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1 | Theory into practice

Working with children requires more than a wish to help, an ability to communicate with them, or even a willingness to respect their views – all essential attributes. It also requires an understanding of how, why and when particular forms of assistance and intervention are appropriate. Such an understanding is based partly on reflection upon one’s own experiences and observations, and partly on ‘theory’, which is, in a sense, other people’s reflection on their experiences and observations.

The nature of theory

‘Theory’, according to the New Oxford Dictionary, is ‘a supposition or system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained’ or a ‘set of principles on which the practice of an activity is based’. The important concept in these two definitions is that of ‘principle’. A principle is ‘a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behaviour or for a chain of reasoning’.

The issue here is, what is ‘fundamental truth’? For some, ‘truth’ emanates from the divine, through sacred scriptures or the pronouncements of gurus, prophets, saints and other holy people. These truths, often associated with organised religion, regulate human behaviour, including what to eat or drink and how to relate to other people. Throughout the ages and in many cultures, philanthropic and social welfare intervention has been based on principles emanating from these revelations of how we should treat members of our society.

For others, ‘fundamental truth’ is based on reason. This is the version of truth most closely associated with the natural sciences. Here, truth is discovered by close observation leading to a set of propositions, the soundness of which is then tested through

repeated observation, logical deduction or experimentation. Since the eighteenth century, much Western welfare intervention has been based on these ideas. For example, rational observation and deduction dictated that welfare provision for disadvantaged sectors made economic and military sense when, during the Boer War, the UK government discovered many young men were too enfeebled by illnesses associated with poverty to be conscripted into the army.

Frequently, 'theory' is equated with this perspective on truth. 'Scientific' theories emanating from an observation of phenomena then refined and tested by quantitative, preferably experimental, methods are seen as the only sound, reliable theories – and therefore the only 'real' truth. Many theories used by helping professionals are built on this version of truth, and evaluated against scientific ideals and concepts such as 'positivism', 'rationality', 'reason' and 'modernism'.

Fascinatingly, the challenge to this rational concept of theory was based partially on the observations of the pre-eminent scientist, Albert Einstein. His theory 'says that *all* frames of reference are equally valid, and that there is no absolute reference frame' (White and Gribbin, 1992, p. 28). So this third perspective contests both of the concepts of truth, divine revelation or human reason described above. Generalizing from Einstein's theory, 'truth' is viewed as being relative, and situated in a particular time and place. Therefore, what might be 'normal' human development in one cultural context might be 'abnormal' or inappropriate in another. Some recent philosophical, social science and social welfare theories are based on this relative or 'postmodern' perspective. For example, it is argued that concepts, even ones that seem rooted in biology, such as 'mental health', 'adulthood' and 'child', are relative and constructed by people living together in a particular society. The same is true of 'child abuse', as Corby (2000) explains:

Child abuse is a socially defined construct. It is a product of a particular culture and context and not an absolute unchanging phenomenon . . . what is considered to be abusive in a particular society alters over time. Place is another factor. Anthropological studies show clearly that what is viewed as abusive in one society today is not necessarily seen as such in another.

(p. 66)

If theories are based on so elusive a concept of truth, do they have any value? The answer is that, inevitably, anyone intervening in the lives of others will be basing their intervention, whether consciously or unconsciously, on ‘a set of related propositions that suggest why events occur in the manner that they do’ – that is, forms of theory (Hoover and Donovan, 1995, p. 38). Well-founded theories, albeit not perfect, will be better than unthinking mechanical input or mindless prejudice, which will fill the vacuum in the absence of theoretical approaches.

One reason why practitioners may struggle with the application of theory is that there are different types of theory.

Some are *descriptive* theories offering explanations about *what is happening* and metaphorically ‘open the eyes’ so that practitioners become more aware of phenomena. Often they provide a framework of understanding. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s (1970) work on loss and mourning has provided invaluable insights for those helping people in a state of grief.

Others are *causal* theories and explain *why things happen*. For example, social learning theory suggests that people learn violent behaviour by watching others behave violently (Bandura, 1973).

Yet others are *interventive* theories indicating *what should be done* about what has happened. Examples here include theories of crisis intervention (Golan, 1978; Thompson, 1991; Aguilera, 1998) and task-centred work (Reid and Epstein, 1972; Doel and Marsh, 1992).

