

Sherwood-Johnson, F. (2016) '**Discovery or Construction? Theorising the Roots of Adult Protection Policy and Practice**', article accepted for publication in Social Work Education.

Abstract

This paper outlines two models for understanding the roots of adult safeguarding/adult support and protection (ASP) policy and practice, and considers the strengths and limitations of each model in an educational context. The 'discovery' model understands ASP policy to be a response to a growing societal awareness of a phenomenon called 'harm' to 'adults at risk'. It understands ASP practice to be triggered by the discovery of an instance of that phenomenon. The 'construction' model understands ASP policy to reflect a particular characterisation of the problem(s) at stake, contingent on particular historical, cultural and political influences. It understands ASP practice to be actively engaged in re-constructing 'harm', 'adults at risk' and 'ASP' itself. The discovery model is argued to be useful in delivering a clear, basic message to practitioners about harm and abuse, particularly where time and the potential for interaction in educational contexts is limited. The construction model is argued to be useful in connecting more deeply with practitioners' lived experiences, promoting political engagement and developing professional judgement informed by ethical debate.

Key words

Adult support and protection; adult safeguarding; abuse; neglect; training; theory; ontology; epistemology; constructionism; realism

Introduction

This paper is about a field of social work and interagency policy and practice known as 'adult support and protection' (ASP) in Scotland and as 'adult safeguarding' or 'adult protection' in other UK countries and elsewhere. The primary focus of the paper is on Scottish ASP, though policy trends and research findings from across the UK have informed the Scottish context and are also drawn on here. ASP concerns the safeguarding of adults who are judged by professionals to be:

- a)unable to safeguard themselves; and
- b)at risk of harm; and
- c)more vulnerable to harm because of the effects of impairment, mental disorder, illness or infirmity (Scottish Government, 2014).

ASP builds on earlier policy initiatives concerned with aspects of this broader field: for instance the physical abuse of older people (Department of Health, 1993) and the sexual abuse of adults with learning difficulties (ARC/NAPSAC, 1996). It was shaped and consolidated by the passage of the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007 (the ASPSA), which led to the setting up of regional Adult Protection Committees and the re-development of policies, procedures and training strategies at local authority level (Stewart, 2012).

The paper is also about ontology and epistemology. That is, it concerns the nature of ‘harm’, the nature of ‘protection’, and how we come to know what we know about them (Mason, 2002). Two models for understanding the roots of ASP are outlined and discussed, with attention to their implications for education, including qualifying social work education and post-qualifying education and training. The two models are conceptualised as the ‘discovery’ model and the ‘construction’ model of ASP respectively. The discovery model is argued to align with certain literal readings of ASP policy, public information and training materials. The construction model is proposed to build on and refine these understandings, drawing on insights from a range of social theory.

The paper skirts lightly over several large and diverse bodies of literature and cannot do full justice to the intricacies of each. In addition, it quite purposefully sidesteps several related debates that risk becoming polarised and fraught: for instance debates between realism and constructionism (Arnd-Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2006), and between realism and relativism (Davies, 1998). It adopts instead a pragmatic approach that focuses on the *effects* of believing and teaching certain things (Borden, 2013). This theoretical perspective has relevance across policy contexts nationally and internationally.

The paper opens by contrasting ideas about ‘discovery’ with ideas about ‘construction’, firstly with reference to ASP policy and secondly with reference to ASP practice. A concluding section then considers the educational implications of each set of ideas.

The Discovery of Harm as an Impetus for Policy

In educational and public information contexts, the commonest place to begin when explaining the rationale for ASP policies, duties and powers is to point to the problem that they aim to counter. For instance, guidance to trainers in the independent care sector cites research into the prevalence of elder abuse to help explain the origins of the ASPSA (Scottish Care, 2009). Online training materials available to staff in one local authority answer the question ‘what is adult support and protection?’ with this take on the definition of an ASP issue:

Most adults with mental illness, physical or learning disabilities or other specialist needs, manage to live their lives independently; or with assistance from relatives, friends, neighbours, professionals or volunteers. However, for a small number, dependence on someone may lead to harm, exploitation, conflict, mistreatment or neglect. (Perth & Kinross Council, 2015)

Similarly, Scotland-wide public information materials explain that the ASPSA is there ‘because some people may find it more difficult to stop harm happening to them’ (Scottish Government, 2013).

Taking a longer view, the increasing attention to ASP and its UK equivalents over time is commonly linked in the policy and educational literature with a growing societal recognition of harm and/or abuse. In these accounts, well-publicised failures of practitioners to respond in specific cases are often cited as evidence of a more general service failure to recognise and address this problem, in the days before ‘protection’ or ‘safeguarding’ gained relative prominence in services for adults (e.g. Department of Health, 2000; Scottish Care, 2009)(e.g. Department of Health, 2000; Scottish Care, 2009). One such example appears in the opening passage of a textbook aimed a student social workers, which explains that safeguarding adults:

is increasingly acknowledged as a critical issue for society, with continuing revelations of abusive and oppressive regimes and practices which challenge social care services and practitioners who work with adults deemed as at risk ... Increased awareness and reporting have revealed that the scale of the problem is significantly higher than originally thought, partly because of a lack of understanding and acknowledgement as to what constitutes abuse. This situation mirrors the public and professionals’ ‘discovery’ of child abuse in the past with increasing scrutiny being paid to abusive situations by the media, researchers and practitioners (Scragg & Mantell, 2011, p.1).

Clearly, literature with different purposes requires to sketch out the context for ASP or safeguarding in different levels of depth and detail: this issue is picked up again below. Moreover, through their use of inverted commas, Scragg and Mantell (2011) acknowledge the complexity of the idea of ‘discovery’ even as they introduce it. However, the notion that ASP arose from the discovery of harm/abuse clearly has some currency in a range of contexts.

