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# Introducing critical best practice in social work

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KAREN JONES, BARRY COOPER AND HARRY FERGUSON

The aim of this book is to present examples of best practice in social work from a range of critical perspectives. There is a remarkable paucity of writing in social work which focuses in a systematic way on accounts of best practice and an almost complete absence of such work in the literature on 'critical practice'. The best practice approach presented here is 'critical' in two senses. First, it is an urgently needed response to the deep negativity surrounding the profession. This often leads to the 'best' in social work remaining hidden from view. Second, it is an approach that proposes the adoption of a 'critical' sociological stance through which the best social work practices need to be understood and analysed.

Our starting point is that social work operates largely within a climate of negativity whereby few have a good word to say publicly about it. It is characterised by a 'deficit' culture which positions social work as fair game for persistent criticism, not only from politicians, the media and inquiries into apparent 'failures' to protect children and adults but also from some social work organisations themselves and from some academics and social work literature. In fact, so poor has been the public image of social work in the United Kingdom that since 2001 the government has run advertising campaigns on television and in the print media to try to improve public perceptions of the profession and attract more recruits to fill vacancies caused by the recruitment and retention problems which many employers have been experiencing.

There has long been a tradition of positive writing which values the social work profession, its practice wisdom and skills (Howe, 1993; Hanvey and Philpot, 1994; Coulshed, 1998; Stepney and Ford, 2000; Doel and Shardlow, 2005; Payne, 2005; Trevithick, 2005). Some recent social work literature explores 'good practice' in particular service areas (Pritchard, 2001; Tibbs, 2001; Frank, 2002). This is supplemented by a

growing number of guides to 'what works' in practice (MacDonald and Winkley, 1999; Buchanan and Rictchie, 2004) and a welcome focus on the 'learning organisation' (Gould and Baldwin, 2004). Vitally important work has been produced on the notion of 'critical reflection' and 'reflective practice' which illuminates the ways in which practitioners think, talk about and generally make sense of and 'construct' social work in everyday practice (Gould and Taylor, 1996; Taylor and White, 2000; Fook, 2002). Parton and O'Byrne's (2000) concept of 'constructive social work' has the dual intention of illuminating how practitioners go about their work and how they can do it positively. All the chapters in this book are influenced in various ways by these important strands of work. Yet there remains a large gap in knowledge and the need for a dedicated body of work where the notion of 'best practice' is theorised and the actual work done showcased as a basis for learning and development in policy and practice.

Meanwhile, the 'radical' or 'critical' tradition in social work has produced vital knowledge about the impact of power and social structures on service users, and its impact has been such that the notion of 'anti-oppressive practice' and promoting equality is now central to social work education (Dalrymple and Burke, 2007; Thompson, 2006). Yet, as Harry Ferguson shows in Chapter 1 of the book, attempts to develop realistic accounts of the ways in which critical practice can be done have only begun (Brechin, 2000; Adams et al., 2002, 2005; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005). Meanwhile, there is an almost total absence of dedicated accounts of such work done well. The bringing together of critical analysis and best practice results in what we call a 'critical best practice perspective' (Ferguson, 2003). The book aims to correct for the remarkable fact that it is very difficult to find in the literature of social work examples of critical best practice that can help to inform the learning of students and all those concerned with social work.

We argue in this book that it is time to replace the deficit model of social work. Instead of a focus on what does not get done (well), we propose an approach which draws out the strengths and profiles the best practice that routinely goes on. The aim is to create a perspective whereby learning can occur through best practice set out as a model for developing systems, knowledge and practice capabilities. Claims for 'best practice', we suggest, should be analysed from the perspectives of the individual practitioners, service users and managers involved and critically informed by social theories. Thus, critical best practice refers to social work which is skilfully supportive, therapeutic and challenging of power structures, yet authoritative and which can be shown to deserve to be called the 'best' because it contains aspects of all of these.

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## THE DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION OF CRITICAL BEST PRACTICE PERSPECTIVES

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Our argument is that the concept of critical best practice perspectives elaborated through the book has a number of distinctive features. Its core distinguishing feature is that every chapter of the book offers detailed description and analysis of actual social work practice drawn from real events and cases. This, as we pointed out above, is quite unique in books about social work. What tends to be offered in ‘critical’ texts is prescriptions about what social workers should not do – in terms of avoiding being oppressive – but with little indication as to how social workers can practice in progressive, skilful ways, which values their expertise and good authority, while being as respectful of and fair to service users as possible.

