Psychoanalytic Theory for Social Work Practice

Thinking under fire

Edited by Marion Bower

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Psychoanalytic Theory for Social Work Practice

Written by practicing social workers and social work educators, this is the first book in over twenty years to introduce psychoanalytic theory to social work practitioners. The loss of psychoanalytic theory has left social work without a model to fully understand the impact of trauma and deprivation on the inner world of their clients and to make sense of behaviour which may be disturbing and self-destructive.

Psychoanalytic Theory for Social Work Practice analyses psychoanalytic and psychosocial approaches to social work and relates them to current practices and values. Focusing on working with children and families, the text covers salient issues in social work practice including risk assessment, dealing with patients with drug and alcohol problems, and supervision and management of emotional stress. It also examines the research evidence for this approach.

With psychoanalytic and psychosocial approaches becoming increasingly popular this text will be a welcome addition for both professionals and students in the social work field, promoting analytical thinking and presenting practical examples of how psychoanalytic theories can be applied in practice. It offers a new perspective on understanding clients and discusses realistic ways in which clients can be helped to change.

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I am pleased to have been asked to write a foreword to this book. Yet it is a challenge and not without discomfort. It involves a journey back to the 1950s when social work was establishing itself as a profession and when education was seeking appropriate theory on which to ground practice. I am conscious of the extent to which the theories and assumptions underpinning this book are unfamiliar to many of today’s qualified social workers, including those in child welfare.

This foreword explores the reasons for this unfamiliarity and poses four questions. These are:

• Should psychoanalytic theory have a place in the practice of contemporary social work in child welfare?
• How important was psychoanalytic theory in the early years of British social work?
• What contributed to its continuing fall from favour?
• What now needs to be done?

Should psychoanalytic theory have a place in the practice of contemporary social work in child welfare?

This question has been carefully phrased; to argue, as I will, that such theory should have ‘a place’ in child welfare practice does not imply that it should be exclusive or even that it should hold a dominant position. In my career as a social worker educator, I have always believed that social workers need to understand and utilise a range of theories. The very nature of the work, in which social workers move between the external and inner worlds of the child and his/her parents, makes it essential to build practice on theories which embrace these different understandings. To present to social work students these diverse and sometimes conflicting views of human interaction is a formidable task for social work educators and one which is often not done well. Yet it is integral to the task. Within that context, psychoanalytic theory has an essential contribution to make to practice, for reasons discussed below.
The wording of the heading also refers to ‘conscious practice’; ideas deriving from psychoanalytic theory have become part and parcel of our collective understanding of human behaviour; even if they are not consciously expressed in terms of that theory. The obvious example concerns ideas about the unconscious mind—however loosely used—and its effect on behaviour. It is no longer contentious, or even adventurous, to hypothesise that a person’s actions may be driven by emotional forces which he or she is unaware of. Furthermore, it is frequently assumed that those forces have their origins in earlier childhood experiences. Yet, without precision and a clear focus, the impact and significance of such assumptions are not used constructively to help the person manage their feelings.

So why is it so important that this body of theory—ever-changing and developing—should be a key element in social work? I am not expert in particular aspects of theory which the different authors address in this book. But, in general, this way of looking at human behaviour speaks deeply to me as it is one, very important, way to understand the more profound dynamics of human behaviour which so affect interaction. In the field of child welfare, in which social workers deal with some of the most troubled and damaged children and their families, it is imperative to have some basis for understanding the strange, often destructive, reactions of those caught up in the misery, this is not to say it is all misery or to discount the observable evidence that some children (and indeed adults) are amazingly resilient (Daniel 1999, Gilligan 1999, Werner 2000).

No doubt some of this resilience is due to basic personality traits. But psychoanalytic theories of child development do not only offer explanation for negative outcomes, they suggest a rationale for positive ‘against the odds’ outcomes. For example, the internalisation of past good experiences can be kept intact even when a child has been deeply hurt.

As I write this, I am thinking of a microscope; the analogy is at once attractive and repugnant. The social worker does not want to peer at another human being, as at a collection of cells. The process of engaging with another human being (usually in difficulty) is in some ways the opposite of microscopic examination. But (as this book illustrates so graphically), this process of engagement necessitates intense concentration on the feelings and actions of the ‘client’ at certain moments. Only in this way can the worker begin to grasp what is going on. The process is ‘microscopic’ in the sense that it looks in enlarged detail at what is being presented. These observations can then be used for reflection about the meaning of what is seen. Thus, in one particular way, a good social work interview should be analogous to a psychoanalytic encounter. The listening should be attuned and refined to the feelings being presented, whether it is in the rough drawings of a child or the apparent ramblings of an angry mother. There are many differences between these two modes of professional interaction and the analogy should not be taken too far. It is used here to emphasise the critical need in child welfare practice for concentrated empathy, which includes detailed observations. This has to be grounded in a suitable body of theory, if we are to make sense of what we observe and feel.

