The Task-Centred Book

Peter Marsh and Mark Doel

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THE TASK-CENTRED BOOK

Task-centred social work is one of the best known and most strongly supported approaches to social work practice. The model fits well with the long-standing emphasis in social work on empowerment, as well as with more recent pressure for evidence-based practice.

This text is a radical departure from traditional literature on social work methods. The main reference point is the voice of practitioners, service users and carers, as researched and developed by the authors over twenty years. Case studies are used throughout the book to build on the experiences of practitioners and the people with whom they have worked and to demonstrate practical skills for:

- studying and analysing
- teaching and learning
- practising task-centred social work
- review and continuing development.

The Task-Centred Book is a core text for both undergraduate social work courses and continuing professional development training, as well as being a practical book for the active professional which will support the development and implementation of taskcentred practice.

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THE TASK-CENTRED BOOK

Peter Marsh and Mark Doel

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To Annie and Jan.

Professor William J.Reid 1928–2003

For over 40 years Bill Reid was the leading light for practice-based research and for the principles which underpin this book. He was an outstanding social scientist and a warm and generous colleague. We owe much to Bill's leadership and wisdom.

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INTRODUCTION

> The family was asked what they thought of this way of working. Diana said she had not had any involvement with social services before, and didn't really know what to expect. She said she didn't expect to be involved in the work, rather that we were going to tell her what was wrong. Diana said that when she contacted social services the only thing she had thought of was Mat's behaviour towards her and his stepfather and she wanted this to stop. Working in this way had given her an opportunity to understand *why* Mat behaved in this way.
>
> (Portfolio D 2002:5.2)

WHY *THE TASK-CENTRED BOOK?*

There are a number of reasons why we have written this book. The first is that task-centred work fits so many of the developments in social work in recent times, in particular partnership work with service users and evidence-based practice. It feels that task-centred work has come of age.

The second is the growing evidence of the need for more focus on the development of professional practice in social work. There have been important developments in the UK, such as a new council which will register social workers and uphold standards, and a new professional award which means the profession will become solely graduate. However, alongside these developments are the concerns expressed by many social workers that direct work with service users and carers (professional intervention) is becoming relatively marginal to what social workers do, and that the skills of social work are being reduced to an application of a set of administrative procedures, drawn primarily from a substantial agency guidance manual.

The third reason for the book is our joint experience of teaching and developing task-centred work over more than two decades, and the clear indications that knowing about the model is not enough. Knowledge about task-centred work does not easily move into practice activities. It is clear that implementing and supporting task-centred practice is a complex activity, and an essential one, if the learning is to be transferred to regular and sustained practice. We want to plough back the experience of working with social workers to develop professional practice.

SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICE

This is a book designed to have a real impact on practice. It is based on research carried out by us, and integrated into our training and development work since the early 1980s. A major theme of the book is the significance of supporting practice development. This is a process of innovation which, sadly, often falters beyond the one-off project and fails to make it into mainstream work (Smale 1996).

In this book, we aim to support practice development in general, and task-centred practice in particular, by drawing on the experience of our research and development work with practitioners, managers and their wider agencies over a number of years. Very many of these practitioners (and, indeed, some of their managers) compiled portfolios of their task-centred experiences, providing careful evidence of their learning and practice. We focus on the work of twelve of these practitioners. Their work, alongside that of the service users and carers they were involved with, is central to this book. We hope that the illustrations drawn from their experiences of learning, implementing and developing professional practice will prove an interesting and useful guide for the reader, and a positive aid to developing practice.

The example work has been chosen to span key areas of social work, and also to examine a variety of learning experiences. It provides help with the details of what is to be done, shows particular difficulties and opportunities, and highlights areas for learning, teaching and support. The significance of the context of social work practice is also highlighted through these examples. All names and circumstances have been altered to preserve confidentiality.

Our work in developing and evaluating courses in task-centred practice, and the work of the practitioners, service users and carers themselves, form the backbone of the book. It is a significant development from our previous book on task-centred practice (Doel and Marsh 1992), which will continue to provide an introduction to the task-centred model itself. *The Task-Centred Book* is designed, we hope, to have the greatest likelihood of improving practice by building on the experiences of practitioners and the people with whom they have worked. As such, it is an example of research in practice.