Some theories have all three functions. Psychodynamic theory, for example, *describes* human functioning including the role of the unconscious, *explains* why people behave in certain ways and *provides guidance* about how people can be helped.

Most theories relating to human beings are founded on, and developed from, one of several approaches. These are:

- *biological* based on observations and interpretations of the behaviour of animals and investigations of their physiology and genetic composition;
- *behavioural* based on observations of manifest behaviour of animals and humans;
- *cognitive* based on conscious thought revealed mainly through behaviour with some verbal expression, and through computer simulation and artificial intelligence;

- *humanistic* based on conscious thought revealed mainly through verbal expression;
- *psychodynamic* based mainly on unconscious functioning revealed predominantly through verbal expression;
- *systems* based on an analysis of the interaction of one unit with another, whether inanimate objects, living organisms, human beings, social groups or institutions; and
- *sociological and environmental* based on the observed behaviours of social groups, institutions and structures.

These various approaches are not mutually exclusive, and many theories are combinations. For example, John Bowlby was a psychoanalyst and this influenced attachment theory, but he integrated insights from the work of biologist Konrad Lorenz (1970) and his work on 'imprinting' in small animals.

In addition there are a number of perspectives through which the different approaches are developed or interpreted. There is, for example, the economic and class theme exemplified by Marxist thinking. Another major influence is the range of feminist perceptions. Feminist thinking in a variety of forms offers both a critique and an interpretation of theories, and fits well with anti-discriminatory practice because 'a feminist stance endorses egalitarianism across all social dimensions' (Dominelli and McLeod, 1989, p. 2).

Integrated models and ecological theory

Increasingly, it is recognised that 'child abuse and neglect cannot be explained by a single factor, it is a consequence of complex interactions between individual, social and environmental influences' (Browne, 2002, p. 57). Theories that locate the cause solely within parental dysfunction fail to account for the fact that abuse is over-represented where there are environmental stressors such as poverty and unemployment. However, purely sociological theories cannot explain why many socio-economically disadvantaged parents do not abuse their children. This accounts for the increased acceptance of ecological theory, which highlights the complex interplay of psychological and sociological factors.

Ecological theory is a systems approach based on concepts advanced by Bronfenbrenner (1979). According to this theory, the child is located within a series of nests. The first, the *microsystem*, comprises the child's immediate family and close contacts. The

second nest is the *mesosystem*, containing the microsystem and embracing wider contacts such as a playgroup, school or immediate neighbours. Next is the *exosystem*, whose components are beyond the child's direct contact but whose influence has an impact on the child, such as the parents' workplace and friendship network, the wider neighbourhood, or distant extended family. Finally, all these systems exist within the all-encompassing *macrosystem*, comprising the political and cultural context.

It is worth noting that ecological theory underpins the approach and structure of this book. The next three chapters consider psychological and sociological explanatory or causal theories, while those on intervention are organised on the basis of working with the smallest to the largest systems.

Evaluating theories

Smith (1998) warns that 'In all areas where there is a fairly structured and extensive body of thought in a particular social science, we can witness a reluctance to question bedrock assumptions' (p. 187). Because no theory is the absolute 'truth', each will have both strengths and limitations. They may be useful in helping to explain why or how things occur, but there are dangers when they are used uncritically. All theories need to be questioned and appraised. The next section provides an example of the evaluation of one profoundly influential theory.

Attachment theory is vitally important in the appreciation of the relationship needs of young children and the understanding of the relationship patterns of people in older life (Howe, 1995; Howe *et al.*, 1999). The theory emerged from the work of Bowlby (1951; 1969) and hypothesised that on the basis of babies' interactions with their mother they develop an 'internal working model' of what might be expected from relationships in general. Young humans need to explore their environment and develop independence, but to do so successfully they need a secure base to return to for comfort and reassurance when under stress. This base, essential to future mental health according to Bowlby, is 'a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother-substitute – one person who steadily 'mothers' him) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment' (Bowlby, 1969, p. 13). In the same work, Bowlby outlines the role of fathers thus: 'fathers have their

uses even in infancy . . . [providing] for their wives to enable them to devote themselves unrestrictedly to the care of the infant and toddler' (p. 15). The evident concern here is the potential oppression of women, and indeed of men, with the implied requirement for mothers not to delegate care of their children to others and the relegation of fathers to a remote secondary role.

