

Reviews

A Contemporary History of Social Work – Learning from the Past Bamford, T.

Bristol: Policy Press, 2015

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The final section of this book is an afterword entitled 'Rotherham and beyond'. This was written, as the author explains, because, 'just as the manuscript for this book was delivered, the report on child sexual exploitation in Rotherham was published'. This experience shows how difficult it is to publish in book form anything about social work described as 'contemporary' in these days of twenty-four hour news cycles, blogs, and any other long or short form of writing available over the internet.

And since this book was published, the College of Social Work (its role and relationships, a key issue discussed in Chapter 5 on '*Education and training for social work*' especially with regard to a – now forgotten? – spat with BASW) has been closed. The May 2016 Queen's Speech has been followed by current legislation to increase the speed of adoption, strengthen support for care leavers, and bring in a new government regulator for social workers by 2020. In addition the review of Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs) by Alan Wood has been published, together with the government's response; and Martin Narey's 'root and branch' review of residential care for children and young people has been undertaken... Indeed more may have happened in the world of social work between the time at which this review was completed and the date of its publication and reading by you, dear reader.

These latest developments could not be mentioned in Terry Bamford's book but are further examples of a number of general principles he points to and observations which he makes, in what is a stylistically well-written and accessible book. Example after example in the book shows how social work and the profession – well, is it? – has been a contested space, where wider social tensions have been played out. These are tensions about the approaches of society to the human person, young and old, and the role of the state in responding to those approaches through qualified social work practice. It does mean, unfortunately, that some of the observations are already dated, and so less useful to some extent to any readers needing a history of social work which makes direct connections up to the time of its reading.

The book is steeped in and benefits from the personal experience of the author. This makes it a convincing and authoritative account. In Chapter 7, '*From the mainstream to the margins*', he uses the examples of social work practice in the fields of probation and mental health as the basis for illuminating the debates and tensions of social work practice over the last forty years. Bamford records his own experience of training at Rainer House, the Home Office Training Centre for probation in Chelsea, which included an extensive residential component for the students. In our time, when there is some controversy about the way in which aspiring social workers are trained, through such schemes as *Front Line*, *Step-Up* and *Think Ahead*, we are reminded that there have always been a number of routes into social work practice through which talented people have found their way to a variety of destinations. In the context of his experience, Bamford argues that 'there is no conclusive proof about the superiority of one form of training over the other'. Let all those who have joined battle on the quality of generations of students, employers' perceived needs, and the higher education institutions' passions, go on to discuss this!

I found Bamford's use of his own relevant experience more a help than a hindrance. Maybe it's because I have lived through a good portion of the 'contemporary' time, which after all gives the book its title. I'd imagine that for anyone needing a more secure evidence base for sustained historical reflection, however, this may be seen as a limitation of the book. Those colleagues will have to move on from the helpful broad introduction given in this book, and seek greater detail in other works and primary sources. His view is balanced throughout, with his comments on p.52 that 'both optimists and pessimists exaggerate their case' (specifically with regard to the best way to respond to 'troubled' families) being a good strapline for his views throughout.

It should be said that the book isn't really just about social work, and in this it also flags up a tension. Many – this reviewer included – have engaged with a social work course and qualification and then moved away from direct social work practice with members of the public / people / citizens / people who use services / service users / customers / consumers – there are a few references to public perceptions of 'political correctness' and social work – into policy, performance, research, commissioning, leadership, management or training. They (we) could be responding to a broadening of personal interest, a wish for a wider scope of influence or (dare I say it?) believing that these areas of activity are less stressful than daily frontline encounters with vulnerable members of the public.

So Chapter 3, '*Childcare and the loss of trust*', for instance, is a policy oriented reflection on really big issues which affected social work with children and families. But it's essentially policy analysis all the same; and as such, while it informs social work practice, it isn't really about practice. Likewise, Chapter 8 '*The impossible dream: integration of health and social care*' is a wider consideration of the issues connected to integration, but from a policy perspective, though well informed by personal experience. The material is good and helpful and this kind of policy analysis is sorely needed. Anyone looking for material about social workers' actual experiences of practice, and the effects it has had for people encountering local services for children and families or in integrated settings will, however, need to look a bit further than this book.

I thought that the analytical approach worked better in Chapter 4, on '*Neoliberalism and social work practice*', where the influence of the introduction of market arrangements through purchaser-provider splits in a mixed economy, personalisation, and direct payments introduced through the use of 'new managerialism' was clearer in terms of a description of its effects on social work practice.

