

Reviews

Social Work with Adults: Policy, Law, Theory, Research, Practice

Davies, M. (ed.)

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A common complaint of social care academics is that whilst students find it relatively easy to grapple with policy and practice, they find a critical deployment of theory and research a much harder endeavour. The same can be said for many social work practitioners, as their professional lives are taken up with the daily demands of supporting their service users, meeting organisational targets, responding to policy expectations and understanding recent legal judgements. These pressures leave practitioners little capacity or energy to keep up to date with the latest empirical findings or to reflect on alternative conceptual frameworks. This book seeks to address both these gaps by providing informed summaries of the five key pillars of contemporary social work – policy, practice, research, theory and the law. It does not give precedence to one pillar over another, or aim to synthesise their insights. Instead, readers are allowed to consider separately the different pillars and use their own judgement to interpret what is meaningful and relevant and how they can be combined together:

There are very few certainties in social work, but a thoughtful and reactive reading of this text will enable the reader to form a judgement on what weight should be placed upon a whole range of possibilities (p.2).

The book is structured around four key topic areas in adult social work – ‘personalisation’, ‘mental health’, ‘substance misuse’ and ‘older people’. The topics therefore are a mix of three adult user groups, and one cross-cutting philosophy – no rationale is provided as to this mix, or the selection of each topic. All

clearly have relevance, but then so would ‘safeguarding’ and ‘integration’, or ‘learning disability’ and ‘physical disability’. Each topic considers the five pillars outlined above through separate chapters, with different authors for each of the chapters. As highlighted by the editor, the text can therefore be approached by topic or by pillar, depending on the interests and requirements of the reader. This opens up the dual possibilities of a more in-depth exploration of the different pillars in relation to a particular user group; or, for example, a comparison of the legal context of personalisation and statutory mental health. A short introduction to each topic area sets out the key issues and content, and the editor provides an initial reflection on the approach that has been taken. The authors largely work in academia, and with editorial leadership by Martin Davies, make an extremely credible team to tackle such a project.

The target audience is described on the back cover as being ‘students, educators and practitioners’, and this range does pose problems regarding the levels at which chapters are pitched. Some of the more descriptive practice-based material will already be familiar to those with experience of working in that field, and may be of greater relevance to those beginning their career. It also appears to be geared more towards social work practice within a statutory context than that within provider settings in the third or private sectors. This somewhat limits its relevance to the broader field of practice, and does not reflect the realities of where social work actually takes place in our mixed economy of welfare. Another issue is the extent to which it accommodates the increasing variation between the policy and legal frameworks within the four home nations. The editor makes it clear that the book does not seek to detail all of the possible nuances and instead is more focused on the ‘conceptual differences’ between the five pillars (p.xviii). However, it is notable that

the default position is to take an English perspective, whereas bringing in more law and policy from the other parts of the UK would have supported the reader in comparing and contrasting approaches. International evidence is considered within the research chapters to varying degrees – for example, the personalisation chapter by Gillian MacIntyre is wholly UK-based, whereas the studies within the substance misuse chapter by Donald Forrester *et al.* are predominantly from the USA. As noted by the authors of the latter, this is due to the limited research evidence available from the UK. However, the social and political contexts and the role of social workers within these may make transferability of learning challenging for UK practitioners and students.

The comparative potential of the book is also limited somewhat by a lack of uniformity in the approaches taken by the authors. To some extent this is a by-product of the topic being considered. For example, personalisation does not have a single legislative framework, whereas in mental health there are clear legal requirements; and there is considerably more research in relation to social work with older people than in relation to social work responding to substance misuse. However, it would also appear to be due to the particular style of the author in question. So, for example, the substance misuse practice chapter by Sarah Galvani and Sarah Wadd is based around a ‘stages of change’ model, and gives guidance as to how this could be applied, whereas the equivalent content for personalisation, by Michael Bamber *et al.*, tells eight people’s stories. Both are relevant and appropriate, but it is harder to ‘read across the pillars’ than if they had a similar structure. The contents within each chapter are generally of an excellent standard and give a concise but thorough summary of current thinking and policy developments. Additional reading and references are provided, and these will enable the interested reader to explore an aspect in more depth. In general, the policy and practice chapters felt more introductory in nature, whereas the theory and research ones contained more

complexity and depth. Each reader will rate the different chapters according to their personal interest and prior knowledge base; but for this reader the chapters on personalisation and law (Suzy Braye & Alison Brammer), theory and mental health (Jerry Tew), practice and substance misuse (Sarah Galvani & Sarah Wadd) and older people and policy (Tony Gilbert & Jason L. Powell) were of particular merit.

In conclusion, this book has much to recommend it, and provides a welcome addition to current social work texts. It would be good to see a volume in the future that considers the ‘missing’ user groups and key cross-cutting themes; and for this and future editions to have more consistency in style and structure. It would also be interesting to more explicitly link the practice chapters to the theory, law and so on that has come before. Whilst this may in some ways be against the overall editorial philosophy outlined above, it would also help the reader to better understand and synthesise the different elements and processes; and this is what is ultimately required to improve professional and academic standards in social work.

