

**PSYCHOSOCIAL AND RELATIONSHIP-BASED PRACTICE
IN SOCIAL WORK**

Book review of:

Claudia Megele, *Psychosocial and relationship-based practice* (2015)

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Psychosocial and Relationship-based Practice

Claudia Megele

Critical Publishing, Northwich, 2015

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David Howe, in his foreword to the book under review, writes:

If you really render social work to its basics then there isn't much left other than the relationship between worker and client, practitioner and service user --- Losing sight of the relationship was always bound to end with social work losing its heart and with it, irony of ironies, losing its efficacy and social credibility (p. vii).

He refers to the recent 'roller-coaster career' of relationship-based practice, with the hope held out of a 'slight renaissance' today. This book provides a shining light on such a renaissance, pulling together many diverse approaches, some of which have been set at odds with each other in the past, and demonstrating through applied case studies their essential cohesiveness and rootedness in the relationship and psychosocial engagement between practitioners and users of services.

There is no virtue in extolling relationship-based practice within a vacuum of evidence. Olive Stevenson (2013), at the end of her long and distinguished career, reflected upon the near demise of a psychoanalytic approach in social work that aligns with the approach taken by Megele, and pleaded:

Those who believe as I do that there are substantial aspects of psychoanalytic theory and the impact of practice that moves between inner and outer worlds which can be 'evidenced', must be prepared to make explicit their grounds for so believing (p. 81).

The pages of this Journal have taken up this challenge by reviewing the relevant research literature (for example, Mishna, Van Wert & Asakura, 2013; Trevithick, 2014, pp. 288-295); Megele applies this research base to extended case examples, bringing research knowledge firmly into the world of the front-line practitioner. She writes of 'an increasing unanimity of voices proclaiming the need for evidence-informed and holistic relationship-based interventions' (p. 1).

This book is relatively slim in size but ambitious in scope; indeed, there is boldness in its coverage which is pulled off with skill and clarity. Its ambition is set out in its 'main objective', namely 'to offer a critical and evidence-informed systemic and integrative approach to psychosocial and relationship-based practice and interventions' (p. 2). Its boldness can be

seen in its intended readership: ‘students, practitioners, academics and researchers with different levels of experience and expertise’ (p. xi) and the book does operate in a sufficiently layered manner to appeal across this range of readers. I would add one more group: can one hope policy makers might also set aside the time to immerse themselves in this book and draw from it the powerful lessons about the reality of good social work practice that it conveys? The book as a whole is concerned with social work in the UK, although the many commonalities that apply in the profession and its research knowledge mean that it can also engage readers internationally.

Megele defines psychosocial and relationship-based practice and interventions as taking place at the

intersection of the individual’s psychological / internal world and subjective states (eg happiness, sadness, depression, etc.) and their social / external world and objective statuses (eg age, race, poverty, unemployment, etc). Therefore, they are interdisciplinary by nature, systemic in thinking (holistic with cyclical reciprocity) and integrative in approach and practice (drawing upon and integrating multiple approaches) (p. 3).

This entails a ‘rich systemic and eclectic approach’ (p. 2). Eclecticism can be misapplied, amounting to no more than a random magpie way of doing things. In contrast, Megele exemplifies a disciplined but flexible eclecticism, based upon thorough and reflective assessment and analysis of the case in hand, matching the method of intervention to the situation and hoped-for outcomes and, very importantly, doing this explicitly, i.e. stating the approach taken, why it is being used at this point and reflectively reviewing the process and the outcome. Often social work involves the reality and anxiety of ‘not-knowing’ (p. 5), when it draws upon skills and knowledge to contain the uncertainty, the ‘lived experience’ of the process of interaction and reflectively explores a way forward. Megele incorporates this reality into her case studies, with their twists and turns, and how the skills and knowledge of the practitioner can be applied through the turbulence.

To hold all the above together with clarity is a challenge. Megele manages this by maintaining the same structure throughout, which is a cycle of case study, reflective questions and discussion, all of which is explained at the outset of the book. The case studies are extended, complex, multi-layered and vivid; they carry authenticity and draw the reader in. The structure permits skilful staging, so that different approaches, interventions and theoretical explanations emerge naturally from the case. The start of each chapter sets out what will be covered and, while these lists can initially appear daunting, the content unfolds in response to

the case study in a way which avoids overloading the reader. Megele has a direct and jargon-free style, with technical terms explained appropriately.