The attraction of policy analysis is also reflected from another angle on the pull of politics for some social workers. Bamford may be guilty of being a child of his time in giving a full chapter to '*The evolution of radical social work*' (Chapter 6). I have often wondered if this perspective isn't really difficult for recent generations to understand in an environment where trade union power has been diminished and other challenges to qualified social work have been promoted through government policy. I wasn't sure if he was successful in showing how the apparent insights of radical approaches really helped families or individuals, and whether or not it was really possible to practise in this way within a local government setting, as the area of employment in which most social workers have played out their professional identity. Overall, the book tends to focus on social work in the statutory sector, and whilst the first chapter '*Brave new world*' covers some of the early inspiration for social work activity, the book is less strong in presenting an overt perspective from the non-statutory sector, and what social work is like there.

There is a chapter – '*Social work and devolution*' – dedicated to the effects of parliamentary devolution on social work and the changing models developed in the devolved areas of the United Kingdom. Bamford was once a director in Northern Ireland in a system which was often lauded as the model for integrated work. This is another area where I found his lived experience helpful and balanced – integration may not be all that it is cracked up to be is a major point. Anyone needing more detail on sectarianism and the effects on social work practice will have to look further for deeper reflection on this sad background experience.

His account of Scotland and Wales, where different and arguably better paths have been trod for social work, is interesting too. Across all the jurisdictions, he mentions the effects which having ministers who have been social workers have had, in their recognition of the realities for people needing support in their lives and communities, and the consequent challenge for social workers. Bamford also notes that being able to have small, perhaps human-scale structures, rather than 'scaled-up' structures – democratic or otherwise – brings the benefit of closeness of decision-making. I agree profoundly with Bamford's argument that smaller scale, federalised arrangements work better for people but again, if you're looking for the experience of being a social worker in a UK devolved democracy, you'll only find the policy analysis in this section; and

reflection on the potential for England is missing. It's also just a factor of the timing of the book's publication, which can no doubt be addressed in a further edition, that more reflection on the roles of the Chief Social Workers for England in the UK Department for Health and Department for Education is somewhat constrained in the light of more recent developments.

The end game – if there is one – of all the developments which Bamford reflects on is still not entirely clear, though many would offer interpretations which with the benefit of hindsight in some years' (or months'!) time will perhaps lead to us all being wiser after the event. I'd be interested to learn about Bamford's views on the developing approach of 'practice leadership', for instance, in the initiatives of the Chief Social Worker, but perhaps more clearly delineated in policy statements and guidance in children's services. This seems to me to re-energise the privileging of practice at senior management levels in a way that has been somewhat diminished over the last fifteen years or so, as organisational shapes have changed, and the mantra that 'a good social worker doesn't necessarily make a good leader' took hold as a rationale to allow entrance to senior posts in organisational structures for those with qualifications and experience from other sectors. An emphasis on practice leadership seems to me to be one sign of hope, as at one time in recent history the chief social worker in a locality was the director of social services.

To some extent the book is presented as a text book which might be used by students, with 'areas for discussion' identified at the end of most of the chapters. An updated version would be even more of a stimulus, I'm sure. Other areas which beg for deeper consideration are the issue of Inspection – especially of the role and capabilities of OFSTED – and the general use of evidence (as opposed to responding to media, which is a thread running through the history of social work). Bamford has clearly used and refers to research; but a wider reflection on its potential influence, beyond his noting the persistent lack of a research culture in social work (unlike medicine and nursing), would add to what is nevertheless a very wide-ranging, helpful and enjoyable read.

Reference

Wood, A. (2016) *Wood Report: Review of the Role and Functions of Local Safeguarding Children Boards*, published 26 May 2016, Ref: DFE-00131-2016.

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Safeguarding Children Across Services Davies, C. & Ward, H. (editors)
A series of books published by Jessica Kingsley Publisher (JKP)

1. Safeguarding Children Across Services: Messages from Research

Davies, C. & Ward, H., 2011
ISBN: 978-1-84905-124-8, £19.99 (pbk), pp.224
eISBN: 978-0-85700-290-7

2. Safeguarding Children from Emotional Maltreatment: What Works?

Barlow, J. & McMillan, A.S., 2010
ISBN: 978-1-84905-053-1, £18.99 (pbk), pp.176
eISBN: 978-0-85700-364-5

3. Safeguarding Babies and Very Young Children from Abuse and Neglect

Ward, H., Brown, R. & Westlake, D., 2012
ISBN: 978-1-84905-237-5, £23.99 (pbk), pp.240
eISBN: 978-0-85700-481-9

