

## Reviews

### Relationship-Based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice

*Edited by Gillian Ruch, Danielle Turney and Adrian Ward*

London and Philadelphia, Jessica Kingsley, 2010, 272pp

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Relationship-Based Social Work is a collection of fourteen essays by Social Work professionals from a wide range of social work areas, including a number of practitioners from the Tavistock Clinic. Accordingly, the book outlines its 'three key theoretical and conceptual frameworks' as psychoanalytic, systems and attachment theories, but is ultimately concerned with the importance which social workers attach to social experience, and successfully positions itself as much as a practical guide as it does a theoretical exploration.

The book is split into three sections (1. Setting Out The Terrain; 2. Working with the Relationship in Practice; 3. Sustaining, supporting and Developing Relationship-Based Practice in a Reflexive Context), and accommodates contributions from a broad spectrum of practitioners, using a variety of research methods, working with a diverse range of service users. The content matter covers Children and Families' as well as Social Work with Adults, and contains chapters on the development of both long term and short term relationships. Whether discussing refugees, parents with substance misuse issues, or supervision in child protection, the focus remains on the analysis of the human encounters which social workers are involved in, and their meanings.

As this book is heavily informed by a psychoanalytical approach to relationships, it follows that much of the analysis concerns what may or may not be happening in the subconscious minds of social workers', and the people with whom they work. As one of the editors himself puts it, discussing subconscious part of the self will always be in danger of becoming a discussion which is 'too abstract to be of much use in practice' (p.55); however, it was these parts of the book – those that really attempted to unpick what might be happening in the minds of social workers (perhaps as a result of early experiences which have been repressed until experiences in relationships as adults reawaken them) and service users which, as a newly qualified social worker, I found most useful. For example, Adrian Ward's chapter on 'the use of self in relationship-based practice' included a very illuminating and accessible section on how to use the Johari Window (p. 60; Luft, 1984) as a means of reflecting on why certain encounters may have occurred as they did, and how you can use such reflection to inform future practice. It is a tool I intend to use as a means of reflecting on future relationships I build with colleagues and service

users. Although all social work practitioners are distinct in terms of what kind of tools and approaches appeal to them to help them reflect on their work, I think this book is likely to have an approach which suits workers from all fields, provided they are willing to accept the central ideas in the psychosocial, psychoanalytic and attachment theories of human behaviour.

Despite the potential for this to be a loosely connected collection of essays about disparate fields within a very diverse discipline / profession, this book is rare in that it convincingly connects a wide variety of research – and methodological approaches – by focusing on how social work attempts to ameliorate complex social problems: through the cultivation of human relationships. As the profession is now facing a battle to retain its identity in an increasingly bureaucratic and managerial context, it is refreshing to read a contemporary book which puts at its very centre what Laming described as ‘doing the simple things properly’ (Kroll, p.83; Laming 2003, p 105), and the reason the majority of social workers enter the profession: in their belief that they can make a difference to other human beings by their ‘use of self’ (p.54) in the formation of relationships. Many of the approaches described in this book very well reflect the ethos of ideas recently expounded by Professor Eileen Munro’s report on Child Protection, in that they advocate social workers keeping at the forefront of their mind – and indeed caseload – the people for whom they are purporting to work.

I would particularly recommend this book to any social workers whose work is informed by psychoanalytic, systems or attachment theories, and also to all Newly Qualified Social Workers. It is regularly remarked upon that those at the beginning of their career are perhaps more vulnerable to the emotional difficulties of the social work task, and this book provides very useful – and ultimately hopeful – coverage of the ethical and emotional complexities when ‘using the self’ (p.56) in attempting to build positive and appropriate relationships, in challenging and unprecedented situations.

**Harry Wood**  
**Adoption Support Social Worker**  
**After Adoption**

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The Post-Qualifying Handbook for Social Workers

*Edited by Wade Tovey*

London, Jessica Kingsley, 2007, 296pp.