Other criticisms include the theory's failure to explain why poorly attached, abused children do not inevitably go on to be unsatisfactory parents, yet an internal working model based on early abusive relationships would suggest they should. Furthermore, the theory does not take into account all the family dynamics, especially sibling relationships (see the work of Judy Dunn – for example, Dunn, 1995) and extended family members, such as aunts (Doyle, 2001), nor does it fully acknowledge the social factors impinging on family relationships (Papalia *et al.*, 2003). In fact, Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1969) explicitly reject a consideration of environmental factors, believing that such consideration 'hinders understanding to the extent that it is a flight from the recognition of the importance of interpersonal relations' (p. 198).

Ainsworth developed Bowlby's theory (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978) devising an experiment in which a baby is left with a stranger for a short period. Depending on the baby's reactions, she identified three forms of mother-child attachment: 'insecure-avoidant', 'insecure-ambivalent' and 'secure', with secure being generally regarded as the optimal one in terms of future relationships.

Criticisms of Ainsworth's work include, first, the unethical nature of deliberately putting a child, who cannot give informed consent, in a situation of stress without clear benefit to the child; second, the artificial nature of the experiment; and third, the negation of factors such as temperament. Parents with several children know that from birth their children have different characteristics, and this common-sense observation has been validated by a number of studies (Thomas and Chess, 1977; Rothbart *et al.*, 2000, 2001). For example, some children appear to be anxious from birth and show fearful, shy behaviour throughout childhood (Kagan, 1997). Physical and physiological differences between these children and more outgoing ones have been identified (Arcus and Kagan, 1995) indicating a biological basis for their anxious demeanour, rather than unresponsive mothering.

Studies have shown that babies in some cultures have far higher

levels of non-secure attachments than others. For example Miyake *et al.* (1985) found Japanese infants show much higher levels of insecure attachments compared to American ones. Using meta-analysis, Von Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg (1988) found among British children 75 per cent had secure attachments and 3 per cent resistant ones, whereas in China 50 per cent had secure and 25 per cent resistant attachments. Anthropologist Margaret Mead (1962) expressed concern that Bowlby's theories did not take into account those many non-Western societies that cared successfully for children through multiple nurturing figures, and argued that 'satisfactory' child-rearing practices differ from one culture to another depending on the societal requirements. Ainsworth dismisses this with the statement 'her [Mead's] final criterion seems to be the cultural appropriateness of patterns of behaviour. Although this is a common criterion in cultural anthropology, it can be challenged. Can we not differentiate between societies that facilitate and those that handicap the health growth of personality?' (Ainsworth, 1969, p. 209). This assertion is not particularly helpful for social workers trying to practise in a non-judgemental and non-discriminatory way.

Certainly, the concept of attachment is a valid one to the extent that, from Sigmund Freud onwards, most theorists agree that early relationships can influence adult functioning. But there is no reason why other theories cannot be as valid as attachment theory in explaining human relationship development. Alternatives include: Erikson's (1965) stage theory, which highlights the need in infancy to establish 'basic trust'; Maslow's (1970) need theory with its emphasis on the basic need for security, and Rogerian concepts (Rogers, 1967, 1980) of 'non-judgemental positive regard'.

Any theory, if applied uncritically or taken to extremes, can become equally unhelpful. Therefore, there is a need to approach the use of theory with a degree of critical evaluation and reflection.

Dogma into practice

Some theories and principles are elevated to dogma – that is, 'principles laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true' (Oxford English Dictionary – OED). Often their origins can be traced to good practice but they have been applied indiscriminately. Philpot (1995) explained:

Sacred cows have no place in child protection work. Where practitioners have become inseparably attached to a particular theory or preconception, we have been left with cases where the truth has been pushed out of reach and children's experiences have been shrouded in confusion . . . Social workers must reject sacred cows and stop taking refuge in spurious certainties.
(p. 1)

This section examines a number of past and present theories, and principles that have been applied without proper understanding or reflection and have consequently become dogmas that have had an adverse influence on child-care practice.

The 'fresh start' theory

Pat Bastian (1994) joined a Children's Department in January 1955. Looking back forty years later, she recalled 'All of us subscribed to . . . the "fresh start" theory where children could be divested of their previous identity and given a new (and better) one' (p. 70).

