For Andrew and Roser, Paul and Pa
THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO SOCIAL WORK

Third Edition

Edited by Martin Davies
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**Introduction: Knowledge, Theory and Social Work Practice – An Easy Access Approach**

*Pat Collingwood and Martin Davies*

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All authors write in a personal capacity. Their expressed views do not necessarily reflect the policy of their employers.
Preface to the Third Edition

It has been a privilege to edit the Blackwell Companion to Social Work and to see it through three editions.

In this edition, there is a new Introductory chapter and additional entries on drugs and alcohol, migration, ethics, and assessment. The chapters on family/relationship breakdown, learning disabilities, counselling and research have new authors. All other chapters have been revised and some have been completely rewritten.

The contributors to this book are influential writers in their respective academic fields. I am grateful to each of them for making time available to provide an erudite framework of knowledge for the benefit of a new generation of social work students.

I owe a special debt to Mark Doel and Judith Phillips who gave valuable help in the process of updating two chapters.

Holly the collie kept me sane and kept me company during the lengthy business of pulling it all together.

Martin Davies
Norwich
June 2007
Introduction

Knowledge, Theory and Social Work Practice – An Easy Access Approach

Pat Collingwood and Martin Davies

Although we know that service users appreciate social workers who have positive human qualities like helpfulness, reliability and patience, we also know that high quality practice requires a depth of knowledge that can only come from learning about and absorbing a wide range of theoretical ideas and research-based evidence such as that contained in the chapters of this book.

To the beginning student the task of linking theory to practice can be challenging and feelings of apprehension may be fuelled by the fact that social work training courses are designed to cover material drawn, not just from one source, but from complex disciplines like psychology and sociology, social administration and politics, philosophy and law.

The process of becoming a social worker is exciting – but it involves a great deal of hard work. A detailed and reflective reading of the theories, facts and ideas that are outlined in the Blackwell Companion to Social Work will enable you to lay firm foundations for what lies ahead. But the most crucial step in the course of becoming a qualified social worker depends on you being able successfully to bridge the gap between the theory and knowledge that you learn during training and the way that you practise when you are working in the field with service users. Theory and knowledge, for example, are crucial components in ensuring high quality in the work that you do as you:

- prepare for each encounter with a service user;
- assess people and situations;
- decide how, when and whether to intervene;
- react appropriately at all times and to many different people;
- review what you have done and consider how the service user has responded;
- decide what to do next.

When you are qualified, your work will be judged neither by the marks awarded for essays nor by the quality of your contributions to seminar discussions but by the way in which you carry out your professional duties. Social work practitioners
traditionally hold that social problems are solved or ameliorated by the application of ideas from a tried-and-tested body of professional knowledge. But as one student has commented, ‘there are so many different theories and there doesn’t seem to be any coherent way of identifying conflicts between them: why you pick one theory as opposed to another – or do you just randomly pick a theory?’ (Collingwood, 2005).

In Chapter 2.1 of this book, Howe identifies five key points in his exploration of the importance of theory for social work practice:

- Social work theories help practitioners to make sense of complex and difficult human situations.
- Different social work theories generate different understandings of human behaviour and social situations.
- The social work process . . . describes a sequence and a structure which helps social workers to practise in a systematic way.
- Social workers who use theory to inform their use of the social work process are more likely to practise in a thoughtful and professional manner.
- The purposes of social work and the theories which support them vary depending on the cultural context in which social work finds itself.

A good theoretical base should equip the social worker with a high level of sensitivity to the needs and circumstances of service users and the skill to assess the relevance and impact of any situational context. It should suggest appropriate ways of intervening compatible with an agency framework. The methods which the social worker is likely to employ are usually drawn from sources that had their origins in humanist thinking, Freudian or post-Freudian ideas, developmental and social psychology or behaviourism. At times and in varying degrees in different fields of social work, significant ideas may come from Marxist theory, feminism, clinical psychiatry, evolutionary theory, educational psychology, law, criminology, the philosophy of ethics and pastoral or radical theology.

