

Book Reviews

Critical Practice in Social Work

Adams, R., Dominelli, L., & Payne, M. (eds.)

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp.429, ISBN: 978-0-230-21863-5, £23.99 (pbk.)

Forming the second part of a trilogy of connected texts edited by this familiar trio of highly respected authors (the others being *Social Work: Themes, Issues and Critical Debates* and *Practising Social Work in a Complex World*) this new edition of *Critical Practice in Social Work* reasserts its intention to support the learning of social work students in the middle of their professional qualifying degree in social work. Following the theme of trios (three books, three authorial editors) the book itself is in three parts, set out in the Introduction as: *exploring how values affect your personal and professional development* (Values into Practice, Part One); *surveying the main theoretical perspectives on, and approaches to, practice* (Theories for Practice, Part Two); and *studying in more detail particular areas of social work, from the viewpoint of how you develop your critical practice* (Developing Critical Practice, Part Three).

As can be seen above, the book addresses the student directly and sets out its stall as being the core text for the student journey through the middle year of the qualifying degree. Does it match up to its aspirations? To answer simply the rhetorical question: yes it does. Like a compilation album of multiple tracks, the overall impression is one of comprehensive coverage and cohesive value to the reader. Explored in terms of 'Values into Practice' in Part One, the theme of 'academic criticality' runs through the book and acts as a springboard for becoming a 'critical reflective practitioner'. This message is clearest, and most effectively communicated, in Part

Three of the book, where the 'protocolization' of practice (to quote Munro, 2004) is exposed in relation to a broad range of service delivery contexts.

In spite of the seemingly inexorable march of rational-technical management of social work processes in much of contemporary local authority practice, social work students on qualifying degrees are still, thankfully, required to explain, analyse and justify their practice in terms of theoretical frameworks and paradigms. The constituent chapters in Part Two are therefore most instructive for the student searching for clear, coherent signposting summaries of the most common approaches. In order to reflect and mirror the theoretical frameworks being attached to contemporary settings, the editors might have included chapters on Crisis Intervention and Solution Focused/Strengths Based Work, particularly as these models have such evident currency in Mental Health and Family Support work. Furthermore, it would have been helpful to separate and distinguish between - as has been done by many established authors (such as Sibeon, 1989) - theories *for* social work understanding and theories *of* social work intervention. In spite of these minor criticisms, this section offers the reader accessible and easily applied examples of theoretically informed critical social work practice, written by authors notable for their expertise and their proven capacity to communicate and explain.

Part Three takes the student into the realms of practice scenarios which, whilst necessarily general, cover the future employment settings for most registered social workers. The range of practice examples has been expanded for this edition and it is particularly pleasing to see the sphere of palliative and 'end-of-life' practice being given due regard as an area of specialism.

Some publishers are sceptical of the value of edited texts, being unconvinced by the effect of having such disparate voices within one volume. This could well have been a problem here, given that there are 33 authors at work in this publication. However, this proves to be an unnecessary concern. Through the adoption of a standard format for each chapter and with the help of careful editing, the text hangs together beautifully, being strengthened by the expertise and self-evident passion of many contributing voices.

Effective, critical social work is necessarily an improvisation, like jazz, built up during the moments of performance, in the unique style of the performer, but around a theme, a prescribed structure. Once such capacity for spontaneity is eradicated, one is merely left with procedurally driven, formulaic reproduction, 'following the score'. This book makes a significant contribution to helping fledgling practitioners find their reflective critical voice which can only be to the good of social work itself.

Nigel Horner

Deputy Head, School of Health and Social Care
University of Lincoln

References

- Munro, E. (2004) 'The impact of audit on social work practice', *British Journal of Social Work*, **34**(8), pp.1075-95.
- Sibeon, R. (1989) 'Comments on the structure and form of social work knowledge', *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, **1**(1), pp.29-44.

Social Work with People with Learning Difficulties

Williams, P.

Exeter: Learning Matters Ltd, 2009, pp.167, ISBN: 978 1 84445 215 6, £17.00 (pbk.)