During the first half of the twentieth century children came into care for a range of reasons, especially illegitimacy or extreme poverty. Throughout the Victorian era the concept of the ideal middle-class family had been promoted, so poor, working-class families were often deemed 'unfit', and this unfitness, along with illegitimacy was a major disgrace. Child-welfare workers were determined that the children in their care should not suffer from such a stigma. The advocates of the fresh start idea were well-intentioned and in some ways anticipated researchers and theorists who highlighted the insidious nature of negative 'labelling'. On being taken into care, children could lose the label 'illegitimate' or 'indigent' and take on a new identity as a member of a respectable upper working- or middle-class family.

This policy persisted for nearly a hundred years. It was not until in the 1970s that there was a perceptible change. Then Janet Hitchman, in her book *King of the Barbareens* (Hitchman, 1960) described how her many moves in care and attempts to give her a 'fresh start' each time had led to her lifelong search to establish her identity. Bastian (1994) recalls:

The revelation came to me, as it did to many others, as a blindingly obvious fact and it is hard for the present generation of social workers to realise that we hadn't understood this before. The children who could not cope with life in whatever setting were those who did not understand who they were, why they were there and what was happening to them. (p.72)

The blood-tie

The Second World War saw the massive disruption of families throughout Europe. In England, many children were evacuated from the main cities, which caused distress to both the children and their parents. After the war, there was a desperate search by refugees and concentration camp survivors for blood relatives and family members. Meanwhile in England the death of one child, Dennis O'Neill, shook the foundations of the establishment. Tom O'Neill describes what happened to his seven-year-old brother six years after he was taken into care: 'On 9 January 1945 my brother, Dennis O'Neill, was beaten to death by his foster-father in a lonely farmhouse in Shropshire . . . At the time of his death Dennis, whose stomach showed no traces of food, weighed just over 4 stone at thirteen years of age' (pp. ix-xi). Then six years later came Bowlby's work on the importance of attachment to one mother figure and the deprivation that ensued from separation from her.

All these events lead to an emphasis on the importance of the blood relationship and for children to remain with their birth mother if at all feasible. The 1948 Children Act set up in the wake of the death of Dennis O'Neill stressed the importance of returning children wherever possible to their birth parents.

On 6 January 1973, another child, Maria Colwell, was killed. She was eight years old. She was 'beaten to death by her step-father in a council house in Brighton . . . At the time of her death, Maria, whose stomach was empty, weighed a mere 36 pounds' (O'Neill, 1981, pp. ix-xi). She had been happily settled for nearly all her childhood with her aunt and uncle, who fostered her. Then her mother and stepfather demanded her return – only to abuse systematically and eventually kill her. The blood-tie with the birth mother prevailed over all other considerations. A report by the local authority, in whose care Maria had been, reflected, after her death:

‘The blood tie’ is a term often applied to the belief held strongly by many people that there is a strong physical tie between a child and his parent by virtue of his physical inheritance and the fact of conception and child-bearing. The term ‘natural parent’ somehow implies that any kind of substitute for the parent is to a degree unnatural . . . There can be no question of automatic assumptions that a child is better off with any particular category of person, whether parent or parent substitute. It must depend on the circumstances of each case individually.
(Appendix, Colwell, 1976, p. 87)

Despite criticisms of the over-emphasis on the blood-tie, a deep-seated belief in its importance continues to influence policy and practice.

Anti-discriminatory practice

This may appear to sit uneasily in this section because it is difficult to see how anti-discriminatory practice can be anything other than beneficial. Anti-discriminatory practice challenges discrimination and oppression wherever it is encountered and at all levels, including among professionals themselves and in the systems used by them. At the forefront of antidiscriminatory practice is anti-racist practice. This is defined as:

developing a model of strength and empowerment in social work. It is based on the self-definition of black experience, needs and aspirations and therefore involves the acknowledgement of black people’s views values and concerns, it involves dismantling pathological assumptions and cultural stereotypes in favour of an approach that is sensitive to cultural pride and differences.
(Gambe *et al.*, 1992, p. 10)

The emphasis on anti-discriminatory and anti-racist ideologies has, however, had some negative consequences for intervention. The removal of black children by white workers who condemn child-care practices they do not understand has been rightly condemned as discriminatory. Nevertheless, Ahmad (1989) and Owusu-Bempah (2003) both point out that it is equally discriminatory to do nothing to protect children from minority cultures

when there is evidence of abuse. For fear of being seen as racist, child protection workers have tended to shy away from their duties of protecting black children from abuse. Similarly, Corby (2000) reminds us of the culturally relative nature of child abuse, which means that social workers have an obligation to challenge the imposition of the standards of the majority culture on minority groups. Nevertheless, Corby warns against the ‘extraordinary degree of tolerance’ (p. 67) – in the name of anti-discriminatory practice and cultural sensitivity – shown by social workers towards unequivocally abusive behaviour, which has led to the deaths of a number of children.