In my view, the varied, and sometimes conflicting, theories which form part of the psychoanalytic family tree offer the best basis for understanding what is going on beneath the surface of the troubled waters in which deprived and damaged children swim and sometimes sink. (Do we see when they are ‘not waving but drowning’; as Stevie Smith put it?) Such theories are neither infallible nor complete. They are part of the search for
meaning in what is said and what is done. But they are good enough to improve practice and much, much better than the present atheoretical stance adopted by many social workers. Such a stance may be a consequence of poor education or it may be a kind of cover for hidden assumptions—which can be dangerous.

There are a number of assumptions based on psychoanalytic theories, which are indispensable to good practice in child welfare.

_Past experiences affect current attitudes and behaviour_

This is now commonplace, even platitudinous. Yet, as Howe (1997) has argued the importance of such links is all too frequently passed over. For example, the crucial work of assessment, these links are too often missing. Whilst there is room for detailed argument as to the ways the past and present interact, it is flying in the face of a substantial body of evidence if the story of an individual’s life journey is not taken into account.

_We are not always consciously aware of the ways in which experiences affect behaviour_

Again, this may seem self evident; it is part of the discourse of a sophisticated society. But, in reality, most of us have only limited self-awareness of the ways in which the past has affected us. The turmoil and disruption surrounding the past lives of children and adults with whom social workers work makes it inevitable that many of them will have little awareness of the interaction between experience and behaviour in their own lives. It is sometimes part of the social workers’ task to facilitate such awareness. This is a sensitive area, requiring the use of professional judgement. Awareness in itself is not ‘a good’; the goal is to enable a greater degree of control over behaviour. This is not achieved simply through ‘awareness’; it is achieved through facing the pain of past experiences, understanding something of its effects and being supported in the process to move on. Social workers cannot always work in this way but it remains a key element in the role; for example, when a child or young person is fearful, angry or desolate at the prospect of going to a foster home because of unacknowledged and unresolved mourning about past losses. Revisiting feelings about the past may be essential to move forward.

_Client may have feelings about the worker that derive from other (sometimes unconscious), unconnected experiences_

This is a looser formulation of the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and counter transference. It is often essential to examine the dynamics of the worker-client relationship in which fundamental, primitive and sometimes explosive emotions are embedded. Whilst this is true to an extent of all social work, in child welfare practice in particular, there is much basic pain. There are open wounds and there are angry scars, from rejection, abuse and neglect. There is guilt, anger and depression in abundance. It is
inevitable that feelings on both sides, however contained or hidden, are powerful. The worker cannot and should not be immune and has a profound responsibility to manage these transactions ethically and sensitively. In my opinion, opportunities to examine and reflect upon these processes are as essential in social work in this field as in psychotherapy, even if they are differently focused and organised.

In sum, in child welfare practice, social workers need theory and skills which help them understand the complex emotional dynamics affecting the attitudes and behaviour of the parties involved, workers included. Only in this way can they begin to grapple with the dilemmas and dangers which routinely confront them, psychoanalytic theories, and the ways of thinking which they foster, provide an extremely important context, within which to practice safely and creatively.

How important was psychoanalytic theory in the early years of British social work?

The period in question spans about twenty years, 1950–1970. During that time, there were major developments in social work and in social work education. The establishment in 1948 of Childrens’ Departments in local authorities, following the passing of the Children Act in 1948, was a major step in consolidating statutory services for deprived children. It was primarily concerned with ‘children in care’ (or ‘looked after’ as we now say) but led to a focus also on services for children in need, or in danger, in their own homes. One impetus for the creation of these departments came from the inquiry into the death of Dennis O’Neill, a foster child, at the hands of his foster parents (Monkton 1945). But of greater significance was the Curtis Committee which reported on the position of children ‘in care’ and found it wanting (Curtis 1946). This report itself should be seen in the context of wartime experiences with evacuated children, large numbers of whom were sent to the country from London and other large urban centres. In these years, psychoanalytically orientated people played significant roles. For example, Anna Freud’s work with children in a Hampstead nursery made a significant contribution to the growing awareness of the effects of separation on young children. In terms of their impact on social work, the work of Clare and Donald Winnicott, rooted in psychoanalytic theory, was crucial. Their work with evacuated children in Oxfordshire during the war has recently been well documented in a biography of Clare (Kanter 2004). From this point until the 1970s, Clare, herself a psychiatric social worker, gained a unique position of influence on social work. She directed the first child care course at the LSE and worked within the Home Office on a programme of expansion of training courses. She worked with huge energy (and was whole heartedly supported by Donald) and had a national voice at numerous professional conferences.