4. Recognizing and Helping the Neglected Child: Evidence-based Practice for Assessment and Intervention

Daniel, B., Taylor, J., Scott, J. with Derbyshire, D. & Neilson, D., 2011
ISBN: 978-1-84905-093-7, £18.99 (pbk), pp.192
eISBN: 978-0-85700-274-7

5. Caring for Abused and Neglected Children: Making the Right Decisions for Reunification or Long-term Care

Wade, J., Biehal, N., Farrelly, N. & Sinclair, I., 2011
ISBN: 978-1-84905-207-8, £25.99 (pbk), pp.224
eISBN: 978-0-85700-441-3

6. Effective Working with Neglected Children and their Families: Linking Interventions to Long-term Outcomes

Farmer, E. & Lutman, E., 2012
ISBN: 978-1-84905-288-7, £25.00 (pbk), pp.240
eISBN: 978-0-85700-609-7

7. Adolescent Neglect: Research, Policy and Practice

Rees, G., Stein, M., Hicks, L. & Gorin, S., 2011
ISBN: 978-1-84905-104-0, £18.99 (pbk), pp.144
eISBN: 978-0-85700-280-8

The dissemination of research results may bear little direct relationship to policy making and local practice. For very recent discussion of such issues in relation to child neglect across the UK, the previous issue of RPP (vol 32(1)) is both timely and wide-ranging. This is not straightforward even when the commissioners (the Department of Health, DH, and the Department for Education, DfE) could be regarded as the leading source for policy. Conveying useful messages for practitioners is also fraught, given the different mechanisms for communicating to practitioners with varied backgrounds and levels of research knowledge. The least ephemeral means of communicating findings directly is through book publications, supplemented by summaries, journal articles, and no doubt training events associated with *Making Research Count* and *Research in Practice* among others.

This general pattern in Children's Services policy research seems to have been set in the 1990s, with the evaluation of the 1989 Children Act. 24 research studies resulted in 13 books, plus an overview, *The Children Act Now – Messages from Research*. The study results were published in the 1990s; but these HMSO books are no longer readily available, though the overview is downloadable as a free pdf file.

Concurrently research was commissioned in response to issues of practice identified by the Cleveland Inquiry of 1987. This comprised 20 studies and overviews, resulting in 8 HMSO books published in 1995 as *Studies in Child Protection*. A 120 page overview, *Child Protection: Messages from Research*, was published in the same year. Like the books, this is no longer readily available. From an evaluation by staff of Dartington Social Research Unit it was reported to be 'very well known' among most professionals working in child welfare, particularly in social services, and to have affected the practice of over half of the sampled specialist professional respondents (*Child and Family Social Work*, 5(3), August 2000).

Carolyn Davies, previously Chief Research Officer at the DH, leading research management on child and adult social care, was a key professional link between the three research programmes, including the DH/DfE research programme which resulted in the 7 books indicated above. She deserves positive recognition for her consistent long-term efforts. These latest books are still available, in paperback and as eBooks. *Messages from Research* covering some additional studies as well, is available as a free download pdf file from Government uploads (DFE-RR164). James Blewett reviewed it in RPP vol 29(3), 2012.

The present review aims to draw out some of the methodological details and implications that the necessarily condensed overview might well omit. The passage of time also means that some background features, links and assumptions are now easier to see.

One such feature is how the studies grapple with considerable institutional or evidential bias and gaps. A literature review, such as Study 4, can go some way with available evidence, though in this case subject to a search strategy that limited it to 63 national and international studies related to the research question. However, the researchers themselves note that in relation to neglect in England the operational definition locates neglect as a caregiver omission; and does not locate the care giver in a wider socio-economic context (p.15). A point from a study not included in the 63, but cited in Study 6 below, is that parents often hotly disputed that they were neglectful, when the registration category had been neglect (Farmer, E. & Owen, M., *Child Protection Practice: Private Risks and Public Remedies*, HMSO 1995, n/a).

Another hazard is the temptation to draw on international sources despite (or because) also acknowledging the literature as being sparse. Effectiveness then turns out to be expressed in terms of desirable principles, rather than in terms of more compelling and grounded evidence from multiple UK studies. In the case of services responding to neglect this can descend into platitudes – 'creating the conditions that will allow children to benefit from the core service that each profession offers' (p.121).

By contrast Study 6 reports long-term empirical (quantitative and qualitative) work, following up 138 children in 7 English local authorities, for up to 5 years after they had been reunited with a parent following placement in care subsequent to some form of neglect. Surprisingly, there is no indication of the date of the work. There were only 6 interviews with parents and 6 with young people themselves. Social workers and their records were the primary data sources, with researcher opinion also being crucial.

