

Reviews

The Task Centred Book

Peter Marsh and Mark Doel

Abingdon, Routledge, 2005, 191pp

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This book is published when many social workers feel increased apprehension and unease as yet another Government review seems to threaten to undermine their profession, now in adult services.

Whether the threat is perceived or real, it is claimed by commentators that the relentless and radical change of recent years, driven by forces seemingly beyond the scope of the profession, has led to a degree of anxiety about the future of social work amongst practitioners. In a climate of consistent challenge to the core values of social work, and an increasing bureaucratisation of the profession, there is uncertainty out there about what social work is supposed to be about.

Step forward Marsh and Doel, who have no such doubts. Nor do they have any pretensions to radical liberation or to post-modern discourse analysis. Rather they advocate a no-nonsense approach to social work practice which does what it says on the tin.

One's first impression is that their book is a model textbook - clear, paced, and very thorough, supporting the reader's aware engagement with the subject. It conveys also a confidence about practice which one hopes could be contagious. However, as one reads on there comes a realisation that these authors are on a mission and there is no room for ambiguity or doubt.

Marsh and Doel do not miss and hit the wall - this book is a detailed and sustained argument for the promotion of the task centred approach throughout social work practice and training:

We believe [task centred practice] has a central role in developing professional practice; indeed, many practitioners have described their

learning and practice of task-centred work as a re-introduction to what they understand professional social work to be. (p.6)

As practitioners of what they preach, Marsh and Doel preface each chapter with specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and presumably timely objectives, and the text is punctuated with tasks for the reader – whether learner, trainer, manager, service user or carer, supervisor or practitioner - some of which are accompanied by model answers.

To assist the reader, the text of each chapter is broken up with boxes summarising key points or presenting discreet blocks of information.

And what they preach is not just the task centred approach, but the task centred approach as the model for practice development. It is the authors' intention that *The Task Centred Book* should be more than an up-date of their 1992 *Task Centred Social Work* which remains a key student handbook. With *The Task Centred Book*, they hope to bridge the gap between the written word and the reality of practice, and actually reach into the lived experience of how social work is taught and practiced.

While the partnership between worker and user at the heart of the task centred approach is written up to emphasise the AOP credentials of this model, this book presents no radical departures from, or developments in, the task centred model as such. The authors' contribution is to feed back what has been learned from researching, teaching and practicing the task centred way, and so present the well known stages of the model in closer detail and in a variety of contexts, including a most useful chapter on how to teach task centred practice. To effect this, the text is supported with continual references to practice in the form of extracts from learner portfolios, which both beds the concepts in reality and brings them to life. What we get is a richly embroidered textbook/handbook which, like the model of practice it endorses, is immensely practical.

This book is on one level a relentless argument for the promotion of task centred practice throughout social work practice and social work training, but because it is written with such clarity and thoroughness, it will be an extremely useful handbook for practice teachers. Here you will find guidance not only on the teaching of this practice method, but also examples of students' engagement with their learning about the method, and its application. If you like the task centred approach, you'll love this book.

The authors allow that the task centred approach has its critics, citing Lena Dominelli's concern that structural differences in power mean that true partnership between workers, and service users and carers is not possible, so that this approach results in a practice which 'supports managerialist objectives' (1996, p.156). Marsh and Doel emphasise that the task centred practice they describe and promote has developed on the triumvirate of practice-based research, practice wisdom, and the wishes of users and carers, and they stress throughout the importance of partnership with users and carers as the centre of task centred practice. There is no doubt that the task centred approach to practice fits well with the kind of thinking currently driving many of the policy changes in health and social care, and at the same time Marsh and Doel make a strong case for a focused, grounded, user and carer centred practice which will carry the profession forward, if pursued with confidence and enthusiasm.

Asked what *The Task Centred Book* lacks, I guess I would say a sufficient recognition that social work, like every aspect of human life, has its shadow side. Our best intentions sometimes lead us to our worst mistakes. Necessarily and inevitably there is something unfinished, something unknown, about every human life and a truly professional practice leaves space for this, whatever model of practice claimed.