During the 1970s and 1980s there was mounting concern about the problems of black children in white foster (or adoptive) families, which included identity confusion and little guidance about how to cope with racism. Gambe *et al.* (1992) explained that ‘black families can offer [black] children an added dimension, over and above a loving environment, covering such things as continuity of experience, contact with the relevant community and understanding of a pride in the child’s particular inheritance, and skills and support in dealing with racism’ (p. 69). In response, in the 1980s several local authorities imposed a ban on black children being placed with white substitute carers. Because the drive to recruit more black foster carers lagged behind these policies, some black children lingered in residential care or were placed with mismatched black foster carers (see, for example, Lau, 1991).

One of the most iniquitous practices in the name of anti-discriminatory practice has been the treatment of dual-heritage children. Their white heritage has been denied as they have automatically been defined as ‘black’. Researcher Charles-Hoon (2003), the black mother of a dual-heritage child, explains that this labelling of dual-heritage (black/white) children harks back to the days of slavery when, to ensure that the maximum available number of slaves was maintained, children who had ‘one drop’ of black blood were defined as ‘black’ and therefore, unless born of free parents, were automatically slaves. Dual-heritage children should not be labelled as black or white, but should be allowed their own specific identity.

Comment

These, and other dogmas, are or were rooted in theories of good practice. However, when promoted from theory to a dogmatically

imposed ideology they have been applied inappropriately, insensitively and without proper analysis.

Foundations of good practice

Whatever the theoretical bases of intervention, there are some basic requirements expected of helping professionals. These will be common to those working with adults as well as those in child-care, and while not specific to working with abused children, it is worth providing a brief reminder of the essentials.

Evidence-based practice

This means ensuring that any intervention is based on the facts and information available. There needs to be a careful factual assessment of the issues in the case, as well as other external contextual information, including research findings. The importance of this is illustrated by the situation in Britain in the 1980s, when specialist social workers became aware of the research findings of Abel *et al.* (1987) and Finkelhor (1984) into the repeat offending and grooming behaviour of sex abusers. They often found themselves powerless to influence case conferences and courts which, unaware of the research, accepted the abuser's protestations of the offence being 'a one-off' and 'out-of-character', and left children in the home unprotected.

Reflection

Thinking theoretically without any form of reflection becomes rigidity of thought, which leads ultimately to unthinking intervention, whereas reflection without any sort of theoretical basis is woolly thinking, which also leads ultimately to unthinking intervention. Unthinking intervention becomes habitual intervention, which in turn leads to ineffective practice.

Reflection covers every aspect of practice, but includes in particular:

- an explicit awareness of personal values, including bias and prejudice, plus a recognition that other people will have opposing views or very different values;
- acknowledging the impact of the self on others and appreciating power differentials;

- being aware of feelings aroused in them by other people or situations. They might, for example, analyse why they feel threatened when visiting a particular home, and how realistic is the perceived threat;
- evaluating the effectiveness of intervention. For example, the worker feeling under threat might avoid raising a necessary but sensitive topic with a particular family; and
- identifying the theoretical bases for the intervention, and questioning how appropriate they are.

Boundaries

Establishing boundaries is essential to all care professionals, but is particularly important in child protection work. A chummy friendship with parents can leave a child exposed to danger. Failure to establish boundaries when exploring sexual abuse with a child resulting in the touching of private parts (yes, it does still happen) will lead the worker to face charges of sexual assault.

Workers also need to try to be firm about establishing work and private life boundaries. This is easier said than done, and employers often fail to recognise the counter-productive nature of forcing their employees to overwork, which leads to illness and burnout.

But workers can also draw too tight a boundary and refuse to see beyond the immediate focus of their work. The case of Stephen Meurs (Meurs, 1975, in Appendix) was one in which helping professionals were visiting children in the household who were being fostered by Stephen's mother. They took little interest in Stephen's welfare and he died of neglect despite their visits.