As Howe reminds us, ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’, but, with such a wide range of material to draw on, students will always need help as they develop their skill in deciding how best to make links between aspects of theory or knowledge and any particular piece of practice in respect of an identifiable service user. Student learning in this area has traditionally come through group discussion, role play, the viewing of video clips, analysis of transcripted case material and, above all, experience of real world practice in placements under the observation and guidance of skilled field professionals.

But recent research (Collingwood, 2005) has demonstrated that a pen-and-paper or on-screen tool can help students to focus their minds, think clearly, identify priorities, make choices and improve the level of their practice-related understanding. The model that achieves these objectives is the three-stage theory framework. It has been road-tested and has received positive feedback from students who have used it.

**The Three-stage Theory Framework**

The framework identifies three distinct stages that students need to go through when they are learning to access and apply the knowledge and theory that they require for social work practice. It is designed to have generic applicability.
THE THREE-STAGE THEORY FRAMEWORK
COLLINGWOOD (2005)

KNOWLEDGE
THEORY CIRCLE
SKILLS
VALUES and ETHICS

Figure 1  The three-stage theory framework

Stage 1: The service user profile
The first step is for the student to construct a service user profile, resulting in the creation of an identikit picture. For generic learning purposes, the service user becomes known as Kit. At this point the service user is gender, race, age and ability neutral. Students in groups may discuss together their respective Kits and the issues that are raised by them as the profile emerges.

STAGE ONE
‘KIT’

Referral:
Agency Setting:

Figure 2  Kit
The student learns that the referral gives a first indication of the specifics of the person requiring the service and is therefore crucial for focusing the worker’s attention. Of equal importance is for the student to acknowledge explicitly the role and nature of the agency from which the service will be delivered – whether, for example, from the statutory or voluntary sector, from a day care, residential or community-based practice team.

The student is introduced to Kit as a stick person in the centre of a prepared sheet of paper and is invited to build up a profile of Kit. In doing this, significant information about the service user will emerge: age, gender, race, culture, history, family, friends, likes, dislikes, life events and significant other agency connections. The student is encouraged to consider the use of this information as a means of becoming acquainted with Kit’s world. The service user profile (SUP) becomes an initial assessment tool for identification and storage of information. How much of the information is shared (and with whom) will be an important issue to discuss with Kit. The SUP is the first crucial step in preparing for the next stage in social work practice.

Here is a case example to illustrate the process of using the three-stage theory framework. We will call the anonymous service user Kirsty.

**Figure 3 Kirsty**
Kirsty is a 10-year-old white Scottish girl from a travelling family. She is referred to social work with a request for a social background report to be compiled following non-attendance at school.

Kirsty’s home situation is difficult. Her parents have separated and her mother, who has an alcohol problem, has a new partner. Kirsty has two older siblings and a younger brother. She has a close relationship with her paternal grandmother who lives nearby.

She appears thin and withdrawn and there is some evidence of self-harm. She attended school regularly until a year ago.

Based on the information derived from the referral and having met with Kirsty the student is now in a position to move from the theoretical generality of Kit to the real-world specifics of Kirsty – as outlined in figure 3.

This information forms the basis for the initial assessment of Kirsty’s situation and it enables the student worker to pinpoint what may be required before the process of drawing on theory can begin. One student who used the Kit approach commented at this stage, ‘I have to go back and get more details from the client, I probably wouldn’t have thought about, but when you do think about it and writing
it down, you think “aha” I better check that... it makes obvious things I have maybe assumed or not thought about.’

Stage 2: The theory circle

The theory circle is divided vertically in two as shown in figure 4. The two halves signify the importance and interdependence of distinct strands of theory that can be drawn on to explain what may be going on in Kirsty’s world (left half) and to think about what social work interventions might be appropriate (right half).