A second distinguishing characteristic of the book leads directly on from the first, in how a detailed focus on practice makes visible the deep complexity of social work practices. This exposes the deep limitations of the notion of ‘anti-oppressive practice’ (AOP) which is so dominant in social work. The principle of at all times needing to avoid being disrespectful, harmful and inappropriately controlling towards service users and unfairly discriminating against them must always hold. However, the intimate accounts of practice in this book suggest that what is needed instead is a much stronger focus on ethical dilemmas (Beckett and Maynard, 2005; Banks, 2006; Webb, 2006). AOP tends to reduce practice to a series of choices which imply identifiably good and bad options and courses of action. But in the real world of practice, matters are rarely so straightforward. Often, for instance, children need to be taken into care even when this is the last thing their parent’s want. Individuals have to be detained in mental health institutions against their will because they are viewed as a high risk to themselves or others. The chapters in this book have in common the fact that there were no straightforward actions which could protect or promote the welfare of one person or group without possibly causing distress or even deeply hurting and restricting their’s and other’s rights and freedom. To refer to such actions in the language of ‘oppression’ itself risks being oppressive to those involved, as it fails to recognise the interminable nature of the ethical dilemmas involved. The choice, as this book shows, is not how only to do good, but how to do least harm while practising skilfully, fairly and using good authority.

Third, the book grapples with the neglected issue of defining and showing what is meant by ‘best practice’. A new public discourse has begun in the United Kingdom about ‘excellence’ in social work, as

exemplified by the creation in 2001 of the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), which is developing a ‘best practice’ knowledge base, standards and guidance for social care and social work (see, [www.scie.org](http://www.scie.org)). The notions of ‘excellence’ and ‘best practice’ require refinement and debate, and we seek in this book to contribute to the clarification of these important concepts. We are proposing and developing a radical and realistic redefinition of the ‘best’. This means that the best practice examples used throughout the book are good illustrations of what it is possible to achieve. They are not perfect – nothing is. Nor do they mean that there were no constraints on what the practitioners could do. From a strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2006), they highlight what the authors believe was the best that was achieved at that time, in that situation and by that combination of people, processes and circumstances.

Fourth, at the centre of best practice perspectives is the practitioner’s voice, together with that of the service user and any other stakeholders who contribute to and co-construct the practice. We emphasise the practitioner perspective because it has tended to be marginalised and there is much that needs to be learned from them about how social workers actually practice and how this is done in critically best practice ways. Social work intervention has to be created through negotiation and agreement/disagreement by the people involved, and all the uniqueness, difference and diversities of individual perspectives needs to be brought out. Part of the urgency for such a perspective arises in the context of recent demands in the United Kingdom and internationally for ‘evidence-based social care’. While the need for ‘evidence for practice’ in social work has been promoted for some time (Shaw, 1999), government policy now asserts that decisions in professions like social work should be based less on ‘opinions’ and more on data about ‘what works’ (Department of Health, 1998). The meaning of ‘evidence-based practice’ for social work is a contested notion however (compare Webb, 2001 and Sheldon, 2001), and one of our aims in this book is to contribute to a conception of ‘evidence’ which includes notions of ‘best practice’ as they are developed by the various contributors.

We hope the book provides clear and original insights into the range of knowledge, skills, organisational conditions and personal resources that are required to be an effective social worker. Achieving critical best practice is an extraordinary accomplishment, involving the effective interweaving of the bureaucratic, ethical, emotional, communicative and spiritual dimensions of social work. Best practice in social work can and does make a profound difference to vulnerable people’s lives, which is the most important reason why we need to learn from it and develop it.

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## **OUTLINE OF THE BEST PRACTICE COVERED IN THE BOOK**

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Through the 15 chapters that follow, the book seeks to apply a critical, theoretical analysis to descriptions of social work practice. The intention is for these illustrations and perspectives to provide a picture of what happens in real social work encounters with service users, other professional colleagues and managers, in order to expand understandings of the skills, strengths and dynamics of these practices and relationships. The book covers a range of service user groups, and forms of practice in different contexts, but cannot claim to have covered all the possible areas, as no single text ever could. What we have been able to include is a good balance of chapters that address children's and adult's services, as well as different types of service provision and practice experiences. These include casework, day care and family support, statutory work in mental health, adult protection and child protection, initial 'duty' interviews, assessments, advocacy, long-term therapeutic social work, supervision and peer support, inter-professional 'partnership' working and organisational management.

In trying to integrate theory and practice we sought contributors from academic colleagues at the University of the West of England and social workers and managers in practice who were known to us through placements, post-qualifying courses, as ex-students and so on. Four chapters are single-authored by academics, drawing on research studies and recordings which include the voices of practitioners and service users; two are single-authored by practitioners who use theory to analyse their own practice and one is single-authored by an academic who also spends part of her time in practice, while eight chapters are jointly written by practitioners and academics. Given our geographical proximity, the group met frequently in the writing of the book in the hope of achieving as much coherence of approach and thematic unity as possible across the chapters.

