Book Reviews

Social Work Skills with Adults
Mantell, A.
Exeter: Learning Matters, 2009, pp.182, ISBN: 9781844452187, £19.99(pbk.)

As part of the Learning Matters "Transforming Social Work Practice" series, *Social Work Skills with Adults* is written primarily for students undertaking the social work degree qualification. Each chapter begins with a helpful overview of the *National Occupational Standards* and the *Social Work Benchmarks* that the chapter will help students to achieve. The chapters then draw on a range of case studies, research and activities designed to encourage readers to interact and engage with the text.

The book is split into three discrete sections. Chapters One to Three outline the range of skills needed to engage effectively with adult service users. Chapter One discusses the importance of building good working relationships between social workers and service users, carers and other professionals in the context of a changing environment. It takes the reader through 'introductions' to 'maintaining' and then 'ending' relationships. It highlights the importance of actively listening as well as clarifying, negotiating and planning.

Chapter Two looks in detail at the range of communication skills required by social workers working with adults. It takes the reader through the skills needed and draws on research with service users and carers that highlights the particular skills that they value in social workers. The chapter begins to tease out some of the challenges that social workers face in relation to keeping emotionally and physically safe. Chapter Three introduces the reader to the concept of empowerment. It discusses various models of empowerment, highlighting the contested nature of the concept. In addition, this chapter draws on research identifying good practice in relation to the involvement of service users and carers before going on to focus on advocacy and its function in relation to the promotion of service user and carers' rights.

Chapters Four to Seven focus on intervention with adult service users. Chapter Four looks at assessment - arguably the most important intervention with adult service users. It introduces the reader to various models of assessment and the skills required to carry out assessments effectively and ethically. The chapter also highlights the tensions and ethical dilemmas faced by social workers in carrying out the assessment task, particularly when the demand for resources exceeds supply. Chapter Five discusses the various stages of the decision-making process and introduces the reader to the challenges of balancing a range of views. Of particular importance is the concept of risk and the chapter highlights the need to balance positive risk-taking with the protection of potentially vulnerable service users. The chapter provides helpful exercises to enable the reader to deconstruct taken for granted skills.

Chapter Six focuses on the concept of collaborative working and highlights the opportunities and challenges involved. It is argued that developing relationships between professionals can result in greater success, in terms of collaborative working, than more formal arrangements. The main challenges relate to sharing of resources and information. Strategies for overcoming these challenges are suggested. The potential for collaborative working to transform social care, particularly by involving service users and carers, is also highlighted. Chapter Seven focuses on negotiation skills and introduces the reader to different models of negotiation. The

importance of identifying one's own style of negotiation is emphasized. This chapter explores the particular challenges of negotiating on behalf of a service user while at the same time representing an agency that is restricting access to resources.

The final four chapters cover professional accountability and competence and focus on the professional skills required by competent, reflective practitioners. Chapter Eight looks at the writing skills required by social workers including report writing and case recording. It highlights the ways in which academic writing skills are transferable to practice. Chapter Nine explores self-presentation and discusses the ways in which our own thoughts and beliefs impact on our actions. The chapter offers a number of useful exercises that can be used to explore the self in more depth. Chapter Ten emphasizes the importance of critical reflection in social work practice. It begins by introducing the concept and its usefulness as a learning tool before offering techniques and questions to aid reflection.

Finally, Chapter Eleven looks at skills for self-management. The focus of this chapter is on managing one's day-to-day role as a social work practitioner. It recognizes the stresses that this role brings and offers strategies to assist in the management of stress focusing particularly on the importance of supervision. It looks at ways to support daily practice and also looks to the future and introduces personal development planning to assist as a tool for future career development.

Overall this book has a number of strengths. Edited by a social work academic, it draws on a range of perspectives in the various chapters including those of current social work practitioners, practice assessors, service users and carers and this is particularly helpful. Across the various chapters, a number of themes relating to social work with adults become apparent. These relate to promoting the rights and protecting the welfare of service users, partnership working and the involvement of service users and carers in the process. A number of ethical dilemmas are also highlighted. In particular, these relate to promoting choice on the one hand but protecting service users from harm on the other. Likewise, advocating or negotiating on behalf of a service user can be difficult when representing an agency structured around budgetary constraints. This can lead to role confusion and a perceived threat to personal autonomy on the part of the individual social worker as highlighted in the final chapter of the book.