People with learning difficulties deserve an ordinary life. To be seen and treated as equal to others and to be afforded the same opportunities, rights and respect in the 21st century continues to present a challenge for many disabled people. Realising this goal is not dependant solely on political will through legislation. For disabled people, a deep rooted recognition of their equal place in society goes beyond the creation of legal structures as means of enforcement. To be treated as equal through the social care system relies upon the creation of informed social work practitioners who see things from their client's perspective, using mechanisms which enable the person being served to shape practice. This book sets out to help social workers and social work students to develop knowledge and skills of practice which equip them to work with disabled people.

The first set of chapters (One and Two) detail the complex notion of how one may define learning difficulty, alongside the historical developments which have informed the way disabled people have been seen and treated in the UK. Both chapters are descriptive and reflect the author's ambition for the book to be of practical use – he makes the point that, as the aetiology and definition of disability are socially constructed (and therefore contested), readers should look to other published sources for a more critical view.

The practical nature of this book is a positive feature. Social workers and students will value the approach adopted by the authors. The main elements of social work activity such as care planning and co-ordination are discussed in chapters Three, Four and Five. Here a more contemporary model is offered. Readers are provided with

scenarios through which to work. These are intended to help practitioners consider alternative ways of understanding the needs of disabled people where a proxy is no longer acceptable. The most effective section is Chapter Five. The role and nature of assessment are explored within the confines of policy-driven assessment strategies indicative, one might suggest, of the neo-liberal position.

The book is easy to use. A variety of case scenarios are dotted across the chapters to help social workers consider ways of working with learning disabled individuals, their families and others in their lives.

The book offers a wide range of well-researched resources which accompany suggested activities. These are all geared towards helping the practitioner improve her or his perception of what really matters to people with disabilities when carrying out their statutory social work duties.

The book has the potential to become an essential text for social workers occupied in services for people with learning difficulties. This is, in most part, due to the way it creates knowledge for practice.

The seven chapters are interrelated and all use the key theme of human value to challenge social care practices, offering social workers and those in training ways of working which value the individual by promoting user involvement. Each chapter is dedicated to demonstrating how its central themes can support social workers return to more traditional, value-based practice.

The final two chapters review the function of care management. The needs-led approach to planning and commissioning is examined against alternative models such as person-centred planning, brokerage, life histories and risk assessment. This is an excellent section.

Although not particularly political or analytical, the author does offer opportunities for social workers to develop more creative strategies in identifying need beyond a process-driven methodology.

There is, undoubtedly, an expectation that students and social workers will need to build on their understanding with further reading. Every chapter concludes with suggested further reading. However, in summing up, the authors should be complimented for what is an excellent contribution to social care practice.

Tony Bottiglieri

Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Health and Social Care
Anglia Ruskin University

Big Steps for Little People: Parenting the Adopted Child

Foster, C.

*London: Jessica Kingsley, 2008, pp.216,
ISBN: 9781843106203, £12.99 (pbk.)*

This book provides an excellent insight into the experience of adopting children from the perspective of one particular set of adoptive parents. In doing so, the book raises some pertinent issues such as: parenting a child who has a separate family history; the grieving process that may arise; and acknowledging the role emotions play in family behaviours.

The main theme of Chapters One to Three is how to create a sense of continuity for adoptive children. The reader is encouraged to imagine how it may have felt to live in the birth family of the adopted children. The detailed description of scenarios from the children's life history invites the reader to empathize with what children may have experienced prior to coming into the adoptive family context and how this history may affect their ability to adjust to the permanent adoptive family context.

Pragmatic advice is offered on how to respond to some of what the author describes as “the realities of the settling in period” (p.48).

Chapters Four to Six discuss the importance of setting age-appropriate tasks. Foster describes the centrality of working together as a team and discusses important issues such as how to deal with friends, friendships and the notion of identity. The grieving process associated with adoption is addressed along with the different stages or steps that the adopted children may experience. The author introduces the concept of ‘reframing’ which emphasizes the importance of creating a context where the children may unlearn the conditioning experienced in the birth family environment.