The left half of the circle encourages the student to be specific and to identify all the theoretical ideas and relevant writing that might help achieve an understanding of Kirsty and the environment she inhabits. In our example, relevant ideas can be drawn from attachment theory, human development, risk and resilience, mental health, self-harm and the sociological and social policy understandings of travelling people.

The theory entered into the left half of the circle will, of course, not directly enable social work intervention to take place. Only when the student moves into the right half of the circle can theories of intervention be considered for Kirsty. These might be underpinned by person-centred ideas about working alongside Kirsty with empathy, acceptance and congruence, doing play work, life story work or constructing a geneogram. Thinking which of these ideas might be used with Kirsty helps to lay the foundations for a tactical approach to social work intervention and helpfully links the assessment stage with the identification of potential goals or desirable changes for Kirsty and her situation.

Stage 3: Knowledge, skills and values

The third stage requires the student to think about what knowledge, skills, values and ethical considerations might enter into the practice situation as work begins with Kirsty.

On the left side of the theory circle (figure 5) the knowledge required for social practice with Kirsty is indicated. This might include specific organizational issues that relate to working with travelling families and schools, the legal framework for working with children, relevant policy and procedural information with regard to assessment and the availability of resources for undertaking the work.

On the right side of the theory circle the skills required for effective intervention with Kirsty are identified. The skills of assessment, communication and report writing, would be crucial for work with Kirsty. The student social worker can also be helped to identify the special practice skills required when working with a 10-year-old girl: play work and other forms of informal interview techniques in order to gather the information required for the completion of a social background report.

The consideration of values and ethics is represented at the foot of the theory circle. There is acknowledgement that theory, organizational context and the practitioner’s professional identity are not value-free. Thinking about values and ethics enables the student to ask why the agency operates in a particular way and how this might impact on work with Kirsty; why a particular theory and theorist is
chosen to explain Kirsty’s experience; why a particular method was considered an appropriate choice. The student also brings his or her own personal and professional value base to working with Kirsty. (What preconceptions, for example, might the student have about the travelling community? How might the worker’s age or gender affect the relationship?)

Practice choices are informed and underpinned by an amalgam of personal, professional and organizational value bases. Stage 3 gives opportunity for the student worker to consider issues of difference and diversity and to acknowledge the potential harming forces of oppression and discrimination for Kirsty. This could be about having an understanding of the issues relevant to Kirsty being a member of a minority ethnic group, her age, the impact of her mother’s mental health and the consequences of the ‘split’ family situation.

Issues of power and powerlessness will require further consideration if Kirsty is to be understood in context and helped with her need for development in order to move on from this difficult period of her life.

Conclusion

As members of a profession social workers are trusted to practise autonomously. Because of the specialist nature of their expertise and knowledge, they are assumed
to have internalized the skills required for professional practice. But the skills can only be learnt in a disciplined and organized fashion. If used consistently in a number of different cases, the three-stage framework can go a long way towards ensuring that future generations of social workers are skilled – both in theory and in its application to practice. The ‘Kirstys’ of the world deserve nothing less.

Exercise

Using the easy access approach and with reference to a case that you are familiar with, create diagrams in recognition of stages 1, 2 and 3 of the Three-stage Theory Framework.

Don’t feel that you have to follow the Kirsty model slavishly – your outline needs to reflect sympathetically the age, gender and circumstances of the person and situation.
PART 1

Reasons for Social Work

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The demographic character of family life has been changing quite dramatically over the last 30 years. There have been significant increases in the number of people living alone, in the number of same-sex relationships, in the number of divorces occurring, in the numbers of people cohabiting, in the numbers of births to single women, and in the number of stepfamilies formed. At the same time, marriage rates have been declining and average age at marriage has been increasing. Overall it is evident that people are now choosing to construct their sexual, domestic and familial lives in far more varied and flexible ways than was common for much of the twentieth century. Moral values over issues of marriage, sex and childbirth have altered so that now far greater personal freedom is being exercised in patterns of family and household formation and dissolution. This chapter is largely concerned with the implications for social work practice of one aspect of these changes: marital separation and divorce.