Supervision, mentoring and consultation

Effective supervision is essential for those working in the field of child protection. As one student reflected:

It is important to be able to step back and reflect and not be blinkered. Supervision enabled me to view situations from a different perspective, and to realise that my original perspective could sometimes be naïve and often plainly wrong.
(Watson *et al.*, 2002, p. 161)

Some professionals find that their supervisor has had little experience of child protection work, and feels unable to offer any real

assistance with the complex issues of abuse cases. Here, workers might try to negotiate a consultation with more knowledgeable colleagues.

Walton (2002) points out that there are usually two tasks in supervision – one managerial and the other mentoring. The use of power distinguishes these two components. In the first, the supervisor has the greater power, whereas in mentoring ‘power is mainly with the person being mentored and the purpose of the relationship is to encourage their professional development. Mutual trust [Erikson again] is important in both relationships’ (p. 565). Some supervisors are unable to share their power and so only the managerial function is fulfilled. Again, if possible, the worker could benefit from a strategy that meets his or her needs for mentoring either by helping the supervisor change approach or by finding an alternative mentor.

Recording

Time and again, inquiry reports (see the Appendix for list of reports) into the deaths of children have commented on poor record-keeping and communication. Good records are essential if the accurate information is to be shared with other colleagues, agencies and courts.

It is advisable when writing up records to avoid general terms such as ‘the house was dirty’ or ‘her clothing was inadequate’. First, these convey very little meaning to others because one person’s ‘dirty’ house is another person’s ‘lived in’ one. Second, when parents and children have access to their records, terms like these can be emotive. Far better is to use an accurate description or if a judgement has to be used then concrete examples given. An example is the Malcolm Page case (Page, 1981 in Appendix), where for months the social worker and health visitor had been recording general comments such as ‘some improvement’, which proved meaningless. The police officer investigating Malcolm’s death gave a purely factual, if stomach-turning, description of the state of the house, leaving the reader in no doubt that it was unfit for any child to live in.

Writing records is time-consuming and there are a number of illustrative methods that can prove to be more effective than wordy statements. Methods include:

- *Flow charts*: these are lists and dates of all the injuries or abusive incidents to a child. In a separate column other important events are recorded in a way that matches dates, incidents and events. It is a simple exercise but can be remarkably effective in demonstrating patterns of abuse. Practitioners, on seeing these charts, have made comments such as: ‘The incidents seem to occur at regular intervals’ or ‘I didn’t realise she had had so many hospital admissions in only sixteen weeks’.
- *Ecomaps*: circles are drawn, one each for the child and the main relationships and influences in the child’s environment such as parents, siblings, relatives, school, other helping professionals, friends and even pets. The nature and importance of the relationships can be indicated by differences in the lines attaching the circles – for example a bold line for a strong positive relationship, a wavy line for an ambiguous one, a dotted line for a weak one.
- *Geneograms or family trees*: rather than attempt to describe in words all members of the family, it is useful to draw up a family tree. This does not need to be the detailed, formal creation of the genealogist. However, it is advisable to use symbols others can recognise. As with the ecomap, it is also helpful to indicate, through the connecting lines, the nature of the relationship between the child and members of the family.
- *Growth charts*: children who have been abused sometimes fail to put on sufficient weight and height, despite the fact that their families are of average build and there is no growth-impairing disease or explanatory physical condition present. A child’s physical progress can be monitored through the use of growth charts. Medical staff, who can interpret them correctly, and who have access to the same scales and measuring devices every time, are best placed to maintain them but a copy could usefully be kept on the key worker’s file. Jasmine Beckford (Beckford, 1985, in Appendix), aged 4, was returned from care only to be killed by her stepfather. Her weight rose in care and fell on returning home. The inquiry report states: ‘The failure of Area 6 to take particular note of Jasmine’s weight over the three years of a Care Order is perhaps the most striking single aspect of child abuse that was fatally neglected’ (p. 114).

Values

All helping professionals are required to maintain the values and ethics of their profession. These values are often made explicit by their regulatory bodies and usually embrace areas such as confidentiality, avoiding discrimination, respecting difference and not abusing any power, privilege and authority the professional may possess.

However, maintaining professional values may not be conflict-free. When there is a particular 'moral panic' against societal 'folk devils', then legislation against a particular disadvantaged group may become very restrictive and punitive. Professionals may find that their values of respecting people's right to self-determination are undermined by the restrictive legal framework in which they have to work.

