

Book Review

McColgan, M and McMullin, C. (2017). Doing Relationship-based Social Work, A Practical Guide to Building Relationships and Enabling Change. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, ISBN 978-1-78592-014-1

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When I was asked to write this book review, I was both excited and intrigued. As a care experienced adult who had many social workers through a turbulent experience of care, I hoped that I would learn a lot about what good social work practice should look like. Also, as a Consultant working on the Permanence and Care Excellence (PACE) programme, I also hoped that it would also benefit me professionally.

The book grounded itself in theory and context by explaining the rise of new public management and 'managerialism'. It then explored the impact that this has had on social work practice over the years. This is explained really well – someone with no prior knowledge of social work would clearly understand how this resulted in a shift from a more relationship-based approach with service-users to one which is task oriented, investigative and output focussed.

The book then hints at being able to address the challenges that this change has created through its four step model (Engage, Negotiate, Enable, Endings). I found this a simple but seemingly effective model which can easily be incorporated into day to day practice with, for example, children who are looked after.

Case studies and personal reflections are abundant throughout the book which helps to bring the four step model to life. Whilst these are both varied and interesting, a slight downfall to their inclusion is that they all seem unachievably aspirational. Chielle's model of mentoring is one example; by definition, it requires a certain level of time and resource to be available consistently - an amount which the book clearly states in earlier chapters social workers don't have. There are some benefits of sharing excellent practice examples, but I felt that the case studies could have been better tailored by including time and resource variables too.

The whole book sets out to build empathy in social work as the foundation for relationship building, and it does this quite well. However, I think that it could do more to bring the experiences of service-users to the fore. There are lots of statements like 'young people in care often feel' or 'they often find these meetings challenging' and there are also some insightful case studies, but I often found myself wondering about the bigger picture. Some statistics on the outcomes of care experienced groups, for example, would complement these case studies well and better inform the reader why a certain approach is so important (without taking up too many pages).

I feel strongly about coproduction and non-tokenistic participation, and I was very impressed by the chapters on these. The only improvement I could suggest would be for more conviction. In the book, coproduction is described as 'important' and 'empowering'. Yes, this is true, but it is also a key requirement of UK and Scottish policies and legislation, so it our responsibility to be doing this routinely for everyone. For me, it is a fundamental, and the book could do more to throw down the gauntlet.

My favourite sections of this book were those that focused on how social workers should strive to be authentic, in service of both themselves and those they work with. The book also takes this theme further by encouraging social workers to make the most of supervision opportunities, to become comfortable with self-disclosing and to develop their emotional intelligence. All of this is particularly pertinent in a profession which has experienced huge change in recent decades.

Social worker students and those in their early careers would benefit hugely from reading this book. It would support more experienced practitioners to meaningfully reflect on their practice. I think the writers could more explicitly address how to achieve relationship-based social work despite the time and logistical challenges that many face today. Nonetheless, there are some excellent examples and there is great content in this easy to read book, with a useful model that could benefit any social worker and the people that they work with.

About the author

Jimmy Paul is a care experienced adult who works at CELCIS as a Permanence Consultant. He specialises in leadership, has a background managing in the health service and is passionate about improving care experiences in Scotland and across the world.

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