ISBN 978 843104285 (pbk) £19.99

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Post-Qualifying Social Work education (PQ) in England is, at the time of writing, undergoing significant changes and restructuring in light of the overall reform of national social work provision and governance, so this is a timely point to review Tovey’s Post-Qualifying Handbook for Social Workers, and consider what it has to offer for the times ahead of us. As a PQ educator, I have recommended this book for a number of years, and

consider it an inspirational guide for our candidates to the often stony path that has to be negotiated whilst balancing studies with the unending pressures of practice.

Taken as a whole, the book presents a coherent argument for the value of engaging in continuing professional development, in whatever form that might be, promoting 'an approach to learning that is about understanding and making meaning rather than simply reproducing others' points of view' (p235).

The book is organised into four parts: 'Contexts', 'Practice', 'Issues' and 'Doing PQ'. Individual chapters are contributed by a range of academics, practitioners and work-based educators representing the whole spectrum of social work practice. All contributors have significant experience of post-qualifying teaching and learning, and write with a strong focus on reflective, analytical and self-aware approaches to learning. The book also has a small section of appendices providing useful information and guidance for those supporting post-qualifying students under the current PQ framework in the UK.

The first part discusses contexts ranging from the overall concept of continuing professional development, integration of theory into practice, through ethics and values and international perspectives, to researching practice. Discussion of the PQ framework (GSCC, 2005), relatively new when the book was published, will need significant revision for future editions. However many of the issues which are covered in some depth are those identified as central to best practice in the UK by Munro (Department for Education, 2011). One area that reflects this is the exploration of how social workers understand their own role in organisations that take an increasingly managerial approach to service provision. If social work 'sits on the boundary of exclusion and inclusion' (p61) then as resources for services shrink, this liminal role becomes more vital; the critical reflection that this book encourages helps to emphasise the importance of values, advocacy and empowerment of service users and carers in creating real social change.

Munro (DoE 2011) also stresses the importance of understanding the use of evidence, theory and practice knowledge, and the chapters covering this area are both clear and thought-provoking.

The 'Practice' section of the book covers the main areas of social work provision in the UK; Children and Families, Adult Care, Mental Health, Learning Disability and Youth Justice. Whilst each area is necessarily covered only briefly, brevity does not preclude depth. Issues are considered in the context of a realistic case summary or examples; theory, policy, values and research are linked together clearly, with an overall focus on critical consideration of inclusive and transformational practice. Again, coverage of policy and organisational issues needs to be updated; the pace of change in these areas in the UK is such that it is hard to keep up with it. However the importance of maintaining professional values and perspectives in a changing world remains a constant.

What readers may find most enlightening about this section are the insights given into fields of practice that they are less familiar with. It is always instructive to 'look outside your box' and consider the perspectives of other professionals with whom you may work in partnership.

Part three addresses a range of issues relevant to practitioners in all fields of social

work, particularly those that may be contentious. The chapter on assessment considers major principles of this universal process, and usefully explores the issue of potential for bias, and the need for critical analysis in assessment. Anti-oppressive practice is addressed specifically in the context of sexuality in social work education and practice. This is a valuable contribution to the literature in this area, as it is a subject less usually considered. The fact that many practitioners 'just don't want to go there' (p165) can lead to sexuality being marginalised as an issue, with subsequent potential for significant discrimination and oppression both for service users and for practitioners themselves. Other topics covered – making sense of 'self' in practice and the participation of service users and carers in education and service development – also add insight to the knowledge base, for educators as much as for practitioners. The chapter regarding the challenges of practice learning has enduring relevance in its exploration of the debates, but the discussion of Practice Educator training is contextual to the time of publication and may also be less relevant to readers outside the UK.

The final section, on 'Doing PQ' also needs to be seen in the context of the referenced framework (GSCC 2005). However Chapter 19, on strategic approaches to PQ learning, has much more general relevance, with advice on preparing for learning, self-analysis and reflection and consideration of the issues of motivation, learning styles and learning needs that can enable or block continuing professional development. This chapter should be essential reading for any practitioner, whether or not they might be a PQ candidate.

I would recommend this book, not only to Social Workers undertaking Post-Qualifying awards, but also to practitioners who are unable to access formal PQ education, to encourage critical reflection on the process of continuous learning through experience. I would also recommend it to managers of social work services, at all levels, so that they might appreciate the value of Post-Qualifying education in workforce development and, vitally, how this develops the improvement of service provision, and of outcomes for the people who use their services. I will look forward to seeing a new edition in due course.

