PRACTICAL SOCIAL WORK

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The British Association of Social Workers has always been conscious of its role in setting guidelines for practice and in seeking to raise professional standards. The conception of the Practical Social Work series arose from a survey of BASW members to discover where they, the practitioners in social work, felt there was the most need for new literature. The response was overwhelming and enthusiastic, and the result is a carefully planned, coherent series of books. The emphasis is firmly on practice, set in a theoretical framework. The books will inform, stimulate and promote discussion, thus adding to the further development of skills and high professional standards. All the authors are practitioners and teachers of social work representing a wide variety of experience.

JO CAMPLING

PRACTICAL SOCIAL WORK

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Foreword

In the late 1980s there are probably few families in Britain whose lives are not touched directly or indirectly by separation and divorce. What was until recently a private issue is now a matter of public concern. For many years the *consequences* of divorce have brought families to the attention of social workers, who have been well aware of the difficulties experienced by many single-parent households. It is, however, only in recent years that attention has been focused on the *process* of separation and divorce and the gap in social work provision for families experiencing major upheaval. Research has clearly shown that the long-term impact of the experience is dependent on the way in which the process is handled, and that the greater the bitterness and conflict surrounding the process the poorer the prognosis for successful adjustment for all family members. It seems to follow, therefore, that social welfare intervention should properly be available for families at the early stage of separation, encouraging social work practitioners to be proactive rather than merely reactive.

In the last ten years new conciliation/mediation services have attempted to fill this gap, adapting social work theories and skills. In this book the possibilities for effective social work with separating families are explored and discussed by a practitioner who has already made a major contribution to the development of conciliation services in Britain. Lisa Parkinson is best known for her pioneering work as the first co-ordinator of the Bristol Courts Family Conciliation Service, in which she established a distinct way of working with

separating couples who experience difficulty in agreeing about future arrangements for children. By controlling conflict, parents are enabled to continue to parent whilst letting go of the marriage.

Since these early beginnings Lisa Parkinson has been a tireless campaigner for new innovations in the divorce process, and as Training Officer for the National Family Conciliation Council has run workshops, training sessions and given advice to a range of professional groups throughout Britain. In addition she has presented papers at multidisciplinary conferences in Europe, North America and Britain. She has now written a straightforward and practical guide to the needs of separating families and to the help that social workers can give them. The complex process of separation and adjustment to new family structures is carefully described with an imaginative use of case studies which clearly focus on practice skills and issues. The Smiths and the Browns will be well known to most practitioners, and by understanding the communication patterns, the feelings and the struggles of these couples we can consider the different skills which social workers can use to move people on from the 'stuck' positions which can be so damaging for all family members.

Concern to promote 'the best interests' of children is a well-established principle both in law and in social work practice. Social workers will welcome the author's extensive discussion about the needs of children. Research has shown, painfully clearly at times, how children are seldom listened to or understood by adults and are often left to cope alone with tremendous hurt, guilt and bewilderment. Social workers are all too familiar with situations in which children become a football to be kicked around by warring parents, or are divided up and shared out along with the television and the washing-machine. Social workers have a key role in preventing such situations, and here Lisa Parkinson describes a range of ways of working with children and families which go beyond statutory supervisory duties.

Although a staunch supporter of the conciliation movement, the author is well able to stand back from her own practice to consider the very real dilemmas faced by social workers. Who decides about children? Is it a parental task or

a social work role? Can confidentiality and privilege be maintained when social workers are required to protect children and to safeguard their interests? These issues and concerns are not unique to Britain. As the impact of divorce and the consequent changes in family structures become increasingly common throughout the western world knowledge and skills are being shared and developed across international boundaries.

Lisa Parkinson suggests that the paucity of social work literature about separation and divorce may be because professionals have ambivalent feelings about working with these families. Undoubtedly it can be stressful and demanding, requiring practitioners to recognise their own reactions and feelings. While matrimonial work has often not received the attention it deserves, the development of a systemic orientation has uncovered exciting possibilities for highly innovative interventions with divorcing families encouraging joint work across professional groups which the author recognises as an important way forward. As she points out, clarity about principles and objectives helps professionals to select appropriate methods of working and to develop skills in using them. This book will help social welfare practitioners in Britain and elsewhere to do just that. The author has found the right balance between knowledge based on sound research evidence and the practical application of social work skills to enable social workers to advance their own understanding and expertise with separating and divorcing families.

