

Book Review

Communication and Interpersonal Skills in Social Work, 5th Edition, (Transforming Social Work Practice Series)

By Julia Koprowska

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It is worth noting on the outset that the 5th edition of *Communication and Interpersonal Skills in Social Work* was being revised at the end of 2019. The Series Editor's Preface was written in February 2020. Neither the author, nor the editor writing those words, could have known of what was to come in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the impact on this on how we all communicate.

Prior to entering into contexts for and methods of communication, Koprowska illustrates the need to understand the 'component parts' of communication in and of themselves, drawing upon the concept of 'meta-communication'. This in effect is explained as a feature of communication, where in addition to any verbal communication there are cues and behaviours that could change the meaning 'encoded' within the interaction. Reder and Duncan (2003) highlight that messages are not always received as intended and note the frequency with which communication failures are reported in reviews of fatal child abuse cases in the UK. This complexity and nuance of communicating for shared understanding is reflected by Koprowska.

Chapter Four of the text specifically gives consideration to the spaces in which communication occurs. At a time of physical distancing due to public health

guidance and legislation, this has led to interacting virtually in many contexts. This may feel highly challenging to practitioners, for whom being *with* people is core to what they do. Social work does not take place in one location, and social workers must adjust to a wide range of spaces with different boundaries. Koprowska refers for example to the awareness that is required when entering into someone's home, and how the boundaries shift in spaces such as bedrooms, that you may not enter as a 'visitor' in other contexts. The ability to be able to adapt, and to hold in mind these multiple considerations, is part of the meta-communication referred to earlier in the text.

The chapters also offer activities – a space for self-reflection – and serves to highlight the importance of self-awareness; those who we respond to, are also responding to what we ourselves are bringing to the dynamic.

Koprowska brings to the fore in Chapters 8, 9 and 10 the concepts of working with 'involuntary service users', safety and risk, and the interpersonal demands and rewards of the work, where there are some of the clear lines of the role and many 'grey' areas. As she has highlighted throughout the text, it is not just the task of what we believe requires to be done – but the process of how this is enacted that needs thoughtful attention. If we ourselves are not clear on the role and/or cannot draw a picture to illustrate what is happening, how can we expect others to engage in a process with us? Koprowska guides us through many areas and considerations within social work practice and does so blending both theory and practical suggestions. This is helpful, as communication is often assumed to be a given – when in fact it is a skill for which a toolkit is required.

For those studying social work, or for newly qualified social workers, this may offer both a 'touchstone' for practice, but also serve as a reminder of how easily overwhelming the role can feel. This cannot be avoided. What Koprowska is offering is both the panorama perspective of the 'balcony view' (Heifetz et al., 2006) and an illustration of the detail that must be attended to. Those who have grown and developed in the role have reflected that being a social worker may at times feel like being the jack of all trades and the master of none. In those moments, practitioners and managers require a lighthouse as a point of reference – and this text may be one of the tools in the kit to serve such a

purpose which can be revisited at different stages of a practitioner's development.

The text covers many areas for consideration including brain development, human emotion, listening skills, reflection, methods of contact, working with groups, and 'groups' of individual experiences such as people who may be seeking asylum or people who have additional support and communication needs. Koprowska layers the different contexts and considerations of practice in an accessible and structured way.

Phillips (2014) reflects on the 'choreography' of communication in child protection, and the need to not only notice how a child moves, but to be able to effectively communicate this in writing. This skill of bringing to life the multi-dimensional experience of verbal communication and interactions is demonstrated effectively in the text. While Koprowska does refer to written communication in the early chapters of the book, and discusses concepts of tone and reframing, a future edition of the book could usefully include further discussion of the skill which Koprowska herself is demonstrating.

There is one notable concept that cannot be clearly seen (or heard) in the text – that of working with silence. Silence is a powerful communication, when used or experienced. Within social work there can sometimes be a tendency to fill the silence, or when silence is experienced (either due to emotional or physical absence) this might be described as non-engagement. We sometimes need to pay attention to the silence – understanding what is not said as well as what is said. Exploring this further both in the text and in practice would provide greater strength.

Overall, the text helpfully brings together many aspects of practice and serves to highlight the importance of self-awareness, as well as awareness of context, role and goal in meeting the needs of those with whom we work and connect to. This brings me back to the current context. The sense for some practitioners of being the 'jack of all trades and the master of none' is potentially what makes social work an art as well as a science. As well as knowing the theory – it is the ability to be able to adapt, to 'read the room', to respond in the moment, to be prepared to revise and revisit what might have at first been believed. A plan,

hypothesis, a 'working story' is important – but so is the ability to be able to adapt and acknowledge that characters can be multi-faceted and there may be alternative endings. All of these aspects influence our communications. In the context of a pandemic, with physical distancing and the use of face coverings – never in living memory has the consideration of how we communicate (and connect to others) been so relevant.

References

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About the author

Louise Henry is a consultant with the Improving Care Experiences Hub in CELCIS. Prior to this role Louise has been both a practitioner and manager in services for children and their families. This has included roles in both the statutory and third sector and specifically for children and young people who have substitute care experiences in fostering families, residential and kinship care. The roles have included a focus upon children's rights and participation, as well as multiagency work and communication. In addition to this, there has been opportunities to be part of teams undertaking significant case reviews to understand wider systems needs and issues in Scotland which impact upon children, their families and the practitioners supporting them.

This book is part of the Transforming Social Work Practice series. SAGE Publishing provided free 30-day access to this e-book for review.