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**Debates in personalisation**, by Catherine Needham and Jon Glasby (eds.), Bristol: Policy Press.

*Debates in personalisation* is a timely volume which presents a range of critical visions of the personalisation agenda in social care. From the outset, Catherine Needham and Jon Glasby set out the contested territory of the debates and readers will be left with no doubt that consensus over its merits and shortcomings remains allusive.

Personalisation emerged in England with great fanfare in the mid-2000s, whereby government ministers enthusiastically embraced the work of Charles Leadbeater and Demos (Leadbeater, 2004) and worked quickly to establish a framework for major policy change. As Peter Beresford observed in an earlier piece (Beresford, 2009), from this time what was set out as little more than a vague idea in the mid-2000s became an 'unstoppable force' over the next ten years. In his chapter in this volume, Beresford rightly reiterates an increasingly muted fact - that the origins of personalisation in social care owe a strong legacy to the disabled peoples' movement. However, whilst legislation for direct payments drew on a strong evidence base highlighting the experiences of disabled people (Zarb and Nadash, 1994), the absence of this type of peer review in the ascendancy of personal budgets has been stark. Therefore in many ways, the range of perspectives presented in this collection set out to fill in some of these gaps.

The book is helpfully divided into five sections. Needham and Glasby present the parameters of the debates and highlight key issues over the very nature of a more individualised system of support. These include the loss of community spaces, the potential for increased isolation of users, de-skilling of the social care workforce and heightened inequalities amongst users as cash stripped social service departments seek to cope with on-going austerity. By contrast, they also draw attention to the potential for increased choice and control in support for users and opportunities to transform the very nature of social care. Subsequent chapters explore these issues in more detail and include frontline perspectives from users and practitioners, more recent incarnations of personalisation in the health service and a final section which brings together thoughts on the barriers and future directions of policy. Indeed this is a real strength of the book in that it covers areas of the debates, which to date, have been largely absent from the literature. Notably Lucy Series chapter on Resource Allocation Systems – initially projected as the basis of a more equitable and transparent means for distributing resources in social care – outlines its blatant shortcomings and promotion of inequalities between different groups of users. This is echoed throughout the book, with Colin Slasberg raising these issues in relation to the promotion of PBs in health. Likewise, Melanie Henwood details how those managing and paying for their own support may still be denied making real choices or securing the best services for their needs. In doing this, she answers one of the fundamental issues in personalisation – whether purchasing power alone is a strong enough policy driver to facilitate independence and choice in social care. Victoria Hart's appraisal from the social work front line adds an interesting account of some of

these issues and rightly questions the merits of a system which – at its worst – has resulted in a two-tier service and little more than a ‘box ticking’ exercise.

A more positive outlook is presented in the chapters by Christine Bond and Colin Royle. Bond outlines her own experiences of PBs. For her, the success of personalisation has centred on the inherent flexibility of the PB and the ability to change her hours in line with the support she needs. This, she argues, is a major improvement from the more rigid system of direct payments, where cash no longer has to be spent in an eight-week period. Colin Royle also presents a compelling account of how receipt of a personal health budget for his father transformed his health and well being as decisions about the type and delivery of his support were transferred to him and his family.

Both Bond, Royle and others throughout the book (see also chapters by Alakeson Beresford and Duffy) underline the vital role of peer support in personalisation. This has been a consistent theme throughout the inception of direct payments and one that clearly makes a positive impact on users experiences. Needham and Glasby rightly acknowledge the absence of a fuller discussion of the user-led organization role and many readers of this journal will no doubt see this as a missed opportunity to explore this role more thoroughly in light of more recent policy changes.

The contributions to the book all draw on experiences from within the English system of social care. Whilst there is plenty here to go on, those of us working elsewhere in the UK would no doubt liked to have seen a broader and more comparative focus. In the concluding chapters, Simon Duffy – himself one of the early proponents of self-directed support - uses the term ‘zombie personalisation’, in arguing that in many cases policy has ultimately failed to improve outcomes for service users and promote independent living, community and citizenship. Given that local authorities were establishing their frameworks for personalisation at a time of relentless government cuts, such outcomes cannot be a surprise. Indeed as Duffy notes, the very systems designed to empower people have also been used as a mechanism to cut budgets. As Needham and Glasby state, many of the book’s contributors have expressed disappointment in that the personalisation agenda has lost touch with its initial roots and values and been overridden by neo-liberalism. Examples of more positive initiatives are presented around ways in which personalisation can move forward and for Needham and Glasby, clearly this is a longer term aspiration.

Overall, this is a very welcome addition to the personalisation literature. Its breadth of discussion makes it a valuable resource in disability studies teaching and for all those with personal and professional interests in the area.

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## References

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