The range of practice methods is comprehensive. As she puts it, the therapeutic and disciplinary approaches cover ‘psychology, relational psychoanalysis, object relations theory and transactional analysis, narrative therapy, systemic approaches, family therapy, cognitive and behavioural approaches, and others’ (p. 1). Each chapter is self-contained but the book can be read from cover to cover; this is what I did and found a strong feature of the book is that it is cumulative, building on what has gone before. The reflective questions following each stage in the case studies are valuable in this respect as they often invite the reader to reflect upon the case by drawing upon learning and perspectives acquired in the preceding chapters.

With the first chapter, Megele opens in perhaps a slightly unusual place but one which feels right and, I think, will chime with front-line practitioners: the ‘emotional labour’ involved in the work. This requires ‘maintaining a professional outlook and clear professional boundaries’ (p. 15) but the complexity of emotional labour is not resolved by a simple appeal to ‘professionalism’ because it is ‘often unrecognised, discounted or invisible to those who benefit from it’ and unacknowledged by those who provide it. There follows a beautifully linked sequence as a thread runs through emotional labour to mentalisation – understanding and making ‘sense of our own and other’s thoughts, emotions, actions and behaviours by imagining ourselves in their place / position’ (p. 17) – to attachment theory to ‘potential space’ (pp. 19-27): a person can be so overburdened with past emotional distress, lack of containment, past and recurrent unresolved trauma that there is no internal reflective capacity left for oneself or others. This can apply to service users and practitioners; for the latter, responding to emotionally charged relationships and the impact of secondary trauma contribute to the emotional labour of practice. The consequent defence mechanisms are lucidly explained and applied (chapter 3). These concepts thread their way through the rest of the book, for example in the discussion of empathy and respectful challenge. Empathy, so closely tied to mentalisation, is seen as ‘foundational’ to good practice but it is not necessarily ‘sufficient’ because empathic understanding can also serve to validate lack of agency on the part of the service user. A case study illustrates this whereby empathic validation is combined with respectful challenge by extending the nature of the exchange and inviting ‘the person to think reflectively about themselves and their actions and emotions and *how these are impacting others*’ (p. 37; emphasis added).

There are many ways of doing this, from simple open questioning to more structured approaches such as motivational interviewing but they all tie in with a narrative approach,

which assumes ever greater prominence as the book progresses. How people give meaning to their lives and sense of self-identity lies in the narratives they hold about themselves and narratives can be re-authored or reframed. As Shaw puts it (2011, p. 123, quoting Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) ‘social workers are concerned with “the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change”’. Megele illustrates this, for example by using language with the client which externalises the problem, removes it from being part of ‘me’ and so can be named, talked about, reframed (p. 115); by applying narrative in family therapy (pp. 143-144); and by helping resolve trauma not through attempting to recapture a pre-traumatic state but by re-authoring a new post-traumatic life narrative that names and incorporates the trauma. Megele writes:

[t]herefore, narrative interventions and the practitioner’s ability to engage users of services in revisiting, exploring and re-authoring their narratives is an indispensable element of effective psychosocial and relationship-based interventions (p. 177).

Research reinforces this emphasis upon narrative in relation to work with offenders. It shows that factors leading to sustained desistance from offending

over the long haul are the positive qualities of sustaining hope, maintaining a strong sense of self-efficacy, experiencing adaptive shaming, and redefining one’s sense of self and identity (Porporino, 2010, pp. 73-74).

With a background in probation, I found it refreshing how naturally Megele affords cognitive-behavioural approaches their place as effective interventions while also identifying the limitations in their application, namely that they ‘do not address wider systemic and social problems’ and ‘may be of limited suitability for people with more complex mental health needs or learning difficulties’ (p. 170). Probation carries its warning of how practice within an entire profession can become distorted and unbalanced if policy makers force through a favoured single approach based upon flawed ideology, research and implementation. Such an approach in this country and beyond resulted in a hegemonic cognitive-behavioural ‘programme fetishism’ (Porporino, 2010, p. 80) that has taken years to undo; regrettably, this has since been replaced by a policy environment of privatised fragmentation that continues to inhibit the development of sustained relationship-based practice in probation services (Burke & Collett, 2016).

