regulation particularly within the public sector. The lived experiences of public sector professionals related in the book evidences all five of these dimensions. Whilst other recent studies reinforce this evidence (Connolly & Hughes-Stanton, 2020; De Saxe, Bucknovitz, & Mahoney-Mosedale, 2020; Trappenburg & van Beek, 2019; Wennström, 2016), the book provides a detailed and coherent analysis of the historical anti-cedents and multi-dimensional characteristics of de-professionalisation across all three key areas of the public sector in Britain; health, social care and education.

The contemporary significance of this book is clearly illustrated by the experiences of public sector professionals within the current Covid-19 health pandemic. Here, health, social care and educational professionals are at the front line of the response to the Covid 19 health crisis across Europe. In Britain, as Michael Marmot (2020) has evidenced, the health pandemic has simultaneously exposed the extent and depth of social and health inequalities and the full

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impact of austerity measures in reducing the capacity of public service professionals to respond effectively to the crisis. Moreover, the experiences of public sector professionals within the current Covid 19 crisis clearly resonates with Nigel Malin's argument that professionals working in education, health and social care today are constantly challenged with regard to the decisions that they make, the organisational structures in which they operate and the quality of the service they provide. In particular, Nigel Malin's argument finds strong resonance in current events relating to the grading of student examinations across Britain. At the time of writing this review, the final exam results of young people across Britain were subjected to a standardisation model which utilised an algorithm to finalise student grades rather than the estimated grades provided by teachers. This model was widely criticised by teaching professionals with the chief executive of the Association of Colleges in England, arguing that students felt grades had been pulled down 'in a way where they feel that there's an injustice been done to them' as young people from schools in the most socio-economically deprived areas of Britain have been disproportionately affected by the external standardisation of grades (Adams & McIntyre, 2020).

Whilst the Scottish Government has subsequently reverted back to the estimated grades set by teachers, the imposition of an externalised standardisation process as a substitute for the estimated grades provided by teaching professionals and the related impact on already entrenched educational inequalities in Britain reveals the relevance of all five dimensions of de-professionalisation identified by Nigel Malin in this book.

Given the general tendency towards 'the de-professionalisation' of societies across Europe this book is an invaluable resource for policy makers, practitioners and researchers particularly in light of the profound challenges that lie ahead within post-Covid-19 societies across Europe.

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