Peter Beresford and Sarah Carr (eds) (2018), *Social Policy First Hand: An International Introduction to Participatory Social Welfare*, Bristol: Policy Press, £24.99, pp. 320, pbk. doi:10.1017/S0047279419001089

At first glance, this book might seem like a classic case of the difficult second album. As a sequel to Peter Bereford's 2016 work *All Our Welfare*, which set out the case for participatory social policy to meet the contemporary challenges of the welfare state, this volume initially feels quite unruly – as if the editors have invited too many voices and ended up with something of a cacophony. However, closer inspection reveals that this diversity is both deliberate and of considerable value. In a sense, the editors are trying to practice what they preach by including such a wide range of contributors – activists, service users and practitioners, as well as researchers – enabling an exploration of the lived experience and 'user knowledges' that lie at the heart of the shift from paternalistic to participatory social policy. The result is a kind of experimental compilation album – you won't like all the chapters, but there is definitely something for everyone, including some timeless classics.

The challenge for the reader may be in selecting from this smorgasbord (if you'll excuse the mixed metaphor). Participatory social policy can refer to anything from an individual having control over their own services, to user-led organisations influencing national or international policy, as well as participation in social policy research, and this book includes examples of participation at every level in a multitude of contexts. To help with navigation, the book is divided into eight sections, although many of the contributions cover issues which would fit in more than one place, so it is perhaps more useful to explore the book in two halves.

The first four sections lay out the context for participatory social policy, reviewing the global issues facing contemporary social policy and introducing the lived experience of people who have found themselves excluded, controlled or oppressed by their interactions with the traditional welfare state. For those who are new to the concepts of participatory social policy, whether as students, practitioners or researchers, these sections will be of particular value, laying bare the failings of paternalistic systems of 'care', but also demonstrating the benefits that can be generated by participatory approaches in terms of individual outcomes and improvements to services. For example, Cameron's first-hand account of the dehumanising effect of her experiences in housing and homelessness services which were more interested in 'bricks and mortar' than people is truly distressing to read, but also demonstrates the ways in which treating people as assets and co-producing services can transform both lives and services.

In the last four sections of the book, the focus shifts to the ways in which social policy, as both practice and academic field, can be reshaped through different modes of participation, campaigning and research. Particularly interesting here are the discussions of new approaches to participation and campaigning, using social media and other online platforms. Although there is a recognition that the web can be a toxic place at times, the contributions from Harris, Onions and also (earlier in the book) de Iongh illustrate the disruptive power of social media as a tool which can bypass the traditional hierarchies which serve to exclude user voices. There are clearly substantial challenges here for large, formally-structured public and third sector organisations, as well as for social policy research – capturing, understanding and responding to these new approaches requires flexibility and political skill. The inclusion of participatory research in the final section of the book (as well as in a number of earlier chapters) also highlights some particular challenges for academia, particularly in terms of supporting user-controlled research when funding and timescales often make this difficult. Moreover, if I can be excused a personal soapbox moment, academics sometimes need to be reminded that participatory research is not the same as researching participation – despite

the substantial contribution from this collection, there is still a significant gap in the evidence base regarding user participation in most areas of social policy.

Looking across the whole volume, there is a question as to whether the book's contributors tend to be a little too sanguine about the challenges of shifting towards a more participatory social policy – though perhaps this is unsurprising, given that many of the chapters are written by activists. Whilst the book is clearly intended to add to the case for a participatory shift in social policy, there are points where it would help to have some deeper analysis of the dangers of tokenism, manipulation or responsibilisation (Cooke and Kothari, 2001, Rose and Miller, 2010), where organisations are able to co-opt activists and participatory processes to their own ends. Some of the latter sections, however, go some way towards exploring these issues. Thus, Croft provides a fascinating reflective exploration from a practitioner's perspective of the meaning of participation in end-of-life care, and the challenges of enabling service user control in a context of power dynamics between professionals and family members, as well as within the family. At a more collective level, the chapters by Burns and Williams are particularly useful in highlighting the complexities of both rights-based campaigning and participatory research when issues of intersectionality lead to questions around representation and power, whilst Ferguson highlights the risk of neoliberal governments co-opting the demand for user control in order to increase marketisation of services.

At the risk of being pedantic, the range of the material occasionally feels a little narrow, despite the vast diversity of contributions. Whilst there are chapters which draw on evidence from a range of countries including the US, Australia, Nepal, Southern Africa, South America and Europe, the majority of the contributions are UK-focused, which somewhat undermines the 'international' angle of the book. Moreover, even the 'UK' chapters are very England-centric, which arguably neglects the participatory policy innovations emerging in the devolved administrations –Williams' chapter suggests that devolution in itself may be acting as a driver for innovation in participatory policy, drawing on experience from Wales, but there is no evidence from Scotland, where the Community Empowerment agenda is wide-reaching and even the new Social Security system is being partly shaped by user involvement. Arguably the book is also rather heavily focused on disability, although this is perhaps unsurprising given the editors' backgrounds and the central importance of disability movements in demanding more participatory social policy.

Setting this pedantry aside, it is clear that *Social Policy First Hand* offers an impressive breadth of perspectives on participatory social policy. Moreover, the emphasis throughout on collective voices through user-led movements is a crucial message which often gets lost in discussions about how services can 'engage' service users. Whether you are new to the whole idea of service user participation, or a cynical old hand (like me), you will undoubtedly find something in this book to make you think more deeply about the need for a participatory shift in social policy. Just don't expect a harmonious chorus – that's not how this book works and it's not how the messy reality of participatory social policy works either.

References

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