Professionals can also find that there are conflicts between one value and another. So there is often a clash between the individual's right to self-determination and the professional's 'duty of care' to both the individual and to other vulnerable people. When clinging to one value it is important to ensure that it is not undermining another. So when refusing to share information on the grounds of maintaining confidentiality of one person, it is important to reflect on whether or not this is failing in one's duty of care to another.

Finally, there may be a conflict between a professional's personal values and his or her professional ones. Here, reflection and the use of supervision, consultation and counselling are important.

Anti-discriminatory practice

This is an essential value that should be at the heart of the practice of all professionals. Not only do they have to exercise their own power in a way that does not discriminate or oppress, but they also have to be aware of other means through which people are being oppressed and disadvantaged.

Anti-racist practice and the challenging of policies and practices that disadvantage black, Asian, dual-heritage and other minority ethnic groups is at the forefront of anti-discriminatory practice. However, professionals are aware that there are other discriminations, including ageism, disablism and homophobia. Women in particular are oppressed in relation to child protection policies. Milner (1993) writes about the way that fathers have in effect been

allowed to evade responsibility for the protection of their children. Similarly, Doyle (1998) found that in instances of emotional abuse in registered cases the mother was held accountable most frequently for the abuse, but when survivors of emotional abuse were questioned the majority (whether sons or daughters) felt that their fathers were the more blameworthy parent. This imbalance could support the view that society is more likely to hold women accountable for child abuse, when in reality women are probably no more culpable than men.

Power in practice

Power can be a positive force, as Foucault (1980) explains: ‘it trans- verses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse’ (p. 119). But power can be corrupted, and maltreatment and oppression occur if people with power abuse or misuse it. In the macro environment – that is, society or the nation – oppressions (for example, the former South African apartheid) are officially sanctioned by those ‘in power’, even if they are the minority. Conversely, ‘force’ of numbers can mean that the majority often oppresses minority groups in society. In the micro environment (for example, small institutions, family homes) abuse occurs when there is a power imbalance and those with the greater power misuse it. In order to practice in a truly anti-discriminatory way, and to help those who are abused, social workers and other helping professionals need to understand and be able to analyse the power dynamics.

A number of commentators have recognised that ‘power’ is not a single entity but rather that there are different forms of power. Handy’s (1985) analysis is perhaps one of the most useful because it is very comprehensible and transfers readily from the world of business and organizations, for which it was originally devised by Handy, into the social and welfare environment. Handy identified six forms of power and here they are applied to child abuse:

Physical power This is clearly apparent in the domestic setting and relating to physical abuse, with the larger physique of adults compared to children, and of many men in comparison to women.

Position power This again is seen most clearly in physical abuse. In some countries, simply by virtue of their position as parents,

adults are allowed to assault child in way that would be illegal if inflicted on another adult.

Resource power The failure of parents to use this power in terms of material resources is clearest in cases of physical neglect. But resource power can also be love, praise and encouragement, all of which are often denied in cases of emotional abuse.

Expert power Sex offenders often use their knowledge of what attracts children in order to seduce them into sexual activities.

Personal power This is personal magnetism, charisma and charm. Again, this is often used by sex offenders to beguile both children and potentially protective adults.

Negative power This is the ability to be subversive and to stop things happening. Often abusers use this power in order to impede an investigation. They may, for example, repeatedly use the complaints procedure to block progress and ensure that the investigators have to focus on defending their actions rather than concentrate on the investigation.

When working with abused children, helping professionals need to be aware of the power dynamics in the situation. This includes awareness of their own power, which is often considerably less than the literature would suggest, especially in the case of social workers. Having only a degree of position and resource power, social workers often have to rely substantially on their expert power. But often this is not recognised and they find themselves overruled by other professionals who are seen to be more expert. Some people with whom they work will have very little power indeed, hence the requirement to empower vulnerable 'clients'. However, many abusers do not require empowerment; instead, some need to be disempowered while others could usefully be shown how to use their power differently.

