

‘The central message of this book should make it a “must-read” for all social workers, managers and those concerned with and about social work. As with all great ideas and concepts, the joy is that at their heart they are simple. What this book does beautifully is unpack the simple idea, exploring the key components of how social workers should place relationship-based social work at the centre of their practice. In a world too driven by technocratic responses, digital solutions and robotics, the one thing we can be sure of is that social workers will not be replaced by robots! This book explains why – you should read it.’

– *Dave Hill, CBE, Executive Director, Social Care and Education at Essex County Council and past President of ADCS*

RELATIONSHIP-BASED SOCIAL WORK

Second Edition

Getting to the Heart of Practice

Edited by

GILLIAN RUCH, DANIELLE TURNEY and ADRIAN WARD

Foreword by David Howe



Jessica Kingsley *Publishers*
London and Philadelphia

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First edition published in 2010
This edition published in 2018
by Jessica Kingsley Publishers
73 Collier Street
London N1 9BE, UK
and
400 Market Street, Suite 400
Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA

www.jkp.com

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Front cover image source: iStock.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Names: Ruch, Gillian, editor. | Turney, Danielle, editor. | Ward, Adrian, 1953- editor.

Title: Relationship-based social work : getting to the heart of practice / edited by Gillian Ruch, Danielle Turney and Adrian Ward.

Description: Second Edition. | Philadelphia : Jessica Kingsley Publishers, [2018] | Revised edition of Relationship-based social work, 2010. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017038353 | ISBN 9781785922534

Subjects: LCSH: Social service--Case studies. | Interpersonal relations--Case studies.

Classification: LCC HV40 .R373 2018 | DDC 361.3/2--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017038353>

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78592 253 4

eISBN 978 1 78450 543 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain

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Foreword

Of course it's never really gone away. It has always been there in social work, one way or another: the practitioner's relationship with her client, the service user. Whatever intentions you have, whichever technique you use, the medium in which matters are conducted is the relationship you have with the other, and the other has with you. The quality and character of these relationships therefore matter, they matter a great deal. Not surprisingly, outcomes have been shown to vary depending on the technique used or intervention chosen. However, more critically, outcomes have also been found to vary depending on the skill and quality of the relationship created by the practitioner as she engages with her client, no matter what technique or method she is using. In a sense then, all social work is relationship-based. There is no choice. In which case, it's vital that we do it well.

It was back in the late 1960s when I began my career as a social worker. I worked in a pre-Seebohm Children's Department. One of the books that helped me make sense of what I was doing, and perhaps also what I could and should do, was Margaret Ferard and Noel Hunnybun's 1962 book *The Caseworker's Use of Relationships* (with a foreword by John Bowlby, no less). Later that same year I came across Isca Salzberger-Wittenberg's 1970 book *Psycho-Analytic Insight and Relationships: A Kleinian Approach*. This gave my enthusiasm for understanding the way we relate to clients a further boost. Even though over the years the idea of relationship-based social work was destined to go in and out of fashion, I never lost faith in its fundamental importance. Like many of my colleagues, the decades saw me flirt with all manner of ideas and theories, fashions and fads, but wherever the ideological winds were blowing me, I tried to ground whatever I was thinking or doing, researching or writing, on the bedrock of the worker–client relationship. I worried that if social work could no

longer see that relationship-based practices were its core strength, then it was in danger of losing its humanity and with that its right to exist in any meaningful way.

The relationship between one human being and another is a complicated, tricky place. There is both confusion and delight as my thoughts, feelings and behaviours affect, and are affected by, your thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This is particularly the case when feelings are running high during moments of anxiety, fear, anger, love, shame, sadness. And social work, of course, is a place where feelings, almost by definition, routinely run high.

The idea of relationship-based social work is therefore both simple and complex. Simple in the sense that it is unavoidable. We all know about relationships because that is the everyday world, personally and professionally, in which we live and have our being. But as we've seen, it's also a complex place where there is endless scope for misunderstanding and confusion, connection and collaboration, anger and disappointment, joy and belonging, possibility and hope.

To help us understand and navigate this world, at least in the context of social work, Gillian Ruch, Danielle Turney and Adrian Ward have brought together a number of leading experts to write about relationship-based practice. Packed into these pages are so many good ideas, useful explanations and helpful practices that you will finish the book not only humbler and wiser but also feeling more convinced and determined.