We hope that individually and collectively the chapters provide insights into particular issues and approaches, while adding up to something significant in the overall character of critical best practice that they offer. Not every chapter can deal with every aspect of critical best practice in its entirety and the depth that is possible, and some chapters illuminate particular aspects more than the others. For this reason the book is broken into three Parts which deal with distinct aspects of critical best practice. Part I has five chapters which outline and discuss various theoretical issues and the concept of critical best practice

perspectives, while focusing on distinct practice issues. In Chapter 1 Harry Ferguson traces the development of critical ideas in social work thinking and practice and outlines the key themes of a critical best practice perspective. The second half of the chapter applies the theory to practice by illustrating a social worker's nuanced and careful approach to a situation of domestic abuse and suspected physical abuse of children which is shown to involve the careful balancing of competing perspectives and contradictory issues of care and control. The fact that the family were from a minority ethnic group, the travelling community, increased the challenge to achieve best practice that was critical by being ethically sensitive, skilful and authoritative.

In Chapter 2, Alison Gardener provides a critical reappraisal of the concept of 'anti-oppressive practice'. She argues that while it still has some value, the notion of AOP is insufficient to meet the challenges of accounting for the complex ethical dilemmas and nuances of how power must be exercised that social workers routinely confront in their practice. Through an analysis of her own work with three younger disabled adults, Alison demonstrates the importance of balancing complex and competing perspectives in order to practice in ways which are ethically grounded and value based. Her chapter, like the book as a whole, seeks to develop a language and theoretical understanding to make better sense of this complexity by grounding it in intimate accounts of best practice.

In Chapter 3, Karen Jones with social worker Imogen Powell also use theory from critical post-modernism to explore best practice with 'Amelia', an older woman with dementia. They draw out Imogen's skilled engagement with the service user and show how fine practice judgements can incorporate both a realistic assessment of risk and a genuine responsiveness to the client's own sense of meaning and place. Centrally, this involved detailed negotiations about the meaning of home and putting in place services which could enable Amelia to safely live there.

In Chapter 4, Celia Keeping argues that an understanding of the emotional content and dynamics of relationships in social work is central to achieving best practice. She writes about what began as an emergency mental health assessment of 'Jane', a young woman experiencing acute psychological distress, and how it developed into a five-year relationship. Celia draws on theories which sensitise us to the importance of issues of class, gender and ethnicity in understanding people's problems and working with them. Her particular focus though is on theories from psychoanalysis and how they help to demonstrate the

importance of emotional engagement in building a secure, trusting and empathetic relationship with Jane over a five-year period.

Part I of the book concludes with Chapter 5, where Barry Cooper introduces arguments from constructivist theoretical perspectives. These are used to illustrate the creative thinking, quick judgements and skilled negotiations that characterise critical best practice in engagements between social workers and service users. The analysis is based on an interview between Sally, an experienced children and families' social worker and 'Adam', a father, who is being interviewed as part of the early stages of a multi-agency investigation into allegations made by his teenage daughter. The chapter demonstrates the importance of language and communication and illustrates how robust working relationships can be skilfully created with service users, despite apparent conflict, within the duties and obligations of a statutory child protection intervention.

Having laid the conceptual as well as at least some of the practical foundations, the book moves into Part II to consider in further depth critical best practice interventions and interactions. Chapters 6–12 are based on a critical analysis of social work activity from a variety of practice and theoretical perspectives. The rationale for the order they come is the lifespan, beginning with work with children and the first stage of intervention into cases and moving into subsequent chapters to cover work with adults and older people. Chapter 6 acts as a 'bridge' between Parts I and II and the principles and interventions of critical best practice. In developing a different stage of the interview used in his previous chapter, Barry Cooper focuses on how the negotiations that are at the heart of social work interventions are permeated by struggles for power and meaning. The chapter explores the powerful dynamics that can arise from processes of social judgements that underpin the social work assessment and some of the skilful ways in which service users can be kept included in statutory child protection investigations. It shows the ways in which assessment in social work has been officially redefined to mean what is covered in 'assessment frameworks', formats and procedures and goes beyond these and illuminates the routine ways in which social workers are skilfully assessing people all the time in their work.

In Chapter 7, Sarah Leigh and Anne Farmer write about their discussions with a group of children and families social workers around what constitutes critical best practice. They take a complex child protection case, identified by the group, as the subject of their detailed critical best practice analysis. This shows how the social worker carefully assessed

and managed the issue of substantiated physical abuse of 14-weeks-old 'Jamie' by his middle-class father, Andrew. The practice involved highly skilled supportive work with Sandra, the highly stressed mother, developing her capacities to be a safe, reflective parent, while patiently and skilfully working with Andrew and other agencies who provided counselling and other services. The effect was that the father, having gained significant insight into his own history of abuse in childhood and much greater ability to know and manage his emotions and behaviour, eventually returned to live in the family home, while Sandra gained similar kinds of self-understanding and improvements in parenting capacity. The children came to be viewed as safe, and their names were removed from the child protection register.

