

Reviews

Social Work and Human Development

Karin Crawford and Janet Walker.

Exeter, Learning Matters, 2003, 130pp

ISBN 1 90330 083 5 (pbk) £14.00

This textbook on theories of human development and their utilisation by social workers is in the Transforming Social Work Series, written specifically for the new social work degree courses. The book is short, seven chapters and 130 pages. It achieves its goal of introducing social work students to theories about development and relating those theories to the practice of social work. The book provides the legislative and policy background for that practice. By using an interactive approach the authors encourage the reader to begin to develop the reflective skills required of the effective professional. After a brief discussion of the main theories of development, the authors apply these theories to groups of people throughout the course of human life, starting with 'infants, young children and their families' and progressing to 'older adults'. These groups coincide with the current categories utilised by social care services.

In their application of theory to practice the authors have been particularly successful in demonstrating the richness of people's lived experiences and the complexity of the social work task, to work in ways which enhance those lives. The authors successfully demonstrate the relevance of theory to understanding the individual in their life course and how this informs decision making by social workers. Students are encouraged to use their own life course to explore and understand the theories which are being discussed, introducing tools such as life maps or paths which will be useful in future practice. Throughout the text there are structured activities which explore values and promote the ethical application of theory to practice.

The text is goal orientated, each chapter commencing with the National Occupational Standards that the student will be working towards, and interactive with suggested activities and recapping of the potential learning at the end of the chapter. Reading carefully and engaging with the case studies and activities gives the potential social worker an insight into the complexities of the social work role with people throughout their lives. Most chapters conclude with suggested further reading which develops the student's knowledge base about the area of practice central to the chapter.

The case studies are well chosen, prompting exploration of personal values and of the moral dilemmas that can arise in social work practice with vulnerable people who may require services. Some of the case studies are of individuals known because the events of their life course have been headline news; others are anonymised examples, some of which are developed over the course of a chapter or chapters so that the student gains a fuller understanding of the individual's personal and social context. This developing picture reflects the reality of practice, and encourages the student to consider how understanding of another's life course is modified and developed as new information becomes available. The case studies are well indexed, so that those who learn best from 'real' examples can retrace the material through the text.

This book is recommended not only as an introductory text but as one which can usefully be read by current practitioners who want to update their knowledge of theory about human development and its application to practice. The skilful way that the authors have explored diversity across the life course, emphasising human potential at all stages of life, challenges the 'deficit models' of disability, old age, and of child rearing which have cast a long shadow over decision making and practice.

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New approaches in social research

Carol Grbich

London, Sage, 2004, 152pp

ISBN 0 7619 4931 3 (hbk) £60.00 / 0 7619 4932 1 (pbk) £18.99

Any book with the word 'new' in the title immediately catches my attention. As a fairly seasoned research practitioner and lecturer in research approaches and methodology, I am always on the look out for 'new' tools to use and 'new' or improved ways to rationalise, explain and evaluate the research I am conducting. In my search for these things, Carol Grbich's handbook does not generally disappoint.

The book sets out to 'explore the implications of postmodernist ideas within the research context'. In order to satisfy this remit, the text is split into two parts. Part 1 deals with the rationale of postmodernism and associated philosophical debates. From this foundation, the text moves on, in Part 2, to explore the impact of postmodernism on social research. Whilst it may be fair to point out that some of the tools and techniques presented in the text are not completely new, their description, presentation and application is refreshingly so.

The author provides a relatively articulate description of the philosophical underpinnings of modernity, postmodernism and poststructuralism. All of these terms, and their related philosophical and operational baggage, are dealt with in a business-

like way. For those who are interested in conducting social research, this section of the book should both challenge and illuminate, as it addresses issues surrounding acquisition and interpretation of knowledge obtained and developed through the research process. The text cleverly draws together themes and issues that are difficult or too complex to deal with at length in a typically generalist taught research methods programme. It does this by undermining (and I mean that positively) many of our taken-for-granted interpretations of the social world in which we all live and operate.

That might seem powerful enough. However, in Part 2 of the text, the author seeks to unpack the concepts, principles and approaches detailed in Part 1 and apply them to actual research projects. Topics and subjects detailed here include an analysis and evaluation of research designs and methodologies; the position or role of the researcher in collecting, collating, presenting and analysing research data. A useful glossary of terms is also provided to guide readers through some of the terms used throughout the text.