Reference

Dominelli, L. (1996) Deprofessionalising social work: Anti-oppressive practice, competencies and postmodernism. *British Journal of Social Work*, 26, 153-175

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Modern Social Work Practice
Teaching and learning in practice settings
Mark Doel and Steven M. Shardlow
Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005, 328pp
ISBN 0 7546 4120 1 (hbk) £55.00 / 0 7546 4121 X (pbk) £17.95

It is a daunting task to review a text written by close colleagues and co-authors, and I faced this task with a combination of anticipation and not a little trepidation. The appetite was stimulated by the interesting introduction to this usable book. Those familiar with Doel and Shardlow's distinguished list will not be disappointed with this third volume in the series. Each section has been designed for direct use by practice educators and mentors with their students and supervisees. As a practice teacher in Counselling and Health Care as well as Social Work, I found *Social Work Practice* and *New Social Work Practice* packed with exercises and guidance, accessible as well as interesting and varied. The joint selection of topics and activities along with students has been helpful in accelerating development of the learning partnership as well as the process of their learning. This third volume offers readers a familiar blend of exercises with corresponding reading and references and, although some pathways have been well trodden, there is new territory to explore with updates to the practice learning agenda. For example, the sections which consider interprofessional learning and service user involvement respond to the challenge of the new Social Work degree and there is cross-referencing with the GSCC Code of Practice.

Each chapter follows a set structure, introducing a topic and offering an illustrative exercise, some underpinning conceptual frameworks, and useful references for readers to explore in more depth as necessary. Thus, the text can respond to a variety of styles and stages of development. For example, the Drawbridge Exercise can be used at several levels - to explore layers of cultural power and discrimination on the one hand, and personal beliefs and attitudes on the other. This blend of practice and theory is a particular strength for the busy practitioner.

It would have been interesting to see uses of power and oppression further explored in terms of encouraging the learning partnership to have a critical perspective - to be even more reflective; perhaps challenging the values and assumptions underpinning their roles and the expectation of agencies and educational institutions.

Nevertheless, this lively, readable contribution to the literature deserves

a warm welcome beyond the boundaries of social work. All practice educators in health and social care - on and off site - will find the contents accessible, relevant and adaptable. Practice learning is broadening its base - this volume with its blend of knowledge-based activities will have wide appeal.

Catherine Sawdon

Working Below the Surface
The emotional life of contemporary organizations
Edited by Claire Huffington, David Armstrong,
William Halton, Linda Hoyle, and Jane Pooley
London, Karnac Books (Tavistock Clinic Series), 2004
ISBN 1 85575 294 8 (pbk) £18.99

The contributors to this book are all staff and associates of the Tavistock Consultancy Service. This is an offshoot of the Tavistock Clinic, known worldwide for its psychoanalytically based psychotherapy. Consultation is offered to both public and private sector services and organisations. The writings provide a range of perspectives based on the contributors provide a range of reflections on their action research and practice.

As a practitioner and practice teacher I was interested to find out that this application of a psychoanalytical theory exists. I found the book accessible to myself as an interested non-specialist. Themes include the impact of working in a world of continual change and globalisation. The stressful aspects are addressed, as well as creative possibilities. The contributors examine the impact of the transition in recent years from largely self-contained and well defined institutions to organisations, which need to function and define themselves within diverse and continually changing networks and partnerships. The book reflects on the challenges to staff teams and those in a leadership role. There are reflections on the anxieties and pressures generated where once well-defined lines of accountability or role give way to working relationships which are continually re-negotiated.

Equalities and issues of anti-oppressive practice are not foregrounded in these reflections, which reduces the texts' applicability for practice

teaching. One chapter came as a refreshing and striking exception. It was no surprise to see the authors, Andrew Cooper and Tim Dartington, are respectively listed as Professor of social work at the Tavistock Clinic and social scientist. Of all the chapters, theirs has the strongest connection to the professional experience of social workers. They portray the anxieties, which can occur when professional roles are continually redefined, also examining the increasing alienation and individualism of roles, which are defined by micro-skills and competencies. They observe a business and organisational culture characterised by a loss of trust in staff, which they link to the growing demands increased regulation and audit. I found a parallel with the increasing emphasis on competency based learning in social work training, and the challenges this provides to those of us who advocate a more wholistic and student centred approach to adult learning.

This book is not of immediate interest or relevance to busy practice teachers. It would interest those with a wider role in organisational change and development, including staff involved as training managers. The authors provide a fascinating perspective, which reflects on the impact of the ever-increasing demands for professional and organisational responsiveness and flexibility.

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