**Helen Burrows**

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## References

- General Social Care Council (2005) *Post Qualifying Framework for Social Work Education and Training*, London: GSCC
- Department for Education (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report; A child-centred system*, London, The Stationery Office

Children's Agency Children's Welfare:  
A dialogical approach to child development, policy and practice  
*Author: Carolus van Nijnatten*  
Bristol, Policy Press , 2010, 168pp  
ISBN 9781847424891. (hbk) £65.00 / 9781447306290 (pbk) £24.99

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This book presents a well-balanced and structured argument, based upon considerable experience and knowledge, that use of dialog and engendering communication is an evidence-based clinical technique when practising social work in a child welfare role. It is argued that a dialogic approach is an essential component and skill, for the effective sharing of information, mutual understanding and successful interaction between children, families and welfare agencies. The author acknowledged the importance of development of social work as a profession however suggests that a purely evidence-based approach may represent a danger of using a 'one approach fits all' style. It is suggested that due to our very diverse nature that this may, in fact, cause more harm than good and only by communicating effectively and listening can the nature of, and the need for assistance be identified.

This text provides clear and realistic examples to elucidate the practicalities and essential nature of structured intervention based upon narrative. It covers the nature and development of individual and family agency and clearly explains how this agency may be weakened by an accumulation of risk factors. This may result in concerns for a child and instigate the introduction of welfare agencies to redress the balance where individual or family agency has deteriorated and the text looks for parallels of development of both parenting and professional child welfare. The author stresses that without a narrative and dialogical approach interventions may be insufficient and misguided as the true nature of the breakdown of agency cannot be fully understood.

There is a focus on narrative to construct meaning of current circumstances and to deconstruct negative patterns. Through the use of a dialogical approach to create understanding, or co-construction, to improve the chances of positive exchange, and interaction, of 'agencies' being successful. Through explanation the author successfully merges concepts of child development and narrative as a way of functioning in creating order and understanding, and understanding cultural and societal context.

The book starts with the concept of individual agency and the development and integration of a child into society, including cognitive and emotional development. It covers construction of language, early recognition and its use for understanding society and the world.. The process of individual agency is shown to develop through social interaction, developing interactive agency and explanations of how this may break down through psychological problems.

The author provides examples of poor professional agency and provides useful ways of recognising and communicating effectively with children who have disrupted personal agency. Social agency within a social context is also covered and the illusion of freedom is also discussed. Explained are the differing levels of agency in different cultural contexts

where expectations may vary greatly. The author continues to examine the intervention of child welfare agencies when child pathology presents as a result of parental dysfunction and the lack of family agency.

The author presents his strong, researched based argument in a clear and well-referenced text. There is an air of refreshing honesty regarding the strength of the dialogical approach but also to some of the weaknesses of the constructivist framework, which provides positive and thought provoking balance. It is difficult to complete a page of this text without a degree of self-reflection and reflection of one's practice. Both newly qualified and experienced practitioners will find material to assist them to improve their practice and the outcomes for children and young people.

**Phil Lanigan**  
**Newly Qualified Social Worker**  
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Good Practice in Assessing Risk  
Current knowledge, issues and approaches  
*Edited by Hazel Kemshall and Bernadette Wilkinson*  
London, Jessica Kingsley, 2011, 224pp  
ISBN 9781849050593 (pbk) £19.99

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This is an edited book, which explores professional approaches to risk assessment, providing a rich review of current literature on risk, risk assessment tools and positive practice in assessing and working with risk. A number of the contributors draw on empirical research that they have undertaken or piloted in the field, using a variety of contemporary methodological approaches, including narratives and story telling. The book explores the concept of risk and risk assessment across a number of areas of professional practice, and as such should appeal to a wide audience of practitioners working within health and social care and criminal justice practice. Throughout the book, there is discussion of the limitations and difficulties in assessing risk, as well as critical exploration of good practice and suggestions for further developments.

