

## **Social Workers and Compassion**

Stewart Collins

*London and New York: Routledge. 2023, pp. 203, ISBN 978 0 367 63231 1, Pbk, £34.99*

In 1979, that stalwart of social policy, Robert Pinker, suggested that compassion was an integral feature of the human condition and a core driver of social policy. This is something that I myself have developed in my analysis of British social welfare history (Parker, 2023). So, it is particularly meaningful to have the honour of reviewing Collins's latest book explicitly linking social workers and compassion across a range of directions and levels.

Collins outlines his approach to social work employing Voltaire's *Candide*, who, himself, draws on the optimism of his teacher Pangloss as an example of possibility through adversity. This sits alongside Collins's familial history of his grandfather tending to his garden in an unsympathetic or harsh landscape. Collins's adopted style reflects the culmination of years of social work practice, research and scholarship in which he has honed his compassionate, and passionate, understanding of social work and social workers' conception of it. The seven chapters of this book build on evidence and excavation through research and Collins's long experience in the discipline, setting the context before critiquing compassion in social work. The individual format, in which each chapter can be read as a self-contained unit, is helpful in lending itself to practical application for busy practitioners or students.

Collins recognises the mutable nature of social work and the social world and, thereby, acknowledges the limitations of any work considering such contested concepts as compassion. It addresses some of the fundamentals of contemporary social work and promotes the centrality of compassion towards oneself, colleagues and those people who use social work services. It is a truly fertile nourishment for plants grown in poor soil and under inclement conditions, building on his previous work in stress, supervision and support for social workers!

The context of austerity, neoliberalism and the great demands on people in receipt of social work and social workers themselves is delineated. While the central focus is the UK, the experiences recounted will resonate across many countries. Austerity measures in Western countries have increased pressures on social workers and in many ways created a great pessimism in what social work can achieve. However, Collins assume a more Panglossian stance, although not without a healthy dose of reality, recognising that pressure can lead to innovation and catalyse compassionate practices when dealing with stress, burnout and, of course, the impact of a global pandemic. Compassion fatigue is also recognised as something which social workers often face when dealing directly, intensively and prolongedly with the trauma of others.

The concept of compassion is not easy to define, indeed, all the concepts considered within this text are simple on the surface, and complex and contested underneath. Etymologically, compassion is linked with suffering together with or alongside others. This offers a fascinating glimpse into social work that has featured in much of Collins's writing. He does not shy away from the problematic (mis)uses and proceeds cautiously but optimistically with the person maintaining a central position in the discourse. The dangers related to an individualised fallacy in which compassion is considered only as an interpersonal exchange, or compassion fatigue becomes suggestive of individual failing or pathology is avoided. Collins's adoption of an ecological systems framework throughout the book ensures that different levels, interactions and the socio-structural contexts of social work are fully recognised. The performance of compassion transcends the definitional debate and it is these acts in interpersonal relationships that allow the compassionate social worker to open themselves to scrutiny and critique of their power.

The contextual and theoretical excursus in the earlier chapters lays the groundwork and subsoil on which Collins is then able to plan and landscape his garden, recognising that social workers can also grow vicariously because of their nearness to the suffering and transformation of others. This optimistic perspective builds on the relational foundations of social work that demand active participation in performance and, therefore, self-care and self-compassion. Like a secular liturgy, social workers' self-compassion allows for self-forgiveness, healing and growth to sprout and flower anew. The book concludes with a chapter on mindfulness, a core component of self-compassion in which awareness of self and context are key. Again, Collins's treatment is balanced and weighs the evidence, while offering practical applications for self-actualisation within the social context.

Collins's balanced and mature, reflective text is a Godsend to today's student social worker and a clear reminder to long-serving practitioners, educators and academics of the reasons why we enter, educate for and promote social work. Walking together with others in their suffering and staying with them represents the core of virtuous social work. Recognising the need to look after and love oneself in this helps us all keep going. This book offers the culmination of the author's own compassion and enthusiasm for sharing with the next generation of social workers.

### **References**

- Parker, J. (2023) *Analysing British Social Welfare*. Bristol: Policy Press.  
Pinker, R. (1979) *The Idea of Welfare*. London: Routledge.

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