JANET WALKER

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I should like to thank Fran Dixon and Patrick Joyce of Avon Social Services and Pam McPhee, then with Avon Probation Service, for working with me on our project on the use of matrimonial supervision orders in Avon. The names used in the case studies are fictitious and certain details have been changed so that the actual families on which they are based cannot be recognised in any way.

Finally, but also first and foremost, I should like to thank my husband Tim for combining wizardry with word processors with patience, good humour and willingness to share domestic chores. His support made it possible for me to write this book while continuing to be involved in conciliation developments.

LISA PARKINSON

Introduction

Social workers who work for brief or extended periods with separating and divorced parents and their children cannot remain impervious to the grief, anger and fear which commonly accompany family break-up. The impact of these strong emotions can arouse mixed feelings in those who seek to help – of wanting to alleviate the family's pain whilst feeling disturbed and maybe impotent in the face of so much human distress. We may try to distance ourselves emotionally as we search for rational solutions to conflicts that are generally far from rational. Adults faced with the breakdown of their marriage or equally close relationship often feel as though they have been knocked to the ground and dragged along by a tidal wave of confused and often primitive emotions – grief, rage, jealousy, despair and sometimes even murderous hatred. Attempts to rescue the victims of these destructive forces can be dangerous for the would-be rescuer as well. The attempt may arouse deep anxieties of getting out of our own emotional depth, swamped by currents of feeling we cannot direct or control. The safest course, perhaps, is to avoid getting our feet wet at all. Mattinson and Sinclair (1979) found that many local authority social workers were reluctant to focus directly on their clients' marital problems, even where there were strong practical reasons for doing so. The conflicts of divorce may be even more distressing for workers who are often pulled first one way and then another in their attempts to help children as well as their parents. We need confidence and courage, resilience and strong support from colleagues if we venture into this challenging but not inevitably depressing field of work.

Professionals' ambivalent feelings about working with families during separation and divorce may partially explain the sparsity of social work literature on this subject. Despite the heavily publicised increase in divorce in the last twenty years, books focusing on family reorganisation and adjustment after divorce have been slow in appearing. Early studies were mainly retrospective, describing individuals' difficulties in coming to terms with separation or divorce, rather than how to help families cope with present stresses in planning for the future. Hart (1976) explored what she called 'the sheer anarchy of marital breakdown' (p. 125), the lack of institutional agencies and rituals to help divorcing couples traverse the hazardous 'status passage' from marriage to divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) made us painfully aware of the impact of divorce on children as well as on their parents, emphasising the high risks it can entail for children's psychological, emotional and intellectual development. By and large, professional literature, like the media, has tended to paint a black picture of divorce, or at least a very grey one. There is then a danger that the social work response to separation and divorce is coloured by negative expectations, with the result that we may heighten parents' anxieties and guilt instead of increasing their ability to cope.

If, on the other hand, we can help parents deal with immediate priorities while maintaining some hope for the future, we may be able to buttress them during a period of crisis that often affects every area of their lives. The starting-point of this book is therefore an optimistic belief that short-term, structured work can help divorcing families find ways of coping and surviving, although inevitably there will be personal suffering and practical problems that we may scarcely touch. In taking this positive approach, I am aware of the risks of glossing over difficulties and making apparent remedies sound too easy. Early intervention is important but many families are referred to social workers only at a late stage, after a great deal of hurt and loss have been suffered. Parents themselves are only likely to look for help at an early stage if they are aware that help exists and if they perceive the help as useful and non-stigmatising. The physical location and public image of agencies offering help to divorcing families

need to be considered carefully, if they are to be acceptable to the great majority who would rightly object to being seen as 'problem families'. Instead of assuming that divorce involves some kind of failure or pathology, we need to recognise that conflict can have positive as well as negative functions and that separation need not be damaging.

It has often been pointed out that divorce is an important public issue as well as an intensely private experience. Public beliefs about marriage and divorce and the controls exercised by the law and the courts impinge on people's private lives, raising many questions about the changing roles of men and women, the role of the state and the effects of high unemployment. It is clearly not possible in a short book about social work practice in separation and divorce to discuss major social and economic issues in any depth: I have included some references to books and articles which deal with them more fully. Another subject which needs much more discussion than I can give it here is the pluralist nature of modern Britain, its diversity of cultural and ethnic traditions and the lack of generally accepted norms to guide individual behaviour and attitudes. Some commentators refer to 'marriage' and 'the family' in the singular, as though there were just one type of marriage or family which everyone knows about. However, even a casual observer can see that marriages and families in Britain today encompass many different structures, attitudes and patterns. Members of ethnic minority groups move between two or more cultural worlds and even if they have no language problems, they may be baffled and intimidated by British institutions and bureaucracy. In a multicultural society, there are few norms to define the roles and obligations of wives and husbands, mothers, fathers and step-parents in marriage and in divorce. This makes it much harder for professionals to be clear about what they are trying to achieve and for whom, when parents disagree about the upbringing of their children. We need to stand back, although there is little time to do so, to question our own values and the values of our agencies, as we may otherwise impose values on families which may be quite inappropriate for them.