Social work has long been concerned with problems in family relationships and behaviour. Such problems, including ones consequent upon family disruption, may become known to social workers through self-referral or through the concerns of other agencies. However, which family problems are considered to be relevant to social work practice is not a straightforward issue and in part depends on the agency that is providing the social work service. Moreover the ‘content’ of social work practice alters over time, both as a consequence of new social issues and problems emerging and because legislation and policy initiatives alter the ways different agencies come to prioritize their work. As a consequence, family problems that might have been deemed worthy of social work intervention and resources at one time may at another time come to be defined as personal matters over which there is no real need for social work professionals to become involved. In other words, what is regarded as pathological, damaging or symptomatic of familial disorder is at least in part a socio-historical construction rooted in normative understandings of how family relationships should be patterned.
As an illustration, consider births outside marriage. In the early and mid-twentieth century, such births were relatively uncommon, with illegitimacy, as it was then termed, being highly stigmatized and understood as morally, socially and economically problematic. Often mothers in this situation were seen as psychologically disturbed, unstable or weak, with the consequence that their children were routinely thought to be at potential risk and thus warranting a degree of social work vigilance. Similarly, divorce was quite highly stigmatized and readily seen as pathological, revealing as much about the character of those involved as it did about their marital experiences. Again, the implication here was that those children involved may be at significant disadvantage and warrant social work intervention (Gibson, 1994; Kiernan et al., 1998).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, our ideas about single motherhood and lone-parent families have clearly altered. Being part of such a family is no longer of itself seen as necessarily symptomatic of other problems. Some of these families may face problems, especially ones associated with poverty and racism, for which social work intervention in the form of family support provisions under the Children Act 1989 may be appropriate. But equally, many of these families do not need such support. The fact that they live in family and household contexts which do not conform to standardized nuclear family patterns is no longer understood socially or professionally as of itself problematic.

Children and Family Disruption

So what are the changes in family and household formation and dissolution that are most relevant to social work practice? And what types of social work intervention might be beneficial and resource effective? Issues of partnership formation, whether marriage or cohabitation, are not generally seen as within the normal remit of professional social work practice. That is, whom adults choose to cohabit with or marry is usually understood as a private matter not requiring external overview. Similarly, aside from cases of domestic violence, matters of relationship termination are usually seen as outside the purview of social work when only adults are involved, although counselling or mediation services may be considered beneficial in resolving continuing conflicts. While some recent government initiatives in the UK have explicitly sought to provide relationship support for couples (see http://www.surestart.gov.uk/surestartservices/support/families/), statutorily, and in practice, it is when there are dependent children present that social work is most clearly recognized as potentially having a part to play.

Even here the tendency is to see social work involvement as more relevant at times of family/household disruption than at times of family/household formation. For example, while social work expertise is seen as necessary for fostering or adoption placements, it is not seen as relevant when lone parents re-partner and form new stepfamily households, unless there are specific concerns for the child’s welfare as a result of the new relationship. (Nor for that matter are mediation or counselling services generally seen as pertinent for issues of re-partnering.) It is really only when children are involved in family disruption that professional involvement is con-
sidered to be at all warrantable. In part, this is because of the role that courts play in divorce proceedings, especially where agreement has not been reached over child care arrangements. Interestingly, official intervention in child care arrangements is far less common when (unmarried) cohabitations end (Silva and Smart, 1999).

However, as divorce has become more prevalent – and currently some 140,000 children under 16 experience parental divorce each year in England and Wales – the role of social work professionals in ensuring that children’s best interests are protected is generally limited. Resources do not permit a social work service to be provided to all, even if it were wished or considered beneficial. If during the course of proceedings it appears to the court that a care or a supervision order might be appropriate it will direct the local authority under section 37 of the Children Act 1989 to make an investigation into the child’s circumstances. How a child’s best interests are determined and what response is most appropriate in particular cases remain difficult issues though. Our knowledge of the impact that parental separation and divorce have on children is imperfect, inevitably so given the range of variables involved in the complex psychological, social, economic and legal processes of separation and divorce.