Chapters Seven to Nine address issues around the birth family history. A prominent theme is the importance of being open and honest to the children about what happened to them and explaining why they had been taken into care. The chapters also provide some insights into the adoptive parents’ experience of using therapeutic services for their children.

Chapters Ten to Twelve discuss the importance of understanding that difficult behaviour in the adopted child may be linked with issues of power and control. Foster explains how these issues of control may be linked with early survival strategies devised within birth family environments and discusses how a state of fear may arise when the children experience a sense of loss of control over a situation.

Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen describe real-life examples of problem-solving that link in very well with more in-depth discussion on the importance of communication, listening and raising awareness of the power of language. The importance of confidence boosting is outlined and other mechanisms for raising

levels of self-esteem in the adopted child are described.

Foster puts forward a convincing and useful account of how they attempted to create an environment that would allow the child to ‘grow’. She imparts some particularly useful advice for adoptive parents on how to help children make sense of their past. She also argues that, through verbal reiteration of a set of new ‘core beliefs’, the child was able to potentially move away from historic conditioned responses. Whilst the use of behaviour charts, progress charts for school and rewarding ‘nice’ behavior, provide useful practical responses to challenging behaviour, these tactics perhaps assume an overly specific understanding of how and why particular behaviour emerges.

It may also be relevant to consider that the use of the behaviour management strategies articulated by the author may lead to individualizing the reason for the adopted child’s behavior and subsequently place too much responsibility on the adopted child to adjust their conduct accordingly. There are a myriad of reasons that may lie behind particular behavioural difficulties. These might not always be understood or articulated by the adoptive child and the reason for their origin may be something that is felt in the environment in which the child is situated. I would therefore have liked to have seen more discussion of behaviour being understood as an inter-subjective process rather than as something that, as the book implicitly suggests, resides inside the adoptive child and is attributed to their birth family history and subsequent adoptive status.

The book would be enhanced by incorporating some more in-depth, critical reflection on the emotional response of the adoptive parent which (similar to other parents) can often be found in the tension between what one would hope to feel as a parent and what one actually feels - such as rejection by their adoptive children even

after all reasonable behaviour management strategies have been implemented.

The book provides a valuable compendium of ideas and strategies. However, it is culturally specific, leaning towards a Western, white, middle-class and gendered norm of how family life should be performed or conducted. Perhaps a more nuanced and subtle understanding of the dynamics around identity, care, membership and love within the adoptive family might have been developed. Nonetheless, this is an important and welcome text that deserves to be widely read by professionals and parents.

Cecilia Love

PhD student, School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University

Anti-Social Behaviour

Millie, A.

Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2009, pp.226, ISBN: 978-0-33-5229161, £20.99 (pbk.)

This is an exhaustive account of the concept of anti-social behaviour, measures taken against it and the varied circumstances of the activities that attract this label. Alternative perspectives are offered. The mushrooming literature is comprehensively reviewed.

Andrew Millie provides a handbook which will undoubtedly attract a student readership and others who, with the help of the extensive bibliography, will want to verify or probe particular aspects. Although the author provides little that has not been presented elsewhere and the text is over-weighted with detail, it is nevertheless a valuable addition to the large library on this subject.

So what is the subject under review? As Millie shows from the outset, anti-social behaviour is a contested label, stretching

over disturbances in public space, environmental eyesores and intrusive noise, as well as bullying and harassment within neighbourhoods. The latter was what sparked the political crusade culminating in the introduction of the much criticised anti-social behaviour order (ASBO) but its use, and that of other measures to curb uncivil behaviour, have since stretched to a multitude of phenomena which have been deemed to cause, or potentially cause 'harassment, alarm or distress'. From fly-tipping to poor parenting, from drunken behaviour in town centres to children playing football in their own street, there is, seemingly, no end to the activities punished or controlled in the name of preventing anti-social behaviour. There are many absurd examples, such as that of a suicidal woman given an ASBO forbidding her to go near lakes and rivers.