Chapters 1 and 2 set the context for the book, exploring the social context of risk and contemporary professional debates about risk management, as well as providing a critical debate about the social construction and contested nature of the concept of risk. Chapter 1 focuses on the relationship between defensible decision-making and the context of risk and provides an interesting discussion of the influence of metaphors and repertoires on professional decisions in risk assessment, exploring both the structural and cultural context within which decisions are made. Chapter 2 explores positive risk taking, identifying the dilemmas when working with risk and the ways in which an understanding of the underlying welfare dilemmas can help practitioners to promote a more positive approach

to risk taking. The chapter provides useful best practice frameworks to guide the reader through ways of managing risk in practice

Chapter 3 explores the role of social capital as an important resource to manage the risks that youths pose to society through anti-social behavior or to manage the risks that youths may face as they navigate pathways through transitions. The discussion focuses on both identity and social networks that inform behaviours and explores how an understanding of these processes can help practitioners to develop resilience in young people to use social networks in a positive way to manage the challenges that they may face.

Chapter 4 continues the discussion of assessing and managing risks when working with young people. This chapter argues that there is a situational context to risk and the perception of risk. The focus is on the use of story telling to provide a rich resource for understanding risk in relation to character, context and time, and to provide a robust and dynamic method for planning and managing risk that takes account of the young person's trajectory and understandings.

Chapter 5 explores risk assessment tools and their impact on the way that risk is assessed in social work practice. This chapter draws on findings from an ESRC funded study of social work assessment practices in children's statutory services across five local authority areas. The chapter explores the relative merits of actuarial approaches to risk assessment alongside the concept of professional judgements and takes a critical look at the use of e-assessment tools in social work assessment practice.

Chapter 6 focuses on assessment of risk and violence in UK mental health services and provides a comparative discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of three methods of risk assessment. The chapter provides a good overview of the context and construction of violent risk in mental health practice and how this can impact on the nature of assessment.

Chapter 7 discusses risk and intimate partner violence (IPV), mainly from the perspective of practitioners working in the criminal justice system and draws on expertise to evaluate a number of risk assessment tools, which can help to predict and reduce the risk of IPV and makes the case for the use of a common assessment tool to facilitate multi-agency work in this area and tailor more skilled approaches for risk reduction.

Chapter 8 explores the contentious nature of managing risk with sexual offenders and draws on research using a Good Lives Model (GLM) to explore the development of policies in this area, moving away from an adversarial and deficit model of practice to a strengths-based perspective which works in a motivational and collaborative way with offenders. The chapter provides a clear framework for assessing risk within a multi-disciplinary context, as well as exploring some of the obstacles to good practice in this area

Chapter 9 looks at the contemporary relationship between personalization and risk assessment and management in adult social care and draws on the findings from the Department of Health Review of No Secrets (2009). The chapter uses case studies from three different perspectives (Local Authority, Service User and Carer) and offers their top tips for practitioners.

Chapter 10 returns to the discussion of the management of risk with sexual offenders

and offers a public health approach to the assessment of risk. The author draws on the review of Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) and other public awareness campaigns to discuss a more preventative approach. A tripartite public health strategy focused on awareness raising, education and empowerment is proposed as a model of good practice

Chapter 11 explores the concept of risk within the context of government policy drivers and organizational and bureaucratic goals. This chapter offers a critical discussion of the difficulties of managing risk at a practice level in health and social care and makes recommendations for managing practitioner and organizational stress.

Overall the book provides discussion of best practice with the areas of risk that you would expect to see in such a book, although there is no explicit discussion of the assessment and management of risk with older people or people who lack capacity. This book reads as a series of papers that are related through the concept of risk, but are uneven in terms of format and pedagogical features, which paradoxically is both a strength and a limitation of the book. On the one hand, it is difficult to see this as a coherent set of arguments that are related to each other (although there is some cross-referencing between chapters). On the other hand, each chapter reflects the expertise of the author and draws on contemporary research and, where appropriate, international comparative analysis to provide discussion of best practices in risk assessment. Overall, the book provides a wealth of information about practices in risk assessment and the discerning reader will get much out of it.