There is therefore an additional aim in this book to provoke some harder thinking about values and assumptions which

underpin social work practice with divorced and remarried families. The image of the traditional nuclear family – a married couple with dependent children – although atypical of the majority of British families today, or possibly ever (Anderson, 1983), still influences our view of what families ought to be like, even if the parents are separated or divorced. Many professionals believe that ‘parents are forever’ and that divorce does not end parenthood but it is often difficult to be clear who belongs within a so-called reconstituted family and who does not. Should cohabitees and step-parents be included in discussions about the children, and whose children are they? Should other influential members of the family be invited too, or kept in the background? In Asian families, marital conflict is by no means the concern of the two spouses alone. Divorce risks dishonour to the whole family, especially to the wife, who would normally expect her father and brothers to come to her defence if she feels mistreated by her husband and his family (Ballard, 1983). One of the main practical questions addressed in this book is the one that social workers constantly face of deciding who their ‘client’ is – individuals who seek help, couples, children, nuclear families, wider systems?

Social work with separated or divorcing families confronts us with their personal chaos and the normlessness of the society in which we live. To keep some sense of order in the midst of all this disorder, we need to set our work in some kind of conceptual context or framework, so that we can offer a consistent and reliable response to individual families and understand their problems from more than one point of view. The first chapter of the book outlines the various dimensions of the divorce process and the way professionals tend to work mainly within one dimension, in a fragmented or unco-ordinated way. The second chapter discusses crisis intervention in the early stages of separation, and the third concentrates on children’s needs and ways of helping them cope with separation or divorce. Lip-service is often paid to ‘the best interests of the child’: in practice, children’s feelings are often ignored or misunderstood both by their parents and by professionals (Mitchell, 1985). New approaches, many of them interdisciplinary, are being developed to make divorce

less traumatic and conflictual for families and this brings us to the subject of conciliation. Conciliation services have mushroomed at a great rate in the last ten years and this speed has added to the confusion about conciliation practice. It is gradually becoming clearer that conciliation is not just a new name for the work many of us have been doing for years in a variety of settings. As a new discipline which crosses traditional boundaries, conciliation gives rise to territorial rivalries between professionals as well as enthusiasm for shared objectives. The final chapter of the book looks towards the creation of a unified family court which could bring conciliation, mediation, welfare inquiries and the work of guardians *ad litem* under the umbrella of a specialist service serving the community as well as the court.

In some situations of family break-up, relationships break down between children and both their parents, not only between the children and one parent and between the parents themselves. Although childcare issues and child abuse are not within the scope of this book, being the subject of other books in this series, I have sought to question some apparent contradictions in social work thinking and practice in different kinds of family break-up. For example, access to children in divorce is usually given high priority by social workers, whereas parental access to children in care seems to be given low priority even where there are strong reasons for maintaining parental contact. This apparent contradiction is raised in Chapter 6 as an issue needing further exploration and discussion.

Social workers need good support themselves if they are to go on caring for others in situations that take an enormous toll of their physical energy, patience and capacity to understand behaviour that may seem selfish, irrational or simply vindictive. Co-working can reduce the strains that individual workers often experience in working with deeply divided families. Different models of co-working are considered as a means of developing strategic interventions as well as providing more support for the workers. As an American therapist (Hancock, 1980, p. 27) has tellingly observed:

The dimensions of meaning and belonging are at the core of the experience of separation and divorce; they form the arc

of relatedness to others, the bonds we all need to live. Divorce transforms and shifts these bonds. Each person feels its meaning differently; belonging is an issue for each. Links within the family, and connections to the broader social realm, can only be recreated over a long period of time. The family needs temporary buttressing while new foundations are laid, new beams put into place.

In helping separating and divorcing families manage their conflicts while they reorganise their lives and plan for the future, social workers can offer them some temporary buttressing which they may otherwise look for in vain. The pressures of large-scale divorce are stimulating new practical initiatives in many parts of the country and new connections are being made across professional disciplines. I hope this book will encourage readers to make these connections both in conceptual and practical terms, or at least reinforce those they have already made.