Some children cope well in coming to terms with their parents’ divorce (Hill, 2001). However, parental separation is typically experienced as traumatic, with children and young people often finding the familial and emotional disruption caused difficult to comprehend or accept. How they respond to the experience has been researched extensively and been shown to be influenced by many factors, some obvious, some more subtle. There is a significant body of literature outlining the negative effects family disruption can have for children and young people. (See Hill and Tisdall, 1997, and Rodgers and Pryor, 1998, for good discussions of these issues.) Social work practitioners do need to be acutely aware of the impact on and needs of children in the process and aftermath of parental separation and divorce. We know that in the short-run when parents separate or divorce, children and young people experience a strong sense of loss. They also share their parents’ concerns about where they are going to be living, if there will be sufficient money coming into the household and what the future holds. There are also increased risks of adverse health, educational and behavioural outcomes in comparison to children and young people from similar backgrounds whose parents do not separate (Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Kroll, 1994; Hill, 2001).

The extent to which parents are in conflict with each other has an impact on a child’s ability to come to terms with what has happened. The development of conciliation and mediation services aims to enable parents to resolve their disputes about issues of contact and residence. Family Court Welfare Services are provided under the auspices of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS). In private law proceedings – principally contested applications for residence and contact under section 8 of the Children Act 1989 – a children and family reporter may report to the court on matters pertaining to the child’s needs and welfare. Though this person is not specifically the child’s representative, they do influence court decisions. However, there is growing awareness of the need for some children to have access to separate representation in order for their views and
opinions to be heard. It has been possible for a child to be made a party to the proceedings and a guardian ad litem appointed, under Family Proceedings Rule 9.5, but this has only been invoked in exceptional cases. In an important case, Re A (Contact: Separate Representation) [2001] 1 FLR 715, the court allowed the National Youth Advocacy Service to act as a guardian and it was noted that the influence of the Human Rights Act 1998 might mean that there are more cases in the future where a guardian might need to be appointed to ensure the child’s view is heard by the court. Subsequently, the Adoption and Children Act 2002 has amended the Children Act 1989 so that section 8 applications are added to the list of proceedings where a children’s guardian is appointed, particularly where there is an apparent conflict between the child’s wishes and those of the parents.

The changes that children experience with separation are often not just changes in parental involvement or household composition. As well as developing a different relationship with the non-residential parent (usually the father), children’s material circumstances are also liable to change. Female-headed lone-parent families frequently experience poverty; certainly there is likely to be less money in households following separation than there was previously (see Bradshaw, 2002). In addition, for some children, marital separation and divorce may result in moving home, neighbourhood and school, with implications for their friendships and other support networks. So too, partly depending on the character of their relationship with their non-residential parent, their relationships with that parent’s family, especially the children’s grandparents, may also alter. Moreover, the separation may be the first of a number of linked familial changes the child experiences, particularly if one or both parents re-partner – changes which some argue can have a greater cumulative consequence than the divorce alone (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Cheesbrough, 2003). Thus, the various changes following separation and divorce may have a continuing impact on children’s lifestyles, over and above any immediate issues of parental disruption, conflict and loss.