It should be remembered that, in the very early days, there were only three such ‘child care courses’. The major expansion began in the mid-1960s. In the UK, Clare was the symbol of progressive child care practice. It was, however, a ‘home-grown’ movement, which took little account of the parallel developments of social work in the USA at that time. (The influence of those big players in the USA on the British scene was to come
later.) It is important to understand Clare’s teaching was firmly located in the daily reality of child care social work. This is well confirmed in the recent reprinting of her work in Kanter’s biography. There is no sense in that writing that the external realities were disregarded or devalued. These early images of the early child care officers were of sturdy practical women, in small untidy cars, packed with dismantled cots, battered toys and potties; a world away from their clinical sisters.

Yet, somehow, the myth was propagated that social workers in child care were ‘analysts manqué’. It was simply not true. But it was the case that a significant part of the basic education of child care social workers was based on this body of theory and that there was little attempt to present alternative theory. That is not to say that the importance of other factors relevant to a child’s development were ignored: children’s health and the ill effects of poverty on family life, for example, were well to the fore. What was lacking was a coherent body of knowledge, such as that derived from sociology, to complement the psychoanalytic insights.

Into that incomplete and insecure world of social work came, in the mid-1960s, an onslaught from sociologists and others, such as social policy theorists, who increasingly came to teach directly on social work courses as they rapidly expanded. The late Baroness Wootten launched a preliminary attack in the 1950s (Woolton 1959), ‘The social worker has no need to pose as a miniature psychoanalyst or psychiatrist… Rather than search for something deeper underneath…the social worker would do better to look for something more superficial on top when she is confronted with problems of behaviour’. There was often intense discomfort between these two worlds. Whilst the child care workers rushed about, busy and practical ‘in the field’, back in the universities and polytechnics there was intense mutual ideological distrust. The influence of Marxist theory, with a world view which appeared to be opposed to psychoanalytic theory was an important element in this. Essentially, social workers were seen by their enemies as papering over the cracks of an unjust and unequal society. Social work, especially that part of it described as ‘casework’, was seen as a conservative, counter-revolutionary element.

Kanter (2004, pp. 48–51) describes well the difficulty and pain which Clare Winnicott experienced when she went back to the LSE from the Home Office in the early 1970s. She was, one suspects, ill prepared for that ideological turmoil. But the description of those experiences should not be taken as unique or unusual. It was merely played out with a ferocity typical of that institution. What happened at the LSE was mirrored, in more or less similar degree, across the country and during the years until the end of the 1970s. The sad part of this story is that social work teachers were unable to convince critics or sceptics that social work must draw on a range of theories to underpin the nature of their work, which requires them to move between the internal and external worlds of those they seek to help. My own (unsuccessful) attempt to open up this dialogue can be seen in an early article (Stevenson 1971).

‘The concept of role in sociology and its relationship to the personality of the individual is an area which merits further investigation by social work teachers… It is the point at which we must help our students look at the interaction between theories which are complementary. It is this interaction between the social expectation from the individual and his
In sum: early social work in child care in the UK was greatly influenced by psychoanalytic ideas. These were not presented in opposition to other theories of individual and social behaviour. However, other theory which can be seen as complementary was not adequately formulated and incorporated into training at that time. The presentation of psychoanalytic concepts met with angry distrust and misunderstanding—perhaps also fear—on the part of some of those who taught in courses. This was also exacerbated by a sociological critique of social workers’ aspirations to professionalism. In hindsight, it can be seen that several factors, some of which are further explored in the next section, conspired to push psychoanalytic theory away from social work before there had been time for an emerging profession to use it appropriately.

What contributed to its continuing fall from favour?

Thus far, the analysis has concentrated on the impact of theoretical or ideological dispute on the development of social work. But that is only a small part of the story; 1970 was a landmark in the development of social services. Childrens’ services were amalgamated with other social services in local government into ‘social service departments’ (Seebohm 1963). Many of us supported the model of a generic social work service, believing that there were common elements which made this professionally feasible and desirable. However, as is so often the case in radical reform, there was little understanding of the skills and resources needed to translate this goal into effective reality. Social service departments struggled with frequent structural change which absorbed the energy of all concerned.

