Reviews

Child Protection Work:
Beyond the Rhetoric
Helen Buckley
London, Jessica Kingsley, 2003, 192pp. ISBN 1 84310 075 4 (pbk) £15.95

In this book the author seeks to make visible the professional practices of statutory social workers involved in the child protection process. By finding out more about what happens at the early stages of the processing of concerns about children - the referral stage and beyond - she argues we can understand more about the complexities and uncertainties of child protection work.

The author bases her study on empirical analysis which she undertook in the Republic of Ireland in the early to mid-1990s. She analyses all referrals made to one local authority over a six month period and follows up those categorised as 'child abuse/neglect' for a further six months. Her research methods included a large number of informal interviews with the social workers and some of the parents involved and observations of a number of meetings which were part of the process. It is thus firmly located in the operationalised practices of these particular workers.

The methodological approach is based on focused analysis of these interviews and observations. The author develops an alternative understanding of the child protection process which she compares to the 'official' discourse on child protection. She argues that such understandings as her study suggests allow a more realistic understanding of the daily work of child protection than the 'official' discourse makes available, as her approach includes all concerns referred to the social workers involved in child protection.

There is one major contextual difference between the Irish and the UK Child Protection systems: that is that in the Republic there is a system of 'notifying' all 'child abuse/ neglect' cases. Although she likens this to the registration of child protection concerns, her description and analysis of the process makes it seem to me rather different. However, I would suggest that analytically, this is a contextual difference which in no way detracts from the relevance of her argument. Indeed, the importance of understanding the situated and socially contextualised nature of the child protection process in social work is one of the key strengths of this study.

This book is therefore of great interest to anyone involved in researching social work child protection or child welfare practice in the twenty first century. It will also be a

valuable resource for anyone teaching social work practitioners, either as trainee social workers or in post-qualifying courses, as it encourages critical reflection based on the actual work of child protection as acted out by the workers themselves. Social work practitioners themselves will be able to use some of these case studies to help them understand the nature of their own work and the difficulties they daily face. The study will also be useful to analysts of social policy, whether academics or policy makers as it throws light on daily social work practices rather than the highly publicised, but atypical, child protection 'disasters' which have been the focus of press and political attention since the 1970s in the UK.

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Children's Perspectives On Domestic Violence
Audrey Mullender, Gill Hague, Umme Iman, Liz Kelly,
Ellen Malos & Linda Regan
London, Sage, 2002, 258pp.
ISBN 0 7619 7105 X (hbk) £60.00 / 0 7619 7106 8 (pbk) £18.99

We will look back with incredulity to the beginning of this century at how little we understood about the experiences and realities of children's daily lives, and what little influence children had over decisions affecting their lives.

The trend towards research with children is one means of exploring children experiences and perceptions and of enabling children's voices to be heard. "Children's Perspectives on Domestic Violence" makes a valuable contribution to the field of research with children by outlining the findings of a major new research study conducted in the UK. The first phase of the research sought to address children's general understanding and perceptions of domestic violence, and the second phase considers the effect on children who had lived with domestic violence, what they felt enabled them to cope and what advice they would offer to others in similar circumstances.

The book begins with a section on Methodology which will be of interest not only to those concerned with planning and designing research with children, but more generally to all those who are engaged with children in a professional capacity. The discussion on issues of children's consent, confidentiality and child protection has much wider relevance and application to all who seek to adopt a child-centred approach in their work.

Much of the previous research on children's experiences of domestic violence has not succeeded in being representative of children from a wide range of backgrounds. One of the main strengths of this research (which is described in some detail in this book) are the methods the researchers employed in order to include in the sample, children with disabilities as well as children from a range of ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. This has provided a voice to those children from whom we rarely hear on any subject, let alone one so complex as domestic violence.

Phase I of the study is outlined in Chapter 3. This phase of the study sought to ask a general population of children what they knew and thought about domestic violence and as such is the first study of its kind in the UK. A school based survey was undertaken and questionnaires administered to 1395 children in 12 schools in different areas of England.

This section of the book is depressing reading, as the themes that emerge are those of young women's low self-esteem and poor expectations of interpersonal relationships, alongside young men's acceptance of violence towards women. An acceptance that appears to increase as they move through secondary school.

More encouraging are the findings that children do not think that children should have to live with domestic violence and would welcome the opportunity to learn more about the subject.

The findings of this phase of the research are outlined in considerable detail in this section, but are worthy of close reading as the research provides clear examples of some children's understanding of the complex dynamics of domestic violence whilst also addressing the means by which some of the more disturbing beliefs and attitudes of young people could be challenged.

Phase II of the research is addressed in the remainder of the book. This phase of the research comprised an in-depth study of 54 children known to have lived with domestic violence, 45 of whom were interviewed individually and 9 in groups. The focus of the research was to address what children think about domestic violence, how they cope with it and what kind of help children need. In addition 24 interviews were conducted with mothers and 20 with professionals whom the children considered to be significant to them. Whilst the sample of women and children is small the material covered in the following chapters is very rich in detail and offers an often fresh perspective on the impact domestic violence has on the lives of children and highlights the active way in which they respond to it.