There is a natural logic to the book as each chapter deals with one of the key aspects of doing relationship-based social work. The compilation begins by making the case for relationship-based practices in which there is a need to help the client achieve a balance between their internal and external needs. At times of upset and arousal we seek to regulate our emotions and have them managed and contained. If we can achieve this, then we can begin to think, think about our feelings, our behaviour, our needs and how best to meet them. The theories that help us to understand the relationship and the use of self are outlined, described and discussed.

Social work takes place in a variety of places and over different periods of time. There are excellent chapters on worker–client relationships when encounters are brief, and when they are long term, complex and sustained. There are fascinating chapters on working with strong feelings – fear, anger and aggression; hopelessness, despair

and depression; love and attraction. And when the work is done, or the relationship, for whatever reasons, has to stop, we learn a lot from the essay that discusses endings, completions and letting go.

So although we may feel that simply living life teaches us how to do relationships, it becomes clear that there is much to understand, learn and improve if we are to do them well. The book's final chapters therefore talk about how students can be helped to develop a relationship-based practice, the importance of supervision, and the value of having emotionally intelligent professional leadership. How we learn, how we are supervised, and how we are managed should be consistent with the principles of relationship-based social work. Recognising the importance of practices that are both reflective and reflexive runs as a golden thread throughout the book. *Relationship-Based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice* celebrates the power of the human relationship to hold and to heal. Read this splendid book and warm *your* heart and sharpen *your* mind.

David Howe
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Preface to the Second Edition

This second edition of *Relationship-Based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice* is being published eight years after the first one. Since the appearance of the first edition, macro-level political changes have influenced – largely negatively in our view – the ways in which individuals, families and groups facing difficulties are perceived, configured and responded to. In the context of these changes we feel that this book is more important than ever for social work practitioners who are working in a politically hostile landscape.

In the substantive chapters we have retained the book's overarching focus on psychodynamic and systemic understandings of human behaviour and on professional interventions, but have profiled more explicitly a commitment to anti-oppressive practice and diversity issues. Two new chapters have been included: a chapter on working with service users and carers replaces the first edition's service user perspective chapter and an additional chapter focuses on professional leadership in contemporary social work practice, acknowledging the central importance of relationship-based leadership for effective everyday practice.

It is our aim that this second edition will help to equip social workers with relationship-based knowledge, skills and values that resist the adverse effects of the prevailing political agenda, offering hope and new possibilities to people experiencing vulnerability and distress.

Gillian Ruch, Danielle Turney and Adrian Ward
September 2017

Introduction

ADRIAN WARD, GILLIAN RUCH AND DANIELLE TURNEY

This book aims to address a familiar theme in a new way. It is perhaps a truism that ‘the relationship’ is central to good practice in social work – this has always been recognised to some degree, whatever one’s theoretical stance. What is new is that we now want to examine and explore what this means in contemporary practice, with its complex bureaucratic and interdisciplinary requirements and its frequent realignments in terms of ideology and professional identity. In this shifting context, what does it actually mean to place ‘the relationship’ at the heart of practice? What does it look like (and feel like) in practice, and how does this approach sit within current social work preoccupations? These are some of the questions we have begun to address in this book.

The book grew out of the work of an informal grouping of social work teachers and researchers with an interest in psychosocial, psychodynamic and systemic approaches. As we shared ideas and experiences, both about practice and about teaching and research, what emerged was a realisation that despite all the continuing upheavals in policy and procedure, social work would always begin and end with a human encounter between two or more people – even if this was sometimes a brief or fraught encounter. What the social worker will always have to do is make the most of this encounter, understand the multilayered complexity of the relationship which develops, and use his or her skill to ensure that (at the very least) the relationship works in support of the social work task and not counter to it. At its best, what social work can offer to people in need of help is a supportive and understanding relationship which will enable them to resolve their difficulties and to feel enhanced rather than undermined in the process.

What we rediscovered in editing the book is that, although it may sound a relatively simple proposition to place the relationship at the heart of practice, it is not a straightforward matter at all. In particular, we needed to think about the contested nature of contemporary practice, in which (for example) all ‘professionalism’ may be questioned in terms of its assumptions about power and the locus of expertise. We needed to think about the origins of the social work project and how some of its early and well-intentioned assumptions had to be rethought in the light of some challenging critiques from a range of perspectives. We also needed to address the enormous expansion of models of welfare: social workers now practise in a huge and diverse range of settings, sometimes as a lone practitioner in a complicated multiprofessional network and sometimes as a powerful force within a local government agency driven by compelling national agendas.