Thus child protection plans prior to care proceedings were judged by researchers as helpful in 58% of cases to which they applied – but there was huge variation between authorities, with one third of authorities (two) not using them for the sampled children (p.74). A positive feature of the researchers' long-term perspective was the ability to observe patterns not noted by social workers – such as each referral being seen in isolation and not in the context of previous concerns, though this in a minority of 30% of the 33 children who appeared to the researchers to have been left too long before being removed. The usual response was of family support, and incidents were not always fully investigated (p.79). The limitations on generalisation from such small numbers are illustrated by use of phrases such as 'a few' or 'a small group of cases'.

More robust are the findings of attrition over time. By two years after return from care, or placement with parents (under a supervision, interim or care order), half of the original 138 returns had ended. At the 5 year follow-up this proportion had risen to two thirds. During the first follow-up period three fifths (59%) of the children were maltreated; by the subsequent 3 year follow-up the figure was 48%, though not all of these had been abused in the initial two years (pp.138-140).

Less conclusive were the apparent differences between outcomes for the 26 Black and Minority Ethnic children and the 112 White children. The researchers acknowledge the limitations of this classification, and also the limited numbers of children. An even more general limitation was lack of recorded data. Surprisingly, there is no mention of the availability of data on the age of parents, but these gaps in general set limits on the regression analysis on outcomes. From those variables where data could be used, and excluding the final 3 years of follow-up, three were most predictive of stability (p.173). These were the child's age at the original return from care, a changed household membership at the start of the return, and the local authority variable – the latter influenced by one of the six authorities being very different from the others. (The possibility of variable court practice is not mentioned here, though is alluded to in Chapter 11 as a cause of local authority behaviour.)

The qualitative interviews with 37 social workers are given a chapter, but no indication of any topic guide is reported, and they related to only 50 children in the sample. The Appendix is only of quantitative factors, that are fully analysed. So the views reported are at a level of generality not linked directly to the specific cases: it was evident to the researchers that many of the practitioners lacked knowledge of the cases, though they had been involved with the children on average for 23 months.

Some readers of research studies might only read introductory material and conclusions. If such readers look at Chapter 11 of this study they would miss earlier qualifications and might read statements such as 'the researchers considered that in as many as two fifths of the cases the parents had been given too many chances to make changes' (p.186) in isolation. As trenchantly expressed is the finding that of plans made in care proceedings more than three fifths did not work out (p.189).

The final set of issues tends to focus on practice and case management rather than policy and resources, the latter limited to asides such as 'services for adolescents were often insufficient to meet their needs and help for their parents was scarce' (p.196). Looking more widely, substance misuse problems evoke a comment pointing to the need for greater use of available services and consideration of routine drug or alcohol testing of parents with such problems before and during the return of their children from care (p.201). It is not indicated whether this idea was put to the interviewees but it does go provocatively beyond practice management.

Study 3 was a smaller prospective project focused on decision-making processes and their consequences, in relation to 43 infants across 10 local authorities who had been subject to a core assessment or Section 47 enquiry before their first birthday (there is again no indication of when the research took place).

As neglect was a frequent feature of these cases there is a degree of linkage with the topics of Study 6. There is also a methodological parallel in that data became available on only a proportion of the cases – here only 4% of the assumed sample of families. Thus a substantial national rather than sample study would have been necessary to achieve more than 100 responses. Interestingly, no pilot stage for this research is mentioned, which might have provided a timely warning, in addition to comments made during research governance processes by this reviewer, doubtless not alone. Classification of risk into 4 categories of severity of harm were made by two of the research team, as described in Chapter 3; and the same elements are used to estimate levels of risk at the child's subsequent third birthday. 11 of the 12 children at severe risk had been removed (p.119). 13 previously classed as at medium risk were by then classed as at low risk, but 5 were at high risk and one had been removed and adopted.

As presented the study results are suggestive, and necessarily inconclusive. They are set against earlier studies, and accompanied by extensive quotations from interviewees, plus narrative vignettes paraphrasing case records. Each substantive chapter concludes with summary points, though these themselves can realistically be described as tentative.

By contrast Study 5 had a firmer base for grounding its findings. It drew on an earlier census of all 3872 children who had been looked after at some point by 7 local authorities in a one year period. The data on all or most of these children were from local authority central records and from questionnaires completed by social workers. 2291 children had been maltreated, and were followed up (retrospectively) in general terms for 3 years, though most information was on a subsample of 149 files (on 270 participants who were approached). 68 of these children had returned home at some point in the 3 year period ending in 2007-8.