Local government proved inhospitable to an emerging profession; there was growing criticism of social work courses by employers who alleged that they were out of touch with the realities of practice. The mechanisms set up to achieve ‘partnership’ between training courses and agencies often felt more like power struggles, in which theoretical debate had little place. (The exception was the important but confused ‘anti-oppressive’ agenda.) The notion of planned professional development for social workers was not translated into reality. (In contrast, nurses ongoing registration depended on such continuing education.)

Into this uncertain and confused world of local government, came, in 1973, the bombshell of the Maria Colwell inquiry (DHSS 1974) which examined the case of this
six-year-old child, murdered by her step-father. For the first time, there was a spotlight on social work, as an emerging profession. The report was deeply critical and had a profound effect on social workers. It was to be the first of many inquiries between 1974 and the present. The response of local government management to the anxiety created by these events was to tighten control. This process, explored by Menzies (1970) in a seminal paper in relation to nurses in hospitals, has been profoundly significant. Elaborate systems and structures have been put in place designed to reduce risk of harm to children. Many of these measures can be seen to be sensible and beneficial and it is no part of my argument to deny the necessity for procedures and protocols in the complex world of intra- and interprofessional work in child welfare. However, we have reached a point, perhaps marked by the outcomes of the Victoria Climbié inquiry (2003), at which it is imperative to recognise that these systemic and procedural techniques are not in themselves sufficient to protect children from harm or, indeed, the social workers from damaging censure. As Reeder and Duncan (2003) have recently shown, there is a pressing need to examine issues of communication and cooperation at deeper levels and to use theories which illuminate the darker places of our attempts to work with others and, of course, with the families, who our concern is focused. We neglect such theory at our peril.

The challenge is, however, a major one, because social services generally—not just its child welfare services—has been increasingly bureaucratised and managerialised in recent years. Neither of these terms should be read as necessarily negative in connotation. An agency such as a social service department has important and positive bureaucratic characteristics in the sociological sense. There has to be a hierarchy for decision making, accountability for resources and, crucially, systems for the fair allocation of those resources. Similarly, it soon became apparent after 1970 that social service departments were woefully ill-equipped to provide effective and efficient management of (suddenly enlarged) organisations. It was necessary to put in place managerial controls.

So what is wrong? The focus on improvement of performance by procedures, regulation and measurable indicators (a ‘tick box culture’) has consumed psychic (and physical) energy almost to the exclusion of energy for reflection on the judgements which have to be made. It has also increased anxiety to dangerous levels. The anxiety of the field worker about cases is compounded by the anxiety of managers about targets. There has to be space for thinking about the meaning of what is being seen, heard and experienced. It is within that space that psychoanalytic contribution is so valuable.

In sum: as we moved into the 1970s, the psychoanalytic contribution to child welfare practice was further undermined by the surge of, and pressure towards, the improvement of the techniques of organisational control. Paradoxically, these (usually) sincere attempts to change things for the better have to an extent increased the tension and fear because there has been so little attempt to provide opportunities for understanding the impact of the work and its agency context. There is a real danger that the better local authority workers in child care will seek to deploy their skills in an environment, such as voluntary agencies, where they hope to be better supported and respected as professional people.
What now needs to be done?

There are two inter-related aspects of this question. The first concerns the context within which social workers are educated. Various important changes are taking place at present, including those at post-qualifying level; there is consequently substantial curriculum change. I would like to think that we have come far enough to accept that the ideological battles, fascinating and important as they are to the cognoscenti, should not, and need not, divert us from the sensible use of this group of psychoanalytic theories as one, important element in the development of the skills of social work. Surely we have enough agreed ground on which to base our teaching in this area? If we cannot move forward on this, from what theory are our students going to try to understand some of the most complex feelings and actions of their clients? Without such an attempt, intervention to improve their lot is unguided. Furthermore, workers’ awareness of their own reactions will be inadequate. A particular example of this is to be found in a number of cases in which the overt or covert hostility of a parent or care-giver towards the worker has affected the behaviour of the workers and their capacity to ensure the safety of the child. (See for example, the case of Jasmine Beckford (1985).)

Thus, I am arguing for a way of examining peoples’ behaviour which takes us ‘a layer down’. This is not always necessary or appropriate; for example the widespread use of cognitive behavioural techniques in certain kinds of emotional disturbance is demonstrably valuable. However, it is my contention that this type of approach is not adequate for many of the situations in which a worker in child welfare routinely finds his- or herself. This book offers valuable introduction to a wide range of theory from this family tree. Could it be the precursor to a timely debate on how these valuable insights can be incorporated into the corpus of social work education and how they are to be utilised in practice?