At the same time, we felt that there is not always sufficient understanding within this range of agencies of the subtleties and dilemmas of the social worker/service user relationship. After all, if this relationship was always as straightforward as some would wish to imagine, then why is the work so challenging and sometimes so stressful? Why do things go wrong, such as risks not being fully understood or people’s true intentions or motives not being recognised? Why do service users sometimes feel unheard, undervalued or misunderstood, and, likewise, why do social workers sometimes feel that the true nature of their work is not appreciated or understood more widely?

We realised that the common ground in all of these situations was the relationship between social worker and service user, and that this common ground had certain main features which we could usefully explore in the book and which would actually help us to structure the argument of the book. Thus:

- First, in every case, such a relationship would have a beginning, a middle and an ending, each phase bringing its own characteristic challenges and demands, so we needed to give specific attention to each of these phases of practice.
- Second, in every case, because they are often encountering people in the midst of crisis and uncertainty, there was the potential for the social worker to have to work with some very powerful feelings, so we needed to acknowledge this reality and to address some of these feelings directly.

- Third, we realised that if the common ground is the relationship, then it is the demands which working *in* and *with* this relationship may place on the social worker's self – their human, personal nature – which must be recognised, so we needed to ensure that we included a clear focus on the professional 'use of self'.
- Fourth, it then became clear that, in order to work in this way, social workers require a distinctive kind of support and development, in terms of training, supervision and leadership, and that the organisational and policy contexts in which they have to operate will have a critical effect on their capacity to work effectively, so we needed to address these issues too.
- Finally, if this whole enterprise is going to succeed, it has to be based in sound and coherent theory, rather than just being left to the intuition of the worker, so we needed to address the theoretical grounding for this approach to practice – and that is where we decided to begin.

It is out of these realisations that we have built the structure of this book. We begin with a revisiting of the theoretical foundations of the work in the first two chapters and a discussion of the use of self in the third. The second section of the book focuses directly on practice, following the sequence suggested above, from beginnings through to endings, but also – in the 'sustaining' phase – focusing directly on a number of the powerful feelings which may be encountered, including fear, anger, depression and despair, but also liking and love. For these chapters in particular, we asked contributors either to begin with or to feature prominently some substantial examples from practice which would help to bring the material to life, and there is certainly some powerful case material in this section. In the third section, we move to the issues of training, supervision and the organisational and policy contexts, to explore the challenges that welfare organisations face in trying to facilitate this approach to practice, and also to think about how it can be incorporated in leadership and management. Finally, we conclude with some brief reflections on the journey we have undertaken in compiling this book.

This is only a beginning, and we have inevitably had to restrict our scope to cover only part of the range of possible applications of

this theme. But it is also only a beginning in terms of reworking the theory base. There are many possible takes on relationship-based practice, and as editors we have largely focused on an approach rooted in psychodynamic, systemic and attachment theories – which themselves are all contested fields. Not all of our contributors would align themselves under the same banner, however, and we feel the book is actually enhanced by this diversity. It will be noticed that whereas some are strongly identified with either the psychodynamic or attachment models, others draw on quite different models such as liquidity or empowerment. We wish to promote a broad and inclusive approach, although at the same time we accept that this makes it difficult to come up with a definitive account of relationship-based practice.

As acknowledged in the introduction to the first edition, discrete definitions of the concept of ‘relationship-based practice’ are, and remain, elusive. An observable development since the first edition has been the adoption of the term ‘relationship-based practice’, particularly in practice contexts, where it is often associated with a specific practice methodology. Despite these narrower, more fixed interpretations of the term, we remain content to hold the book open on an absolute definition of what relationship-based practice might be. In fact, holding this position probably reflects the nature of the relationship-based practice terrain, which is rich and diverse and may always be hard to pin down to a simple formula. The challenge for us all is to engage in a thoughtful, curious and open-minded way with the issues raised by attempting to work *in* and *with* the relationship, and to aim to draw on whatever combination of ideas resonates with our professional experiences. It is in this spirit that the book has been written, and we hope it will enable those who read it to enhance their own relationship-based practice as a result.