Subsequent chapters then, address, children's coping strategies the particular experiences of South Asian children, children's relationships with their mothers and fathers and finally what children found most helpful in enabling them to cope.

Each chapter provides detailed and graphic accounts of children's experience but goes beyond the personal in placing these accounts within the context of previous research and knowledge in the field and in considering the implications of the research findings for future practice and policy.

There are not many texts on domestic violence that I would recommend be read

from start to finish, but this is one of them. The style, structure and content of this book is such that the reader is easily led from a general literature review at the beginning of each chapter, to the personal accounts of women and children, to the analysis and conclusions to be drawn from the research.

The children's accounts make fascinating, if painful, reading and pay testament to the ability of even quite young children to strive to make sense of their own reality in living with violence. Aspects of current practice, and our understanding from previous literature, on the impact of domestic violence on children are challenged by the findings of this research. Key messages for those involved in policy and practice can be drawn from the children's accounts.

Of particular interest is the section of the book entitled "Barriers of Racism, Ethnicity and Culture". This detailed and extensive discussion of the experiences of South Asian women and children is of importance as few research studies have successfully addressed this issue. The significance of using South Asian researchers to interview the children cannot be underestimated and appears to have allowed the children to feel comfortable in exploring issues of culture and racism that may not have been possible with white researchers. Again there is evidence of the flexible approach adopted by the researchers, in being sensitive to children's specific needs and circumstances.

Here also the author's move from exploration of the dilemma's and difficulties faced by children to examine how they had successfully developed coping strategies in order to survive their experiences.

This shift from exploring the impact on children to acknowledging their strengths in dealing with adversity is a strong theme throughout the book and serves to prevent the reader from becoming too disillusioned and disheartened by the many accounts of lack of appropriate resources and professional support that children have encountered. Rather the authors challenge us to utilise children's strengths and accounts of their experience to inform the planning of the development of appropriate services for the future.

This book then works on a number of levels. Firstly, as an account of successfully undertaking research 'with' children, rather than to children, and those measures that need to be employed in order to ensure that such research is inclusive.

Secondly, the book portrays children's perspectives on many aspects of domestic violence and thus provides a fresh perspective on what are familiar problems. The analysis of these accounts poses a number of challenges to our current thinking and practice in this field.

Finally, the book reveals the extent to which Children are able to make sense of their own lives, form their own views and opinions, and assess their own needs in a way that many adults continue to fail to recognise. This has wider implications for many aspects of children's lives and the way adults respond to them.

Without doubt this is one of the most significant texts on domestic violence to be published for a number of years. It is essential reading for all practitioners

working with children across a range of fields and for those engaged in research with children. Let us also hope, that those involved in the development of Public Policy in relation to women and children experiencing domestic violence will take heed of the views of children featured in this important new text.

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Social Policy in Britain (2nd Edition)
Pete Alcock
Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 376pp. ISBN 0 333 99334 9 (pbk) £18.99

Pete Alcock's second edition of Social Policy in Britain provides a comprehensive and accessible introduction to the study of social policy.

The book has much to recommend it, not least, its user-friendly approach, which should undoubtedly appeal to students. Divided into four sections, the book covers the development of social policy, welfare services, the structure, context and issues surrounding welfare provision in Britain. The chapters within each section are then subdivided into topics. Each chapter then begins with a summary of the key features before outlining the terms of debate in the area and then moving on to expand on particular issues. The use of the book as a source of reference is therefore dictated by the needs of the reader rather than the book's own internal logic or organisation.

Alcock also provides an extremely comprehensive account of the subject and where, perhaps inevitably, depth is sacrificed to breadth this is acknowledged through the inclusion of annotated further reading and useful web links. These features again should enhance the book's appeal to students.

The subject of social policy is introduced as both a distinct and developing academic discipline and a political project. Alcock charts the development of the discipline from its roots in Fabianism, through its transformation from social administration to social policy, whilst relating this to parallel political developments in welfare provision, including the post Second World War Welfare State, the New Left, the New Right and the Third Way.

Part One, Welfare Services, is comprehensive and includes sections on education, health, housing, social services and employment. For any reader new to the discipline this section should prove invaluable. Each section outlines the historic development of policy in the area together with more recent policy developments. In each section Alcock's critical approach shines through as he explores the implications and contradictions of the recently adopted, more managerialist and individualistic approach to the provision of welfare, for service users, practitioners and policy makers, alike.