Increasingly in Britain and elsewhere in the Western world, policy initiatives are now recognizing that it is generally in children’s best interests to maintain positive relationships with both their parents, with divorce signifying the end of a partnership but not the end of parenting. While few children spend equal time living with both parents, the older perspective that children’s interests are served best by a ‘clean-break’ with the non-residential parent is now discredited. Yet while sustaining positive parental relationships is in children’s interests, it is not always easy for the parents to facilitate this in the aftermath of separation and divorce. The need for parents to cooperate with each other over contact and residence arrangements can be problematic when other aspects of their relationship are conflictual and adversarial. But it is clear that this is what children want; many children have a real concern that following separation and divorce they may lose contact with their non-residential parent. Indeed evidence suggests that a significant proportion of children do lose effective contact with their (non-residential) fathers following divorce, though less so with (non-residential) mothers (Bradshaw et al., 1999). Contact issues can readily become the focus for parental frustrations with each other. Many may wish to ‘start afresh’ and have no further contact with their ex-spouse, but find for the children’s sake there is a need to continue their involvement (Simpson, 1998; Smart and Neale, 1999).
Giving Children a Voice

One factor that has become prominent in the research literature concerns the information children are given about the reasons for the separation and the consequences it will have for their lives. Often children are left in a void, not being told enough to allow them to understand what is happening. The adults involved are themselves struggling to cope, unsure of the future and seeking to ‘shield’ their children from the continuing disputes and uncertainties of the situation. Children are consequently often left in a state of ‘unknowing’, not able to make sense of their experiences and having little idea about what the future might hold. Increasingly, however, it is being recognized in both academic and policy contexts that not only do children need to be given better information but they also need to have their voice ‘heard’.

Within academic research, new conceptions of children have emerged (James and Prout, 1997) in which the view of children as ‘incomplete’ adults or ‘human becomings’ has been rightly challenged (Lee, 2001; Boylan and Ing, 2005). Instead children are recognized as active citizens who shape and inform the world around them, including the private domain of the family. This has led to an increased awareness by parents and professionals working with children and young people of the importance of seeking children’s views and involving children in the process of decision making. Similarly, developments in legal and policy frameworks have emphasized the importance of consulting with and listening to what children and young people have to say. Notably, Article 12 (1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, and Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (incorporated into UK law by the Human Rights Act 1998), support children’s rights as participants in decision making. The Children Act 1989 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 also reflect these concerns.

In line with this, there is now increased awareness of the importance of listening and responding to children’s and young people’s accounts of parental separation and divorce. Historically, children’s perspectives on these issues have either been ignored, or adult proxies used to identify the issues they feel are important for children, rather than listening directly to the accounts of children themselves. Yet children need a chance to understand post-separation arrangements and to have some input into decision-making processes, particularly though not only over issues to do with contact arrangements. Given the impact the separation has on their lives, children also need an appropriate understanding of why the separation occurred, though often they are presented with conflicting or incomplete accounts by parents who are themselves still working out their own versions / ‘moral tales’ of their separation (Hopper, 1993; 2001). Recent research which has drawn on children’s narratives of divorce is illuminating here. For example, Butler et al.’s (2003) research provides a detailed and sensitive account of children’s experiences of their parents’ divorce, portraying children’s experiences of ‘being told’ about their parents’ separation, of the unhappiness children encountered, the questions they wanted to ask, and who children turned to for information and support. Hill (2001) notes that involving children and young people in mediation may go some way towards reduc-
ing their anxiety about their situation. Butler et al. (2003) argue forcefully for an inclusive approach that embraces children’s participation, not as ‘bystanders’ but rather as key players who are trying to make sense of and come to terms with changes in their family lives.

**Conclusion**

A significant minority of children and young people in the UK and other Western countries now experience parental separation and divorce. However, the majority of these children will have no need for contact with social work services or professionals as a result of these experiences. Nonetheless, many social workers will have some level of professional involvement with children and families who are experiencing difficulties as a direct result of divorce or separation. As part of the day-to-day business of social work, in particular assessing need and providing appropriate family support, social workers will need to respond to many children, young people and parents who have their own stories to tell about the ways this experience has shaped and informed their lives. Importantly, these stories will not be uniform; each will have their own dynamic and their own history. It is therefore imperative that social work practitioners understand the ways in which divorce and separation impact on families in general and are able to listen to, hear and respond to the needs of children and young people.