This book is written at a time of change in the world of adult social care. In particular, the personalisation agenda raises a number of questions in respect of the future direction of social work and the role of the social worker within this new world. The book touches upon these dilemmas at a number of points. Some greater discussion of these developments, drawing upon the relevant policy documents, legislation and the theoretical framework behind the developments would have strengthened the book further.

This book is a welcome addition to the literature on adult social care. Although aimed primarily at students wishing to work with adults, many of the skills it discusses are transferable to work with service users in a range of contexts including children and families and criminal justice. Likewise, it provides a useful refresher to more experienced practitioners and academics teaching in this field. A worthwhile read and useful starting point for those wanting an overview of the main issues in working with adults.

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The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child
Newton Verrier, N
London, BAAF, 2009, pp.208,
ISBN: 978-1-905664-76-4, £11.95 (pbk.)

Originally published in the USA in 1993, it took a further 16 years to see *The Primal Wound* published in the UK. Challenging assumptions and unrealistic expectations of adoption, Newton Verrier takes a somewhat controversial, straight-talking look at the impact of adoption on individuals and families. Her premise is that a child cannot fail to suffer when separated from his or her birth mother, regardless of the circumstances. She argues that a loving set of adoptive parents is not enough when a child is subjected to that initial trauma. Much of Newton Verrier's writing comes from her own experiences of being both an adoptive and birth mother, a therapist and a researcher interviewing many adoptees.

In part one, Newton Verrier defines what she has termed 'the primal wound': the experience of separation, abandonment and loss felt by a child separated from its biological mother. She recognises the deep significance of the nine-months *in utero* experience and explores the impact of the separation of mother and baby. Through conversations with adoptees, Newton Verrier picks out themes of feelings of not fitting into the adoptive family; a need for fantasy and, with reference to Stern (1985), the loss of a sense of self experienced by adoptees and to a greater or lesser extent recognised by them. The author touches on physical symptoms, as well as feelings of loss, rejection and abandonment and the enduring nature of these experiences.

In the second part, Newton Verrier moves on to explain how this initial experience of abandonment and loss is played out in an adoptee's life. She highlights issues including rejection, trust, shame and identity and explains how they can manifest themselves in different ways through various relationships throughout the life of an adoptee. There are often conflicting and opposing feelings experienced by the same person and outworked in a number of different ways at different periods in the adoptee's life.

Thirdly, Newton Verrier moves on to more practical aspects of how to deal with this, what she sees as inevitable, primal wound. She looks at this from the perspectives of the adoptee, adoptive mother and birth mother, recognising the strong feelings experienced by each throughout the adoptive child's life. Whilst primarily considering children relinquished as babies, the author takes a chapter to look at how to deal with the issues of adoption with a child placed when slightly older. Newton Verrier tackles controversial and emotional issues that may occur during reunions - such as sexual attraction or further rejection.

In conclusion, Newton Verrier reiterates her reasons for writing the book. These are to encourage pregnant mothers to take time to consider the impact of relinquishing their baby, to support adoptees to understand their own feelings and behaviour and to enable prospective and current adoptive parents to explore both their own issues of abandonment and loss as well as those experienced by an adoptee. Newton Verrier hints at her concern over policies that aim to meet the desire for childless couples to have a baby rather than addressing the need to prioritise and promote a child remaining with his or her birth mother. Originating from the USA, I hope this trend that Newton Verrier perceives cannot be said to apply to the UK today. Newton Verrier focuses on relinquished babies and their mothers whereas, in the UK, the significant number of adoptions are of children removed from their mother's care. While not diminishing the relevance of the theory of a wound caused by separation of mother and baby, there are perhaps different feelings, or articulations of feeling, when the story of the 'adoption triad' is that of a mother who

did not choose adoption but had the decision taken away from her by the Court. These issues could have been discussed further.

