


9-1994

Review: 'High Risk and High Stakes: Health Professionals, Politics and Policy'

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eCommons Citation

Donnelly, Patrick G., "Review: 'High Risk and High Stakes: Health Professionals, Politics and Policy'" (1994). *Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work Faculty Publications*. 45.

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Review: *High Risk and High Stakes: Health Professionals, Politics and Policy*. By Earl Wysong. Greenwood Press, 1992.

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Many studies of the law and policy creation process examine the efforts of particular interest groups and coalitions to influence the views and votes of legislators. Wysong focuses on the role of professional associations, specifically associations of health care professionals, in the legislative debate over the High Risk Occupational Disease Notification and Prevention Act, an example of what is most commonly known as "right-to-know" legislation.

The ethical codes and service-oriented goals of professions suggest that associations of professionals might act differently than interest groups. Wysong shows that the core groups in debates over health and safety legislation recognize that their arguments may be suspect in the eyes of some legislators because of their vested interests. Both unions and business groups seek political allies from other, peripheral groups (i.e., professional associations), which are perceived as more neutral, unbiased, and politically independent.

Basing his analysis in organizational behavior and theory, Wysong argues that the positions and actions of professional associations can be best understood in terms not only of the ethical commitments or service-oriented goals of the profession but of the structural factors that condition their interests and that intersect with and influence the decisions of individuals who are key policy-makers or shapers. Important structural factors include those that tie the professional association to other key organizational actors and the broader political economy. Wysong examines three types of structural linkages: sponsorship, interpenetration, and resource dependency. Sponsorship refers to the economic sector (either corporate or nonprofit) in which a majority of the association's members are employed. Interpenetration refers to personnel linkages in which key decision- or policy-makers in the professional association may also be full-time executives or administrators in for-profit corporations. Resource dependency refers to the extent to which the association's annual revenue derives from individual membership dues versus other income sources.

Wysong found that these structural linkages were able to predict fairly accurately the policy decisions regarding support for or opposition to the right-to-know legislation. The linkages were also related to the level of commitment and resources provided to support the basic policy decision. The professional associations least likely to support the right-to-know legislation were those with corporate sponsorship patterns, considerable corporate interpenetration, and incomes mostly derived from sources other than membership dues. A number of contextual factors within organizations were found to alter the effects of interorganizational structural factors. Wysong found that it is necessary to examine internal dynamics within professional associations to understand seemingly inconsistent policy outcomes. In particular, staff decisions based on

certain organizational goals can conflict with views of boards of directors that are based on other goals. This conflict may produce inconsistent positions at different times. The author examines the role of seven associations ranging in size from the American Medical Association with its 271,000 members to the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists with its 3,000 members. He uses data gathered from archival records and secondary materials as well as rich interview data from key people in each of the professional associations, various congressional and governmental positions, and the business community and labor unions.

The study shows that professional associations dealing with health and safety concerns "are hardly disinterested or unbiased where occupational health policy reforms are concerned." While the ethical concerns of medical practitioners might operate at the individual level, Wysong found few explicit ethical concerns at the organizational level.

The shortcomings of this book lie not in what the author did — and did well — but in what he left undone. In this rather short volume Wysong does not try to assess the importance of professional associations in the process of policy reform. Nor does he try to assess the degree of cultural authority and political influence of these groups. These are questions that are important for understanding the political process that Wysong describes. But Wysong bases his analysis in organizational theory and does a very good job of demonstrating the effects of organizational linkages in shaping the decisions and policy positions of professional associations.