As a minor criticism (and perhaps a reflection of my own simple way of viewing the world), I would have welcomed more discussion and coverage of the way in which modernity as put forward by the author, interacts with other interpretations of reality. Other authors may express what Grbich is discussing through different terminology and language. More analysis of these different (or competing?) models, approaches and understandings would open up the readership and potential readership of the text.

Nevertheless, in an age where we often require a 'quick fix' on research methods and approaches, the book is a refreshing alternative. A useful resource for students of research, the research-practitioner readership of this journal and, indeed, anyone interested in exploring the theoretical and philosophical foundations of social research.

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Children First. Disabled children and their families

Edited by Celia Atherton

Dartington, Research in Practice, 2004

ISBN 0 954256 28 X (audio CD or cassette tape)

This is one of a series of audio CDs available from Research in Practice, aimed at communicating key messages from research to 'busy practitioners and managers'. The total playing time of this disk is approximately an hour, divided into 16 short sections (CD tracks). The material contains both narration and extracts from tape-recorded interviews, primarily with researchers. The format is therefore very similar to a documentary radio programme.

Although the CD claims to communicate the 'most up-to-date thinking and research',

after listening to it in its entirety, I remained unconvinced that this central aim has been met. Research concerning disabled children is introduced via a summary of survey data collected during by the OPCS in the 1980s. There is some initial discussion of statistical trends in the epidemiology of particular medical conditions, medical advances and life expectancy, household and family composition, etc. Disabled children are defined in medical terms. One real concern here is that a resource to claiming to reflect cutting edge research should be framed at the outset within a medical model paradigm.

Given the increasing weight that is attached to social model research within contemporary social work training, I was surprised to see no overt discussion of the social model of disability anywhere on the CD (although there is some reference to topics such as participation, education, poverty, and housing). There is thus a distinct lack of conceptual clarity about the meaning of disability, and inconsistencies in the use of terminology (e.g. although the title of the CD refers to disabled children the audio discussion refers extensively to children with disabilities, which carries a rather different meaning in research terms).

Similarly, while the title of the CD pays lip service to the idea of 'children first' there is almost no meaningful input from disabled children themselves (personally, I found the brief audio clips that were included rather sentimentalised if not a little patronising). There would be excellent opportunities in an audio format training resource to incorporate the voices of disabled children more extensively, particularly as there has been much recent research that involves disabled children's contributions directly.

Having expressed some major reservations, it is fair to say that the various contributors do make some salient and important points arising from research knowledge. Poverty and income are identified as critical factors in the experience of disabled children and their families. The process and uncertainty of medical diagnosis is highlighted as a concern for parents. Attention is paid to the significance of youth transitions for disabled children and young people. The widespread lack of consultation with disabled children is also identified. The specific experiences of families with more one disabled child are highlighted. There is also a specific focus on minority ethnic families with disabled children and their under-representation in research. There is some good discussion arising from recent research on the housing needs of disabled children and families.

Moving to policy and practice, there is a significant section on the development of the National Service Framework for disabled children, the policy context within which the CD as a whole is placed. However, the contributions here focus only on the process of policy development and the consultation mechanisms involved. There was no explanation of the framework itself, its associated standards, or how these might translate into practice. I found this frustrating as a listener and it appeared to be a surprising omission. There were a great many platitudes about 'services wrapped around children and families', 'integrated services', and 'working together' but little if any indication of what research can tell us about how this might be implemented.

Overall, I was somewhat disappointed with the content of the CD, having approached

it with optimism initially. From a research perspective, there was very little either new or challenging for professional development. There was no mention of human rights (either children's rights or disabled people's rights). There was no mention of independent living options, such as direct payments, of peer support options, or of self advocacy - all of which have been researched recently.

There is certainly a strong case for developing multimedia staff development resources, such as this audio series from Research in Practice. There may well be a number of 'busy practitioners and managers' who would welcome the opportunity to listen to focused discussion in preference to reading yet more reports. However, I was less convinced that they would consider this particular resource to be an hour well-spent.

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