

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Jack Levinson, *Making Life Work: Freedom and Disability in a Community Group Home*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, 304 pp. \$US 22.50 paper (978-0-8166-5082-8), \$US 67.50 hardcover (978-0-8166-5081-1)

The de-institutionalization of people with disabilities in recent decades has been accompanied by a movement towards home and community care. Within disability studies, the concept of community care is central to the process of disablism (i.e., beliefs and actions that exclude or disadvantage people with disabilities). There have been great efforts in recent years to involve people with intellectual disabilities in decisions regarding their lives and to help them become more independent. Thus, group homes were organized out of concern for the rights and autonomy of persons with disabilities. Levinson's book describes a year-long ethnography of a group home for adults with intellectual disabilities. This book is important because in the sociological literature relatively little attention has been paid to people with intellectual disabilities. Most of the research on group homes focuses on homeless or troubled youth, and very little is known about the inner workings of a group home for people with intellectual disabilities. Levinson's book addresses these gaps in the sociology and disability studies literature.

People with intellectual disabilities typically encounter challenges with independent living, control, and self-governance. They also face both inclusion and exclusion in the community, from special schools and group homes to mainstream education and other special accommodations. In a detailed history, Levinson shows the complex link between services and social control of people with disabilities. His main argument is that the group home represents the dilemma between authority and freedom in contemporary society. Adults with intellectual disabilities are "no longer inmates but citizens," and are presumed to lack capacity for freedom, but actually govern themselves. Levinson examines how this group home for people with intellectual disabilities accomplishes its task of supervising individuals who "are thought of as free yet incapable of freedom."

In Levinson's ethnography the group home is approached as a workplace because it enables a conception of organizational participation as an ongoing dilemma of freedom rather than a problem of power. He

shows that the group home is organized as a workplace by three kinds of work: the work of counselors and group home staff; the self-work of residents; and everyday life itself. Levinson argues that the group home is an organizational realization of freedom in contemporary society and examines how these ideals are realized practically in the ongoing problems of group home life that must be solved every day. He demonstrates how the group home depends on the voluntary and skillful participation of all those who live and work there. The ongoing participation of residents is integral to group home life, and the work they perform there allows them to become more independent.

The book shows that resident work is similar to what we all do, which is to live better. The focus is on how counselors and residents draw on the clinical and practical methods that are a reflexive feature of the setting, their “know-how” in the group home’s local order. Group home residents govern themselves according to an ethic of autonomy that requires them to take their own selves actively as objects of work. Levinson argues that resident work is one example of broader ethical practices and makes residents’ lives different from everyone else’s. He describes many inequalities between the counselors and residents and the complex character of authority in the group home. He also shows how rights and autonomy pose ongoing practical issues that organize the group home in fundamentally different ways than does the direct coercion that is characteristic of other settings. He argues that work within the group home is the work of governing because authority is not simply exercised in opposition to the autonomy of individual residents; instead authority seeks to shape the capacities for autonomy on which the group home depends.

Making Life Work is a well-written and insightful book that provides a rich portrayal and a novel understanding of adults with intellectual disabilities living in a group home. I recommend it to others in the fields of sociology and disability studies.

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