The second aspect of ‘what needs to be done’ lies not in education but in the agencies. It is useless to promote an approach to theory, which involves reflection and the raising of awareness of the self and others, unless the host agency respects its importance and facilitates its development. This is a huge agenda, at first sight very daunting. What we have to think about is how to create a climate and culture which allows this way of thinking to flourish. Much-used words like ‘space’ and ‘reflection’ immediately suggest ‘time’ to the managerially challenged. But maybe we have reached a point when it must be acknowledged that time needs to be used differently if the goal of better practice (and fewer disasters) is to be met.

There are a number of strategies and changes which could make a substantial difference to the organisational culture. Of particular significance is the use of supervision as a tool for performance development, not simply for managerial control. (I do not dispute the need for the latter.) It may be that these two elements in supervision could be separated. For example, work which I undertook in one local authority suggested the possibility of increased peer group consultation for experienced workers, with focused case discussion at its heart. A second, essential, requirement for
improvement lies in tailored plans for individual professional development—one strand of which should be learning about aspects of psychoanalytic theory. A third way of introducing these reflective processes is through interprofessional case-focused meetings, with facilitation. This was very successfully achieved in Nottingham, in relation to cases of serious neglect (Glennie et al. 1998).

The well-worn maxim of ‘where there’s a will there’s a way’ is, of course, central to this discussion. Difficult as the situation is for many agencies, especially local authorities in urban areas, a willingness to offer some opportunities for a changed style of working might pay dividends in terms of staff morale. Staff recruitment and retention are critical to organisational effectiveness. As agencies seek to address these problems, one vital component will be the development of a culture which is underpinned by respect for professional development. This entails the creation of opportunities for the continuing integration of theory and practice. Close scrutiny of practice from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory could be a particularly valuable element in such processes.

In conclusion: a ‘changed style of working’ must be underpinned by the use of concepts and theories designed better to understand what is happening to workers and their clients. There has been much talk about ‘evidence based practice’ in recent years. That is a laudable objective, provided we are clear as to what we consider to be ‘evidence’. Those who believe, as I do, that there are substantial aspects of psychoanalytic theory which can be ‘evidenced’, must be prepared to make explicit their grounds for so believing.

I hope that this book will be taken seriously by those who are committed to the improvement of child welfare practice and—importantly—to the re-energising of its work force. It deserves to be.

Olive Stevenson
References

It gives me great pleasure to write a preface for this book, which I hope will make a significant contribution to the further development of social work in Britain and other countries. The book is published at an important moment in the history of the social work profession in Britain. For the first time social care workers are now part of a registered profession. In past decades the question of professional registration was often a subject of heated debate between those who were convinced of its need if social work was to establish itself within the multidisciplinary professional field, and those who saw this as a kind of betrayal of the marginalised and often powerless people who use our services. In my view this is a false antithesis. To be professionalised does not imply blind conformity, or complacency. Service users need professionals to be politically and professionally potent if they are to work, and advocate, successfully in their interests.

Those who use our services also need, and all the evidence suggests want, us to be competent at what we do while also refusing the role of distanced expert. The therapeutic specialisms within social work have not always managed this tension as well as they might have done. Psychoanalytically based social work practice is rooted in a complex and highly developed theoretical base that can attract suspicion and hostility. We have not always been astute in finding ways to render these ideas more accessible and familiar. This is despite the fact that, as Olive Stevenson notes in her foreword, many psychoanalytic concepts have passed into our ordinary language and understanding of human nature. One strength of this book is that it aims to communicate about psychoanalytic theory and practice in an accessible and grounded way. Its central purpose is to show that psychoanalytic social work and clinical practice is both a useful and a necessary part of the repertoire of any modern social work service.

But, in a climate shaped by the demands of evidence-based practice, the sceptic may legitimately ask about the empirical justification for including psychoanalytic theories and methods in both the core training of social workers and in the range of service provision offered by hard-pressed commissioners. Here we enter more complicated territory. Social work in common with the profession of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, has been reluctant and slow to engage with this new culture. This is to be explained partly by the familiar (but again largely phoney) cultural tension between the clinical and practice ‘arts’ and the research and social policy ‘sciences’. Good experimental research designs in the applied social sciences are notoriously hard to achieve, but this is not a reason to abandon the quest. Equally, there is much we need to know about social work