The diverse structure of welfare provision is the focus of Part Two. The complex interrelationship between the role of the state and the market is discussed both in relation to the historical development of welfare and its current provision in Britain. Dispelling as myth the neo-liberal vision of the free and unregulated market, Alcock nonetheless, recognises that 'there are two sides to this coin' as he explores the multi-faceted relation between the state and the market in the provision of public welfare. The contributions of the voluntary and informal sectors are also recognised and once again the complexities of the relations both within and between welfare providers are amply detailed. While acknowledging the vital role played by the voluntary sector in seeking out and challenging 'the gaps and contradictions in state and market welfare provision' Alcock points out the weaknesses by acknowledging the potential for voluntary provision to be 'unpredictable, unstable, incomplete and sometimes oppressive and exclusionary' (p.176).

The context of social welfare is the subject of Part Three. The economic and ideological contexts for welfare are included alongside the international and local. Although this may be considered an unusual mix Alcock guides the reader through with considerable flair and attention to detail. The chapter on Ideologies of Welfare, for example, begins with an explanation of what should be understood by the term ideology followed by an outline of the main perspectives, while the chapter; International and European Influences clearly demonstrate the advantages of a comparative approach to the study of social policy.

Part Four then details the issues in relation to social policy, from social divisions, to paying for and delivering welfare Alcock is once again not reluctant to confront controversy. The final chapter on the Future of Welfare provision emphasises the ever-changing economic, political and ideological landscape, yet sees signs of an emerging consensus in favour of diversity in welfare provision, a position which is convincingly argued for by Alcock. The author also demonstrates considerable optimism regarding the future role of academic social policy researchers as advisers on, and evaluators of, public policy.

Overall the book is successful in its stated aim of providing 'a general introduction to social policy for students at all levels of further and higher education' (p.xiii). Its clarity, accessibility and comprehensiveness will make it popular with students and tutors alike. It is however the way in which the author engages with the subject that should have the most profound effect on the reader. The book does not simply present social policy as a series of 'facts' or a comparison between one policy and another but continues the tradition of Titmuss by seeking to critically engage with the subject and to encourage and inspire the reader to do so too.

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The Social Work Business
John Harris
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Writing from a critical perspective, John Harris marshals evidence to show that social work has been transformed from a bureau-profession to a quasi-business endeavour. According to Harris, the economic crisis of the 1970s, globalization and the rise of neo-liberalism, encouraged the view that the welfare state was an expensive dinosaur. In consequence, a modern, cost-effective and efficient approach had to be taken to providing social care. Managerialism together with marketization comprise the twin pillars of this new approach which, initiated by the Conservative government, has been continued by New Labour. Managerialism has transformed administrators within Social Services Departments into managers charged with the responsibility of introducing the government's corporate strategy, whilst social workers, now known as care managers, have also been metamorphosed by the business vision. Care managers are responsible for co-ordinating services into individualized packages of care in accordance with budgetary limitations. As a result of marketization, Social Services Departments are no longer the sole provider of services. Voluntary and private agencies together are now understood as the independent sector and offer alternative (rather than supplementary) options. By means of competition, so proponents say, quality of standard is driven up and cost is driven down. Social work clients have become customers who, by means of rational-choice, state their service preferences.

For Harris, much is lost by the changes that have taken place. For example, social workers have lost professional autonomy. Their work is dictated increasingly by the government and scrutinized in detail by their line-managers. Managers themselves have little room for manoeuvre as their brief is enshrined in the government's corporate approach. Use of the term customer emphasizes consumerism at the expense of values associated with social democratic citizenship. Furthermore, customers may not have the personal resources to exercise the kind of rational-choice implied and the budgetary limitations often mean that, in reality, there is little choice to be had. Indeed, having reflected on the social work of today, Harris concludes that the business-like rhetoric often conceals the materiality of the change that has taken place. The linguistic gloss of capitalist enterprise and private sector management techniques mask the retrenchment that is part of the dismantling of the welfare state.

In writing his book Harris combines both a chronological and thematic approach. After an introductory chapter, the book starts with social work before the business era then, in the following three chapters, charts its establishment, running and modernization. Chapters in the second half of the book, whilst individually following a chronological format, focus on specific topics. For example, chapter 6 'Learning the business', traces the developments in social work education and shows how it is now tailored to the requirements of today's reconfigured practice. Although the book

is probably best read as a whole, helpful introductions and conclusions make each chapter coherent in its own right.   The overall style of the book is accessible and its critical content is welcome. Whilst the argument is persuasive, however, it is more relevant to social work with adults than with children. In cases of child protection, parents are unlikely to be seen (or see themselves) as consumers choosing services in the marketplace of care. This fragmentation of social work is touched upon but not pursued by Harris. Although Harris' argument is predominantly pessimistic, in the final chapter he offers a glimmer of optimism. In an argument that is reminiscent of the radical literature of the 1970s, Harris suggests that there still exist spaces within the social work exchange for an alternative version of practice. Given his argument that the extent of change that has taken place represents a cultural revolution, this is a somewhat unconvincing conclusion. Nevertheless, the book is thought provoking and a refreshing antidote to social work literature that is frequently concerned with little more than procedural competence.

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