Readers should be aware that the case studies all focus on children’s services, with significant mental health issues incorporated into them. Practitioners in adult services may find the book does not speak so directly to them. Learning and application will need to be transferred to other work settings – a process with which social workers are familiar – but I thought it a

pity the case studies in their manifold ramifications did not touch upon some situations of more direct relevance to those in adult services.

It is also noteworthy how generic social work texts tend not to touch upon matters of religion, faith and spirituality and this book is no exception. It is still the case that, generally speaking, such coverage is found only in specialist texts; one wonders if there is resistance to covering such issues or whether the topic simply does not occur to those who have not chosen to focus on this area. Given the multi-faith society in which we live and the central place that religion, faith and spirituality play in many people's lives, shaping the meaning and narratives by which they understand themselves, it seems like an omission to exclude this topic altogether: social work really needs to be able to respond to this dimension in service users' lives (Elliott, 2017).

If some in adult services find the book does not speak directly to them, others may experience a gulf between the sustained, therapeutically oriented good practice described by Megele and the reality of day-to-day practice in British social work agencies, especially within the statutory sector. Megele gives limited recognition to this gap, particularly picking up on it in her concluding reflections (pp. 180-181) but the pervasive presence of a managerialist agenda can be experienced as insurmountable (Trevithick, 2014, pp. 299-304). A public policy of austerity has added a bitter twist to this managerialist culture. Hingley-Jones and Ruch (2016) write:

In a financially austere climate professionally-informed practice shrinks in response to what might be referred to as 'relational austerity' – practice that is increasingly authoritarian rather than authoritative and combative rather than compassionate – emerges as an unintended consequence of this ideological manoeuvre (p. 237).

Depersonalised, bureaucratic and defensive practice becomes the norm, with social work especially susceptible because it operates, in Megele's words (p. 1), 'at the sharp end of society's fears, anxieties and traumas'. Shoesmith (2016) highlights the role social work plays as the 'container' for public grief over such unknowable horrors as familial child homicide, to the extent that '[t]he belief that social workers and others are to blame for familial abuse and homicide can become a habitual response embedded in individuals, groups and whole societies' (p. 84).

Consequently, readers of a volume such as this may also need to see their way through to a work environment that is more supportive of relationship-based practice. This comes through acknowledging the importance of containment, supervision and developing, in

Hingley-Jones and Ruch's (2016) words, 'reflective and relationship-based spaces and places' (pp. 241-246). But this does involve social workers individually, collectively and organisationally exercising their *own* agency. The 'perfect' practice agency setting may barely exist but spaces for reflection, support and containment can be forged and opportunities to achieve this in any particular agency setting can be appraised. Elliott (2008, pp. 280-283) sets out criteria whereby such an appraisal may be made; these criteria also provide a focused framework for exercising personal agency in widening the scope in one's practice setting for supporting and developing relationship-based practice.

Megele calls for a more 'humane ethics and practice with compassion' (p. 181). We are today locked into competing 'moral voices' (Banks, 2004, pp. 174-178; Elliott, 2008, pp. 269-270, 279-280). On the one hand is a professional ethics of the 'service ideal', or the provision of a public good as an end in itself; on the other is a utilitarian ethics of 'rule following and targeting' (Banks, 2004, p. 175). The former features trust, committed relationships, a fiduciary priority placed upon the welfare of the client; the latter features an impartial equity, a concern with good outcomes for the greatest number within resource constraints, requiring accountability and audit. Both approaches are required but the balance has become skewed under managerialism and the associated policies of neo-liberal economics, with utilitarianism sliding into a harsh instrumentalism, sacrificing ethical means to achieve austerity and judgementally driven public policy ends that have divisive and discriminatory social impacts.

That there is a 'slight renaissance' (p. vii), in Howe's words, of relationship-based practice is testimony to the ethical professional foundations of social work. Megele presents tough cases and humane, realistic social work responses; to some this may seem out of reach within their practice setting but to all it serves as a benchmark of what good practice looks like. The current renaissance of relationship-based and psychosocial practice and with it a shift in the balance of the competing moral voices has been achieved, above all, through the persistence of practitioners' belief in the ethical core of their profession, matched by the similar persistence of educators and researchers and the evidence for efficacy that they present. For all in the profession – and those who rely upon its services – Megele's book, clear, passionate and compassionate, articulates a confidence in the capacity, value and future of good social work practice.

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