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**Social Work with Children and Families:
Policy, Law, Theory, Research, Practice**

Davies, M. (ed.)

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Martin Davies has brought together a wide range of experts to provide a book that explores the complexities of children and families policy, law, theory and research, and how they ultimately contribute to social work practice. In doing so, the book draws on the knowledge of a number of recognised leading figures in the areas of policy and research, e.g. Michael Little and Andrew Kendrick. As editor, Martin Davies has skilfully produced a well-structured and easily accessible book. Whilst it is essentially a textbook for social work students and their teachers, I believe that it will be of interest to anyone working in this field, whatever their role or experience.

The book is divided into four parts: 'family support'; 'child protection'; 'adoption and fostering'; and 'residential childcare'. Each of these four sections then has a distinct chapter on the relevant policy, law, theory, research and practice. The preface provides guidance on how the book might be used; and markers on the pages on the right-hand edge of the book enable quick access to relevant chapters.

Each chapter is concise and well written and there are a number of strategically placed boxes, entitled 'Making connexions', which ask the reader to consider key questions such as:

To what extent and in what circumstances should social workers provide support to families where there is no identified child protection issue?

Whilst the chapters are consistent in their length of approximately twelve pages, they do vary in content and some link better than others to the other chapters in their section. The policy and research chapters in the sections on family support and adoption, I felt, fitted together well.

The policy chapters provide a very good outline of how societal and political changes have influenced practice and give the reader a clear sense of the evolutionary development of children and families work. Sometimes starting from different historical points, they nonetheless provide clear explanations of how policy has been shaped and developed. These chapters are extremely easy to read, with authors vividly bringing to life the reasons for policy changes and clearly explaining very complex policy shifts, drawing not only from different political ideologies but also from changing public attitudes and opinion. The policy chapter in Part 1: Family Support, by Kate Morris, for example, provides a very interesting exploration of the concept of family and how family members experience the support offered. It highlights the limitations of policymakers' understandings of the term 'family' and what the author describes as '*the lived experience of families who are the subject of policy concern*', hinting at the scope for new and improved approaches to supporting families in the future. The adoption policy chapter, by John Simmonds, also provides an interesting social history of changing views on adoption, and particularly the issue of matching adopted children to the class, heritage and ethnicity of potential adopters.

Some of the statements made in the policy chapters, however, are not always supported by clear cited evidence or research. For example, Part 2: Child Protection, includes statements such as:

... the great majority of children who have been maltreated are not supported by children's services, and,

... a significant proportion of children thought by children's services to have been maltreated have not been.

Whilst many may share these views, the chapter does not cite relevant research to substantiate such statements.

The book was published in March 2012 and contains a very good historical perspective: but as for all books that describe policy and research, the world does not stand still, and newer developments must be expected to have affected policy and perhaps practice. For example, the family support section could not include the Troubled Families initiative (November 2011)¹; and the Allen Report (January 2011)² is only briefly mentioned. The Child Protection section does not reference Munro's final report (May 2011)³ and since 2012 there has been new 'Working Together to Safeguard Children'⁴ statutory guidance. Both of these have proposed changes to practice and introduced new concepts such as 'early help'. Whilst the book mentions the increased focus on adoption timescales, it does not fully explore the extent of this current policy and how it has been influenced by findings from researchers such as Julie Selwyn *et al.* (published September 2009)⁵, who is not cited in the book.

Nevertheless, the research chapters together provide a very good and up to date précis of relevant research in the four areas. If I had one criticism, it would be that they often cover a wide range of research, and the very nature of the book necessitates that a thorough discussion of studies is not always possible. The result of this is that it sometimes feels that areas such as disability, mental health and substance misuse are not fully considered – perhaps these are areas for a follow-up book, especially as they frequently cross the children and families and adults divide?

To conclude: this is a very well laid-out book and it summarises complex issues succinctly. It will be very accessible to a wide range of readers. It provides an excellent overview of family support, child protection, foster care and adoption and residential care, as well as being a good reference book. Its content provides a stimulating and thought-provoking airing of the issues relating to social work with children and families. It is definitely a book that should be on all social workers', policy makers' and researchers' bookshelves.

References

¹ Department for Communities and Local Government (2011) *Helping Troubled Families Turn Their Lives Around*, London: DCLG.

² Allen, G. (2011) *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*, London: Cabinet Office.

³ Munro, E. (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report – A Child-centred System*, DfE, Norwich: TSO.

⁴ HM Government (2013) *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, DfE.

⁵ Selwyn, J., Sempik, J., Thurston, P. & Wijedasa, D. (2009) *Adoption and the Inter-agency Fee*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, Research Report, DCSF-RR149.

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