The proposed individual case studies sample suffered almost the same level of attrition encountered in Study 3 – 90%. The second largest group of non-participating parents were the 23 who could not be contacted ‘due to lack of social worker cooperation’ (p.28). As a result of non-participation there were only 12 case studies.

The study authors take pains to discuss the possible biases resulting from these processes. This is important because of their frequent use of non-parametric tests in bivariate analysis.

The most important predictors of whether maltreated children went home were whether the assessed risks to the safety of the children were considered acceptable, and whether the problems that had led to the child’s admission were seen as having improved during the child’s period of care (p.130). This was in a context where from the census data the most significant predictor of the child’s return home (having entered care) was the local authority responsible – though without an exceptional local authority as among the (presumably) different seven authorities in Study 6.

By the final follow-up only one third of those children in the group who had gone home had remained continuously at home since their original return – this despite services being devoted to shoring up home placements (p.196). The researchers were, however, unable to report on the nature, intensity and duration of such services (p.200), though observing that they were probably insufficient, as were even well managed and supported transitions in the early stages of reunification.

The Study 5 researchers venture a broadly positive if qualified conclusion on the care system having ‘for many maltreated children... provided an important shelter and an opportunity to refashion their lives and take advantages of opportunities that had erstwhile been closed to them’ (p. 202).

Both Studies 2 and 7 include discussions of international research and policy literature on emotional maltreatment and adolescent neglect respectively.

Parent training and parent-child interventions described in Study 2 were predominantly American, including working with drug-abusing parents. Most used instruments that were at best proxies for assessing child maltreatment. The organising principle for exploring the literature in this study is the theoretical orientation of the research – psychoanalytical and cognitive behavioural. As the authors acknowledge, rigorous evidence of effectiveness of intervention is still seriously limited in relation to emotionally abusive populations (p.106).

Study 7 observes that literature on the neglect of young people aged 11-17 is sparse, both related to the UK and internationally, and also apparently in the degree to which evaluation has been rigorous or even attempted. No doubt this explains why the book is the shortest in this series. In effect it is an essay as an offshoot of a separately undertaken review of literature, which was part of a ‘Safeguarding Children’ set of projects.

Focus groups conducted by the researchers were with 51 young people, drawn from a school for young people with learning difficulties, a young offenders' institution, a care leavers' team, a team supporting young people whose parents misuse substances and a young people's centre. Quotations from these groups illustrate the discussion of neglect in Chapter 6. Many young people themselves did not see neglect as being different from other forms of abuse (p.59).

There were also focus groups with 28 staff from agencies in two local authorities, invited from agencies such as children's services, health (*sic.*), Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), police, Connexions, Youth Offending Teams, and housing. There is no indication of who actually participated, nor are the extensive quotations attributed to individuals as agency figures. Thus one comment on CAMHS policy might or might not be by a staff member of CAMHS (p.81).

Chapter 7, on interventions, is descriptive and summary. Thus the presentation (p.103) of Kids Company as providing tertiary intervention now has to be set against the view in 2016 of the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee:

... it is both sad and disappointing that robust evaluation of the outcomes of Kids Company's work is lacking. Without strong evidence of impact and outcomes on a wider scale than small samples or individual case studies, it is difficult to see on what basis Kids Company's Trustees satisfied themselves of the appropriateness of support given to clients.

(HC 433, published 1 February 2016, para 47)

Writing over 5 years earlier, the Study 7 authors say the same, albeit less pointedly. 'There is very little evidence of the effectiveness of interventions with this target group, and there is virtually no UK-based evaluative research' (p.118).

Messages for researchers and for those involved in policy and planning from research, as shown in these books, are as mixed as the research conducted. Some research could be seen as primarily restating known gaps in literature, of value in clarifying the absence of knowledge or suggesting possibilities for future pilot studies. Some projects followed up earlier work by the same researchers, with value in several respects, such as sample populations and established relationships with local authorities. Others were promising and went on (mostly) to deliver on their promise, with reasonable evidence and cogent well informed discussion – though sample sizes and even census populations would barely register for significant research conducted in other disciplines.

The limited input of children, parents and to some degree the professionals involved in providing services could often have been anticipated. To that extent, funding limits and therefore available research time evidently restricted realistic sampling. Research was conducted in no more than 7 local authorities at a time. The consequences were that local variations could only exceptionally be set against national patterns, to check about the picture being representative.

The 2012 RPP reviewer drew attention to the potential impact on services of the biggest cuts in spending for a generation following the 2008-9 financial crisis. The period, approximately from 2005-2010, when these studies were undertaken, might also turn out to represent a high water mark, in both safeguarding and commitment to research on safeguarding issues.

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