The book is a radical departure from the literature on social work methods. Though we make use of the traditional literature, the book's main reference point is the voice of practitioners, service users and carers, as evidenced through portfolios written and compiled alongside the task-centred work. Certainly, the opportunity to use the testimony from well-constructed portfolios (for not all portfolio formats are reliable) means that practitioners, service users and carers are central to the development of professional practice (Doel *et al.* 2002). We hope this approach will become mainstream to the development of social work practice over the coming years.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book develops in a broadly chronological order, providing background to the model, and then increasing detail of it, using different chapters to explore different facets, such

as the teaching and learning of the model. As you will appreciate, advice about how to use the book is difficult, since individual readers' circumstances vary so much. However, the book offers a wide variety of ways of learning about task-centred practice and of developing strategies to implement it. We have written the book with a broad constituency of readers in mind, and this is reflected in the activities and boxes. Most chapters can be read on their own, with each providing a different perspective on task-centred practice; some naturally group together (such as Chapters 6 and 7 on do and review). You may want to move from Chapter 3 to Chapters 6 and 7, and read Chapters 4 and 5 on teaching and learning separately. Of course, we hope you will feel encouraged to read the whole book and not just an odd chapter!

Regarding terminology, we have aimed to be gender neutral, preferring the use of 'they' where appropriate. We use the term 'learner' to denote anybody who is learning about task-centred practice; this is a more inclusive term than 'students' (which, in the UK, usually means people who are not yet qualified) and 'candidates' (often used for people who are studying for post-qualification and post-registration awards). 'Learner' also includes people who are not enrolled in any formal programme of study and, of course, it can encompass people who learn about task-centred practice as service users or carers. We use the word 'people' to describe people, but sometimes it is necessary to differentiate people's roles as practitioners, service users or carers.

ACTIVITIES AND BOXES

In common with other books in this series we have used boxes to indicate key points in discrete sections, and we sometimes make reference to boxes that are not in the current chapter (the numbering provides the chapter location and then the box order). Activities provide an additional route of learning for six different groups of people. We have included activities for each of these groups of people in each of the chapters to emphasise the significance of all of these groups in developing good practices. However, most activities have some relevance and interest beyond the particular group mentioned in the activity heading, and we would encourage you to read all the activities and cross boundaries by participating in some from other groups. The six groups are as follows:

- *Service users and carers* who want to help develop the service. We would like to encourage those in direct contact with service users and carers to make use of the book where appropriate, especially in using some of the activities.
- *Learners* who are relatively new to social work practice in general or to task-centred work in particular.
- *Practitioners* who are developing their task-centred work based on existing practice experience. In general this will be social work and social care staff, though the task-centred model can be used by different professions and has the potential to create more co-working between professions.
- *Supervisors* who support staff doing this work.
- *Trainers* who lead training programmes on task-centred practice.
- *Managers* who aim to provide a good learning environment for task-centred practice and ways of embedding it in agency practice.

There are suggested answers for some of the activities in the Appendix.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PORTFOLIOS

The level of detail differs in respect of each portfolio presented in this book. Some are prominent and are introduced with a relatively detailed summary (e.g. Box 3.1), most reappear in a number of chapters, and one or two have only a passing reference. Just as it is not necessary to know the plot of a film in order to appreciate a particular cinematographic technique, there are times in the book when detailed background information about a particular situation would obscure the central point in question and clutter the page. However, there will be occasions when readers want to locate the players in a particular situation, so here is the briefest of précis of the twelve situations:

Portfolio A (2000)

Practitioner: Victoria, pre-qualified, working at a Pre-5 Family Centre.

Service user: Sharon, 30s, problems with anger towards child, Tom, 4, and high expectations.

Portfolio B (2002)

Practitioner: Erica, qualified, working in a Community Mental Health team.

Service user: Kelly, 20s, epilepsy, agoraphobia, access to general practitioner (GP); carer Tina (see Box 3.1).

Portfolio C (1995)

Practitioner: Tamsin, qualified, working in a Specialist Child Care Service.

Service user: Mandy, 14, and family—rehabilitation home.

Portfolio D (2002)

Practitioner: Sue, qualified, working in a Children and Families team.

Service user: Diana, 30s, and Mat, 11, and stepbrother Daniel, 12—physical attacks by Mat on mother.

Portfolio E (2000)

Practitioner: Kathy, pre-qualified, working in Adult Services (Learning Disabilities).

Service user: Dave, 20s, mild learning difficulties wishing to move into independence.

Staying temporarily with his sister, Sheila, a single parent with two boys (see Box 2.3).

Portfolio F (2003)

Practitioner: Barbara, qualified, working in a Youth Offending team.

Service user: Wayne, 17, mixed race, a youth offender, and a heroin user; mother, Sue.

Portfolio G (2000)

Practitioner: Andrea, qualified, working in a Children and Families team.

Service user: Evelyn, 30s, children's welfare, school attendance, budgeting problems; eldest son: Carl, 17.

Portfolio H (1996)

Practitioner: Friyana, qualified, working in a Specialist Child Care team.

Service user: Louise, 20s, wants to stop Steven's (her 2-year-old son) tantrums (see Box 2.2).

Service user: Hill/Sarita family (Mr Hill and Mrs Sarita)—marital problems and behaviour of son, Yusef, 9.

Portfolio I (2003)

Practitioner: Laura, pre-qualified, working in Supported Living Services.