In Chapter 8, Harry Ferguson also considers critical best practice in child care, with respect to family support and child protection. He draws on the theoretical perspective of 'individualization' and the 'democratisation of the family', taken from the work of Anthony Giddens. His analysis draws on interviews with a number of professionals and members of the 'Smith' family, including ten-year-old 'Joanne' who was experiencing substantial emotional abuse and neglect. Here a social worker and a family support worker together enabled a mother and a child, and albeit to a lesser extent, a father, to engage in 'life-planning' and gain an important degree of mastery over their lives and develop safer, more loving and supportive relationships. Jane Dalrymple and Hilary Horan write in Chapter 9 about the child's voice as central to critical best practice with children and young people. They tell the story of 'Matty' who was at high risk of entering care due to neglect and how his advocate, Joe, worked with and alongside him, together with a social worker and other professionals. The chapter demonstrates how the child's voice can be allowed to be heard within the complex dynamics of decision-making in child welfare and the positive and empowering outcomes which can follow from genuine participation.

In Chapter 10, Kate Spreadbury, an adult protection co-ordinator, writes with Karen Jones about the ethical complexity inherent in situations of adult abuse. Kate reflects critically on her own practice and on that of a social work colleague in enabling a couple at the centre of adult protection concerns to voice their own interpretation of their relationship, in ways which challenged and ultimately deepened the understanding of professionals involved, enabling them to take actions and risks which were clearly focused on the needs and desires of the victim, while remaining ethically sound. Chapter 11 also focuses on ways of amplifying the voices of disempowered service users as a

cornerstone of critical best practice. Peter Connors is a learning and development manager in a large care-provider organisation for people with learning difficulties. He writes with Jonathan Coles about their joint involvement in a video project to facilitate a group of service users to voice and visualise their life experiences and choices. This is critical best practice both in the deeply respectful, humanistic and rights based nature of the process of engagement with service users, and in the learning resources this work has provided to contribute to the education and training of social care professionals. Chapter 12 is written by Jon O’Gara, a mental health practitioner, who tells the story of his brief, statutory intervention in the life of ‘Justine’, a young mother who was threatening to throw herself and her baby from the balcony of her tower-block home. He explores the ethical tensions and dilemmas inherent to using statutory powers in emergency mental health practice and the skills and judgement involved in the process of ascribing meaning and intention to people experiencing mental distress, while at the same time trying to respect their rights and protect them and others they place at risk.

Part III of the book covers a range of critical best practice issues from the perspective of different practice settings and cultures. While never losing sight of actual service delivery, these three chapters concern the context of practice in and across organisations. Social work is increasingly constituted by a requirement to work collaboratively with other agencies, and Pat Taylor and Karen Jones write with social worker Des Gorman in Chapter 13 about partnership working as best practice within a multi-professional team. Des’s work with ‘Mr Green’, an older man who is struggling to cope in his sheltered flat, is shown to be critically best because of how its fluid and critical approach to the boundaries between social workers and service users and between social workers and other professionals resulted in a genuine partnership in practice.

In Chapter 14, Judith Thomas and Kate Spreadbury draw on their experience as social work educators, trainers and supervisors in writing about the importance of promoting critical best practice through supervision, learning and development. Their analysis highlights the value of creating spaces where practitioners can safely reflect, challenge and be challenged. Through case studies of social worker’s experiences they demonstrate that such opportunities are present within partnership models of supervision, but may also arise through more and less formal opportunities for sharing and development. They outline an important model for agencies and individual and organisational learning through the development of ‘communities of practice’.

In Chapter 15, Bruce Senior writes with Elspeth Loades, an experienced social work manager, about the ways in which social work practitioners affect and are affected by their organisations. They show how the organisational context is typically either ignored in the social work literature or treated as a problem or constraint to good practice. Drawing on evidence from their conversations with Alison Gardener (who writes about her practice in Chapter 2) and with a number of other social workers, they provide a multi-dimensional picture of the centrality of skilled organisational work to achieving best practice in how a reflective approach to bureaucratic rules and relationships with managers enables social workers to do what they do well. Their chapter reveals the creative and confident practice which can be achieved by critical practitioners who are both self-aware and organisationally aware. The book concludes with a chapter by us as editors which reflects upon the key messages of the book and the meanings and future of critical best practice analysis.

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