Whilst at times labouring, perhaps deliberately, her fundamental idea of the primal wound, Newton Verrier offers a blunt and honest look at the situation as experienced by many adoptive families. There has been a traumatic experience, sometimes not one within a child's memory, but one that needs acknowledging as significant and not something to be brushed over or even assumed that an adoptive family can heal.

This is not a book to be read lightly, particularly by potential or current adoptive parents, as there are no guaranteed solutions. Likely to cause offence to some who struggle to hear Newton Verrier's strong views (not just on adoption as she also touches on childcare, anonymous sperm donation and abortion), Newton Verrier is willing to say what perhaps many involved both personally and professionally think. That is, that adoption is not a straightforward solution for looked-after children. Each child comes with deep hurt and trauma, and there is no quick or easy answer. What is required is 'parenting plus' and, quite often, adopters have many issues of their own that they must also be willing to address.

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Reference
Stern, D. (1985) *The Interpersonal World of the Infant,* New York: Basic Books.

Learning from Child Deaths and Serious Abuse
Vincent, S.
Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press (2010), pp.133, ISBN: 978-1-903765-96-8, £14.99 (pbk.)

Dr Vincent's book seeks to describe what can be learned from looking at cases of significant child abuse, including some that resulted in the death of a child in Scotland between 1975 and 2009. The first two chapters amount to a highly informative critique of the extent of child death due to maltreatment and of the processes behind child death enquiries and reviews across the United Kingdom. These chapters include description and analysis based on key research and identification of the shortcomings in the collection of data about child death. There is a clear argument throughout for the support of the new Child Death Overview Panel (CDOP) processes but also for ensuring that the public health approach is wide enough to identify better how to lower the number of preventable child deaths.

What was of surprise, for the English reader, was the way in which inquiry practices into child death due to maltreatment in England (and Wales) have diverged from those in Scotland. In England, the Area Child Protection Committee (ACPC) had had responsibility to conduct Serious Case Reviews since 1988, and Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCB) have had a statutory responsibility since the Children Act (2004). However, in Scotland the responsibility (not statutory) upon Scottish Child Protection Committees (CPCs) and resultant single countrywide process has only been in place since 2007. Currently, there are no plans to introduce wider child death reviewing systems such as CDOP in Scotland.

The first two chapters of the book are an excellent introduction to understanding the legislation and guidance which ensures that

child deaths are reviewed. They are, therefore, of relevance to all practitioners working with vulnerable children in the UK.

The rest of the book is dedicated to understanding better the themes that emerge from enquiries into the death or serious injury of children due to maltreatment in Scotland. The restriction on the author due to the paucity of information is clear. There were 13 reviews in all during the period 1975-2009 (with none between 1975 and 1990). These include 7 enquiries regarding death or abuse in the home; 4 regarding abuse in residential care involving significant numbers of children and individual perpetrators and 2 of child death in the community (including the Dunblane Inquiry).

It would be of interest to the reader to know why there were no reviews conducted and why there was so little drive to know why children had died. However, the answers to these questions may not be so easily found. Across the cases, there was no one clear process of notification of who commissioned or conducted the inquiry and how. Dr Vincent uses all information available and conducts a comparative study, pulling themes from the systematic overviews of Serious Case Reviews in England and in Wales and examining the learning that can be gleaned from the Scottish cases. Attention is paid to child, family, environmental and agency factors that need to be addressed.

The latter chapters are of use again to all practitioners across the UK in that they methodically approach each theme and learning point arising from child death reviews. But the book serves a more essential purpose in making all of this learning much more relevant and interesting to practitioners in Scotland. When the demands of social work place pressure upon those working in child protection, a possible tendency is for individuals and organisations to become more introverted

and less outward looking both in their work and learning styles. Dr Vincent's book makes it clear that child death and serious injury through maltreatment does happen in Scotland and that there is learning for all involved in child protection from looking at such reviews.

Hopefully, it will help to stimulate debate about how best to conduct such reviews or enquiries and to ensure that the learning is embedded in to practice. It also raises, for the reader, the vital point that practice developments across the UK may be too reactive and dependent upon the headline-grabbing cases and not upon a systematic reviewing of all child deaths. Practitioners across all disciplines stand to learn much more about preventing child death if the learning from all child death enquiry processes are emphasised as important and relevant to practice in safeguarding children.

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