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Evidence and Knowledge for Practice

*Tony Evans and Mark Hardy*

Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010, 180pp

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This book examines the range of knowledge available for social work, and its application to practice. The introduction outlines the scope and content of the survey, and identifies the primary readership as social workers (including students). It includes one of a number of reflective exercises, which recur regularly throughout the book; potentially valuable, these sit rather uneasily in the context of an erudite examination of a complex subject. Throughout, social work is represented as an ethical pursuit, albeit incorporating 'technical/rational' processes, and conducted in complex contexts.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to 'knowledge' in general, and surveys the principal



epistemologies and their limitations. Moving on to a consideration of knowledge in social work, while the role of empirical knowledge is recognised, so too are the importance of personal and practice knowledge, and of ethics. The central importance of the practice context in determining appropriate forms of knowledge, and the influential effect of political and organisational priorities, receive appropriate emphasis. A balanced and thoughtful examination of the principles, assumptions, and methods of evidence-based social work follows in Chapter 2. While its limitations (an undue focus on 'what works', and its conceptualisation of social work as a technical rather than a moral activity), are persuasively argued, I found insufficient recognition of the significant contribution of an 'evidence-based' approach to social work practice, for instance in mental health and with children. This chapter, and unfortunately most of the others, fail to incorporate enough practice examples to illustrate the views presented.

This leads onto a useful exposition in Chapter 3 of the role of service users in shaping what knowledge is considered relevant and how this is derived. Different schools of research incorporating their perspectives are examined, with reference to the key social work concerns of justice and power. Here the authors are more successful in illustrating the practical implications for enquiry and understanding. It is perhaps unfortunate that Chapter 4 returns to a more detailed account of paradigms and research methodology; this could usefully appear earlier. That said, it provides an authoritative account of this aspect of empirical knowledge. Here too, I find the authors understate the contribution of a positivist stance to important aspects of the social work knowledge base, e.g. those derived from psychology and human biology. They also fail to exemplify the implications of different paradigms for social work understanding and practice, in contrast to authors such as Corby (2005) who has used examination of maternal mental health as an effective illustration of this. However, Chapter 4 covers material essential in such an account, and has many strengths, in particular its emphasis on value and purpose in shaping the aims and conduct of social work research.

Chapter 5 examines policy formulation, implementation, and social work practice. Its focus on the contexts in which knowledge is applied and its use of empirical evidence of practitioners' experiences is of particular value. Observing that this is a 'complex, contested, and fragmented' subject of enquiry, they consider alternative approaches adopted by practitioners in aligning policy concerns with service users' interests. Chapter 6 on 'practitioner knowledge', (which I found the strongest part of the book), examines both how social workers might incorporate knowledge derived from different paradigms, and the role of reflexivity and critical reflection. Here again, there is a welcome emphasis on the political and organisational context of social work, and an honest acknowledgement of the perceived distance of some of the preceding debates from everyday practice.

Chapters 7 and 8 turn to the topics of the learning organisation and evaluation. Authored by invited contributors, these initially appear an abrupt excursion from the account so far. However, they do suggest some practical measures and resources which can be adopted by agencies and practitioners to apply the purposes and methods of research to examine and improve local practice. The conclusion sets out a convergent approach,

which seeks to combine the differing perspectives examined earlier, to achieve the aims these share, of securing social work practice of the best possible quality. 'Reflecting their belief that neither knowledge or the purposes to which it is put are static, and so theory and method will have to change to suit the variable contexts' (p.170) this is described as a 'pragmatic' approach. The authors describe, critique, and defend a pragmatic philosophy of practice, potentially bridging the gap between social work as art or a science.

This book sets out to do justice to the complexity and debates concerning evidence and knowledge, and demonstrate their relevance to practice. I find it achieves the first aim authoritatively and lucidly, although the impact and accessibility of the writing would be enhanced by more frequent reference to practice and its contexts. This would also further its other aim, to demonstrate the relevance of these debates to social work. That it does not make the best case for this does not detract from the value of the book as a whole, since it provides an expert survey of a complex and important subject. While it seems likely to be too demanding for undergraduate social work students, I would recommend closer scrutiny by qualified practitioners with research or development interests or roles, postgraduate students of social work or policy, and university teachers and researchers: this is a succinct, very well-informed, and overall a balanced book.

## Reference

Corby B (2006) *Applying Research in Social Work Practice*; Maidenhead, Open University Press

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