The book gives a thorough account of government initiatives and legislation in this field, but makes a plea for greater tolerance of diverse activities and wants local people to have a greater say in what is or is not acceptable. However, Millie fails to acknowledge the extent to which local practices vary, both in the use of ASBOs and the development of less punitive options for controlling uncivil behaviour. His statistics do not reveal the sharp fall in ASBOs imposed (especially those attached to a criminal conviction) since 2005. At the risk of crowding his text still further, he could have made more of the key role of social landlords in curbing anti-social behaviour and the extent to which informal methods, such as visits and warning letters, have been found sufficient in the great majority of cases involving social tenants.

Millie is rightly concerned at the extent to which concerns about anti-social behaviour, and measures to deal with it, have focused disproportionately on young people, with 'youths hanging about' (so what?) a favourite source of anxiety expressed in the *British Crime Survey*. Only very recently

has the survey tried to pin down how far the actions of groups of teenagers, as opposed to their mere presence, have really provided cause for complaint.

It may seem unfair to complain about the excessive detail in this book and then to pick on aspects which have been ignored or underplayed. What we have is a conscientious account of the British obsession with anti-social behaviour in terms of both theory and practice, which does not ignore the unacceptable problems in certain neighbourhoods but attempts to promote ideas of mutual respect and reciprocity – not unlike declared government policy but shorn of its punitive overtones.

Elizabeth Burney

Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Criminology
University of Cambridge

Kinship Care: Fostering Effective Family and Friends Placements

Farmer E. & Moyers, S.
London: Jessica Kingsley, 2008, pp.253,
ISBN: 978 1 84310 631 9, £22.99 (pbk.)

When I became a *Guardian ad Litem* in the 1990s the importance of valuing the resources of families of origin was considered a primary aim in securing a child or young person's best interests and future well-being. Yet, on many occasions, I discovered that birth relatives who had been prepared to care for children had been passed over in favour of unrelated foster carers. Where kin placements existed, these were usually as a result of families making arrangements between themselves in fraught situations. Social care services became involved after the event.

This book provides an extensive study into a neglected area of research. Drawing on evidence from practice, it should support

much needed development in this area of work. It uncovers the myths, realities and impact of kinship care on families, on social workers and on children and young people themselves. The book is split into three parts. Part One provides an introduction to the research design and methodology. Here, consideration is given both to family and friend care arrangements and how placements come to be set up. In some cases, this is by children and young people themselves. Part Two gives a comparative analysis of kinship and unrelated foster care, looking at sustainability and outcomes of arrangements for children and young people. Unsurprisingly, findings indicated that kin carers seemed significantly disadvantaged when compared to unrelated foster carers. This was particularly true where resources and foster care support were concerned. This part of the book gives a much needed insight into family and friend carers and children's needs, as well as looking at the various advantages and disadvantages in related and unrelated placements. Part Three examines practice relationships within family and friend care, including standards of care and the quality of social and financial support. There are both excerpts from, and analysis of, interviews with children, young people, carers and social workers. In the final chapter, consideration is given to implications for policy and practice.

Practitioners looking for some guidance for their own cases should find Part Three particularly helpful as it brings the research alive. There are interviews with carers, social workers, children and young people who all share their experiences of the impact of kinship care on families. There are clear implications for practice here. For hard-pushed practitioners with little time to read, this part of the book provides a valuable insight. Social workers may well recognise dilemmas. This may provide them with ways to reflect on and reframe their practice. I appreciated the evidence-based approach. It makes the book, in my view, of

good practical value to practitioners and managers.

The authors bring together much needed research. They also demonstrate the confusion and lack of knowledge about how to manage and support family and friend care for children and young people. The book lays out clearly the issues for the practitioner, looking at what family and friend carers need and want from services in order to secure the best possible outcomes. Because much of the research is based within practice experience, it provides persuasive evidence from which to develop knowledge.

Debbie Amas

Senior Lecturer in Social Work
Anglia Ruskin University