Empowering children

Coulshed and Orme (1998) identify components of empowerment as the giving of a 'voice' and conferring rights. Children can be given a voice by having adults act as advocates for them. In child protection case conferences, while the parents have a right to be present, the children are usually absent, yet they should have an inalienable right to be present or to choose a person to speak for them. Children can be given a voice by being actively involved in

research (Iwaniec and Pinkerton, 1998; Greig and Taylor, 1999). Parental consent requirements should not be used as an excuse to 'gag' children, who have a right to express their opinions. Similarly, there is now an emphasis on service users being involved in social work training. This must include the most vulnerable of service users, particularly maltreated children, as not to do so will further disempower them. Universities and placement providers need to devise imaginative ways of embracing the views of these children, such as by the use of videos or young people preparing their own training materials and Powerpoint presentations.

Definitions

This book is influenced by the view that truth is relative, and many, if not all, concepts are socially constructed. There is therefore a need to explain the way that various key terms are defined.

Child abuse

The term 'child abuse' refers in this book to the physical or emotional mistreatment and neglect of children or their sexual exploitation, in circumstances for which the parents can be held responsible through acts of commission or omission.

This emphasis on parental maltreatment does not mean that abuse outside the family is not important. However, for most children during their dependent years society has identified their parents and immediate family as their primary protectors. Children who are abused within their family are therefore especially vulnerable. In societies willing and able to afford a welfare system, it is professionals working for the system that are charged with the protection of these particularly vulnerable children. It is to those professionals that this book is addressed, hence the appropriateness of the definition.

Maslow's (1970) 'hierarchy of needs' is a theoretical framework providing a means by which 'child abuse' can be conceptualised. Abuse constitutes a failure by a parent to meet the children's needs. Therefore, unmet physiological and safety needs constitute physical neglect. Physical, sexual and emotional abuse is a failure to meet safety/security, esteem, belonging and love needs. All abuse conspires to thwart any sense of self-actualisation or self-fulfilment.

Other key terms

‘Parent’: includes birth, adoptive, step and foster parents. ‘Child’ refers to people from birth to seventeen years. The term ‘abused child’ will often be used not only to mean the primary victim; children who are often called ‘non-abused’ siblings are here considered to be secondary victims if they have witnessed the mistreatment of their brothers or sisters.

Finally

All family members are important, and all can suffer in cases of child abuse. Parents in particular always warrant respect and consideration. However, the child victims of abuse need understanding and appropriate assistance. A significant proportion of the public inquiries (see Appendix) that have followed the deaths of children, have highlighted the fact that some social workers and other professionals have become so preoccupied with the needs of the parents that they have overlooked those of the children, to the detriment of everyone involved.

The remainder of the book focuses on understanding abused children, and appreciating their perspectives, and on intervening in ways that will help them in both the short and the longer term.

putting it into practice**Activity 1**

Choose any theory with which you are familiar. This can be a social science or social work theory if you are already working in a caring profession, or it can be a theory from your other studies if you are new to the caring professions or child protection work. Having chosen a theory, try to list all the positive, helpful features of the theory. Then list all the limitations of the theory that you can identify. Draw a conclusion about whether, on balance, the positive features outweigh the limitations.

This activity is designed to help you evaluate the theories that you are likely to use in practice rather than applying a theory in an unquestioning way.



→

Activity 2

Reflect on any case of child protection with which you are familiar. Draw a circle to represent the maltreated child. Around this, draw additional circles to represent the key people or agencies involved with the child. In each circle identify the types of power held by each person, including the child. For example, the parents or main carers may well have all six forms of power in relation to the child, including substantial physical and personal power. Social workers may have resource, position and expert power, but no (or very limited) physical and personal power. How have the various players been using, failing to use or misusing power?

The purpose of this exercise is to show how important power is to an understanding of child protection issues. Children are protected if parents, family, friends and agencies use power benignly and effectively. Children will be abused if they lack effective power and that held by significant others is misused or not used effectively. Altering the power dynamics can prevent further abuse.

Further reading

There are several important works which provide a broad overview and useful introduction to the key issues for researchers and practitioners in children protection. These works include Jones *et al.* (1987), Corby, (2000), Winton and Mara (2001), Wilson and James (2002), and Beckett (2003). Payne (1997) and Coulshed and Orme (1998) remain the core texts about social work theory and practice. Watson *et al.* (2002) provide guidance about integrating theory and practice in placements and in assignments. Thompson's (2003) guide to challenging discrimination and oppression is helpful and thought-provoking. Theories relating to social psychology are made accessible by Stainton Rogers (2003), while readers seeking summaries of theories on child development will find Papalia *et al.* (2003) particularly helpful.

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