Service user: Roger, 30, learning difficulties, autism, wheelchair, choosing drinks.

Portfolio J (2002)

Practitioner: Margaret, qualified, Adults Community team.

Service user: Paula, 29, dependent on mother with terminal illness; bereavement work (Box 3.2).

Portfolio K (2002)

Practitioner: Gwen, pre-qualified, Mental Health Support team.

Service user: John, 54, schizophrenic, poor confidence, wants to go to café on own (Box 3.3).

Portfolio L (2000)

Practitioner: Jane, qualified, Community Mental Health team.

Service user: Dan, mid-20s, drug-induced psychosis, lack of motivation—wants to get out more.

Task-centred work can have a dramatic impact on people's lives. We believe it has a central role in developing professional practice; indeed, many practitioners have described their learning and practice of task-centred work as a reintroduction to what they understood professional social work to be. While playing its part to develop task-centred work, we hope that this book can also support continuing practice development for social work as a whole.

CHAPTER 1
DEVELOPMENT

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you should:
Recognise the complex translation of ideas into action in social work practice
Be able to outline underpinning elements of task-centred practice
Know about the early development and general outline of task-centred practice
Understand why task-centred practice is an 'innovation' in practice
See the challenges and opportunities for the development of task-centred work.

DEVELOPMENT: THE ORIGINS AND BACKGROUND OF TASK-CENTRED PRACTICE

Developing social work practice is a complex and challenging activity. That will be a consistent theme of this book, and this first chapter not only lays much of the groundwork as to why it is complex and challenging, but also describes some key elements that need to be present for the sound development of practice. The importance of service users' and carers' views, the role of science and evidence, and the need to take full account of the diversity of people's lives are all covered here. The origins and basic outline of task-centred practice are presented, together with the ways that this model may be developed, with the challenges and opportunities that are offered to such a development.

WHY STUDY PRACTICE?

Under the general heading 'social work is work with people: it's that simple and that complicated', the UK government explains what social work is, for those thinking of it as a career, as follows:

> Social work is all about people. Social workers form relationships with people. As adviser, advocate, counsellor or listener, a social worker helps people to live more successfully within their local communities by helping them find solutions to their problems. Social work also involves engaging with not only clients themselves but their families and friends as well, as well as working closely with other organisations including the police, NHS, schools and probation service.

(Department of Health 2004)

This range of activities clearly needs some underpinning knowledge, for example the law, policies and regulations, psychology and sociology. But the 'application' of these areas of knowledge, and the 'practical' activity of working with the people involved, and planning and helping with their care and protection, may be thought of, by many, as strongly related to common sense. No doubt in discussions and in arguments, within a family or between friends in a pub, there are views being put forward about the right way to advise people or to 'live more successfully'. Sometimes these discussions might acknowledge the need for some particular information, for example about the law, but they are not likely to stress the need for a study of 'application' or 'practice' for these sorts of activities. The suggestion that learning easily converts into doing may be right in some areas, but definitely not in social work. The conversion process is complex. It's about the law, it's about the people, and it's about the 'stuck' situations that are often brought to social workers.

First, the legal issues are far from straightforward in 'application'. There are issues of power and control, for example, where social workers have to present to service users the legal case for requiring them to do or not do certain things. How do you put this in the way that is likely to be most effective? How can you do it and still allow people choice in areas that are not part of the requirements? How can you do it and still work with people to encourage them to do other things, for example to write to their child in care even if they cannot see their child? These may appear to have common-sense answers, but there are as many common-sense answers as there are people discussing them.

Second, social workers need to see the service user's point of view, and they often need to see many service users' points of view. These views are central: they should drive the actions that are not legally required. For many decades social work has been developing a 'partnership' approach to practice which bases work, as far as possible, on views, wishes and experiences of service users (Marsh and Fisher 1992), and this is now clearly outlined in the statement of ethics or professional code for registered social workers in the UK (General Social Care Council 2002: see Box 2.1). However, working to this principle is not easy. Individual views about care and protection are often strongly held. Within families or groups it is all too common for blame to be allocated and entrenched patterns of misunderstanding to set in. In short there is very likely to be some element of conflict in these views. This conflict will be expressed in the context of the individual's language, religion, 'race' and culture (as the law concerning children in England and Wales puts it (Children Act 1989 s.24). Conflict and multifaceted personal culture make the understanding of views notably complex.

Third, the situations that social workers often work in are usually complex. The situations have usually reached some sort of crisis, or some form of impasse. People are 'stuck', without knowledge of the right actions to take, or without the ability or willingness to act on the knowledge they do have. People do not generally come to social workers with simple problems; they solve those elsewhere. So the issues already mentioned of power and understanding are likely to be taking place in situations that are far from ordinary. Practice in social work is rarely located in ordinary circumstances; these circumstances are nearly always unusual and difficult, probably best described as