



## Child protection practice

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To cite this article: Arno Heimgartner (2015) Child protection practice, European Journal of Social Work, 18:1, 156-157, DOI: [10.1080/13691457.2015.988011](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2015.988011)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2015.988011>



Published online: 15 Dec 2014.



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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Child protection practice**, by Harry Ferguson, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 237 pp., £20.99 (paperback), £17.84 (online), ISBN 978-0-230-24283-8

The motivation for this book derives from the fact that social workers and other professionals have sometimes dramatically failed in their task of child protection in the past all over Europe. This has led to an impressive book about child protection practice and its core instrument: the home visit.

With a historical introduction, the author documents the fundamental challenges which are connected to social work with families in case of violence, sexual abuse and neglect. The ethical development in the tension between ‘inspection’ and ‘partnership’ is traced. What characterises the book methodologically is the richness of details. Reflections and interpretations are made alongside empirically cited cases and documentation. The book is moreover built on a broad base of scientific sources, with contents being integrated into a continuous narrative going over 15 main chapters.

Ferguson examines the space where the social worker has to walk, and the interactions this involves to protect the welfare of the children, including individual (personal) as well as professional challenges. Perceptions of the space are presented as equally important as dimensions of talk and interviewing. The approach to the house or to the flat, the confrontations which may already take place on the threshold, entering of the private sphere of the family concerned, are described accurately. The self-reflexive manner of analysing is far away from technical lists or procedure guidelines; nevertheless the reader learns along the multiplicity of the material and interpretations: to see intensively all children, to spend time together, to interview the child, and especially also to touch the child in a professional and adequate way, in order to come to the relevant diagnostic conclusions.

The author manages to remind the reader of own experiences of cases and to find new aspects and interpretations in them. The use of the car and the work in public spaces show Ferguson’s innovative-mindedness. The relations to mothers and fathers are furthermore possibilities to clarify the necessary closeness to daily routines and the comprehension of intimacy and perspectives. The book gives a realistic view on an emotionally charged social work and on the same time opens with authentic approaches a sympathetic, consistent conception of child protection practice.

While I was reading this book, a case became public in which a 16-month-old girl was admitted to the local hospital with so many bone fractures that nearly all osseous areas were concerned. The drug-consuming parents were already looked after by the youth welfare service for a long time—yet without any professionals having perceived the situation as being dramatic for the child. Only a self-chosen hospital visit due to an ear problem of the parents led to a medical assessment through which the injuries were discovered. In this connection, it is interesting that the scientific access to the contents is not given in contrast to Ferguson’s inside view, so that no external analysis of mistakes

can follow for the purposes of an optimisation. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the recognition of the injuries was realised only by the doctors—not by the social workers.

Ferguson's book inspires to deal authentically with the sensitive duties of risk clarification. In the triangle of state control, help for the family and own professional ethics, the book expresses the difficulty of this plan. Another basic tension moment of the book consists in the fact that social work is first very individually and casuistically constructed. Processes of negotiation are incumbent upon the relation of social workers and families. Also the language itself, for example, in the formulation of aims, is implicated in this individuality. However, at the same time—according to the objective of this book—a collective understanding and common standards should be developed. The book makes a concrete contribution to this standardisation of the knowledge. Interestingly, this does not happen via a compressed set of rules or a list of instruments, but the interpretative access always leaves a space for the cognitive variety of the individual social worker—from the strengthening of whose competences Ferguson seems to expect more than from a directive processing list. Interestingly, this is not achieved by using standardised methods but rather through an interpretative approach adopted by individual social workers in their professional practice.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2015.988011>

**Qualitative research skills for social work: theory and practice**, by Malcolm Carey, Farnham, England, Ashgate Publishing, 2012, 264 pp., £35 (paperback), ISBN 978-1409449317

**Quasi-experimental research designs**, by Bruce A. Thyer, New York, Oxford University Press Inc., 2012, 203 pp., \$37.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-19-538738-4

For more than decades, social work and social pedagogy have been in need of an empirical knowledge base. This challenge has been handled by universities, research institutions and social workers/social pedagogues themselves. Thereby, much valuable knowledge has been collected, analyzed and generalized. At the same time, the professionals have been overruled by politicians, clients and users. The basic professional judgment has been substituted by demands on evidence-based interventions and efficient methods that 'work'. The idea of evidence-based practice has conquered new land, and this trend or wave has been difficult to refute. In brief, the profession came into a crisis of trust. Likewise, social research has been criticized.

With 'the empirical turn', an increasing number of upcoming or not so experienced researchers have visited courses, read handbooks and manuals concerning how to conduct research. A market of research handbooks has emerged in order to saturate the demand of researchers at different levels. In particular, in the aftermath of 'the evidentiary turn,' an increasing demand has shown up.

Additionally, old battles between quantitative and qualitative research seem to be overcome. However, one still finds heavy critique of qualitative research under headings