Alternative Understandings: Construction in Policy

The idea that social phenomena are ‘discovered’, however, is a problematic one across numerous traditions of sociological thought. A primarily US-based body of scholarship concerned with ‘social problems’ is a case in point. Prior to the 1970s, much social problems literature was indeed compatible with a discovery model, in that it focused on investigating

causes and solutions to given social problems: for instance, ‘battered wives’ or ‘juvenile delinquency’ (Bacchi, 1999; Best, 1995). This literature tended not to problematise social problems categories themselves. However, following the pioneering work of Spector and Kitsuse (1977) and the critiques that built upon it, theorists began to question how certain social conditions come to be defined as social problems, and to focus their research on this process (Bacchi, 1999; Best, 2003). There was a growing argument that, by the time a social problem is understood as such in policy, research and/or the public consciousness, interpretations of its existence and nature have been filtered through particular cultural and political lenses; different stakeholders have represented it in different ways, some achieving more influence than others; and boundaries have been drawn around it based on particular understandings of the kind of problem that it is (Clarke, 2001). Particular implications for the types of solutions to be applied, moreover, are implicit in each such construction (Bacchi, 1999).

The trajectory of ASP policies over recent decades certainly bears hallmarks of this type of process. For instance, ‘elder abuse’ had currency as a social problem prior to the rise of more generic policies for the protection of adults, and there were theoretical and strategic arguments both for and against its absorption into this wider discourse (Slater, 1999). There have been arguments to keep the definitions of ‘abuse’ or ‘harm’ very tightly focused, and others to cast these nets very wide indeed (Johnson, 2012a). The increased breadth of definitions in the contemporary Scottish context has underpinned a shift from the terminology of ‘abuse’ to the terminology of ‘harm’ (Stewart, 2012), whilst elsewhere ‘abuse’ has itself been characterised as a worryingly euphemistic way to conceptualise the assault, rape or theft from certain undervalued members of society (Hugman, 1995). The idea of ‘vulnerability’ has also been strongly contested because of the perception amongst some, but not other, commentators that it is linked with the oppression of disabled people, and that it individualises issues that require societal change to address (Brown, 2011; Hasler, 2004). These considerations shaped a revised approach in Scotland over the course of the drafting of the ASPSA, though it is arguable how satisfactory this re-working is (Sherwood-Johnson, 2013). Contemporary definitions of ASP issues are an outcome of political struggle, therefore, with a focus on achieving representations that serve the interests of diverse stakeholder groups. This is just as social problems theories would predict.

Ideas about the contingency of social problem constructions have also intersected with themes in European social theory including Foucauldian and related post-structuralist concepts of discourse (Miller, 2003; Parton & O’Byrne, 2000; Parton, 2012). In a post-structuralist sense, discourses are bodies of ideas and practices that grow up in particular societies and that are accorded the status of ‘truth’ within those societies. They develop in ways that are discontinuous and disparate rather than unitary and progressive over time, and they are intricately connected with power. That is, a given society’s ‘truths’ shape the ways that its members think and act; they dictate the ways of being and of understanding that will

be given credence and those that will be discounted (Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1980; McHoul & Grace, 1993). For instance, Scottish ASP policy currently accords the status of truth to the idea that harm linked to ‘disability, mental disorder, illness or ...infirmity’ (ASPSA s.3(1)) is a coherent enough phenomenon to be responded to under a single policy heading, and to be distinguished in policy and practice from other types of harm/abuse (Sherwood-Johnson, 2013). Voices wishing to challenge this truth carry less weight than voices subscribing to it, particularly in settings where ASP is practised, policy developed or training delivered. In other cultures and legislatures, however, this is not necessarily how things are understood (e.g. Doron, Alon, & Offir, 2005; Ferreira, 2005).

A post-structuralist perspective rejects the idea of an underpinning ‘truth’ against which discourses can be measured (Parton & O’Byrne, 2000). To argue that the Scottish concept of ‘harm’ to an ‘adult at risk’ is constructed in this sense, therefore, is not the same as to argue that it is ‘untrue’. Moreover, the concept of discourse emphasises that, not only are our understandings of social problems constructed, but so too are the ideas and practices with which we as a society respond to our identified problems (Parton, 2012). This means that not only the idea of ‘harm’, but also the nature of ASP practice might be thought of as contingent. Again, cross-cultural comparisons help to illuminate this point. More specifically, a system grounded in the investigation of allegations and the assessment of risk, the calling of case conferences and the co-ordination of ‘packages’ of intervention services drawn from a mixed economy of care may feel intuitive to professionals immersed in UK social services, with their particular contemporary approaches to risk and rights, collaboration and care management (Means, Smith, & Richards, 2008). But they would not be an intuitive model of response to concerns about harm/abuse across place and time. The more extensively researched field of child protection, indeed, offers some examples of the respects in which approaches to abuse and protection issues differ across cultures and legislative contexts (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011; Parton, 1991).

All this points to an alternative to the discovery model of ASP in the policy arena. Far from a response that flows logically from our society’s discovery of a particular kind of problem, it suggests that ASP is a response we have constructed, to a problem we have also constructed. It is important to stress that this is absolutely not to say that there *is* no problem. Some older people are undoubtedly raped; some people with mental health problems are undoubtedly stolen from; some people with learning difficulties undoubtedly lead fearful and diminished lives. But from a sociological perspective, the kind of problem we consider these things to represent, the kinds of things we place inside or outside the boundaries of this problem category, and the kinds of things we do about it are contingent. Our ways of thinking about ‘harm’ and our ways of thinking about and practising ‘ASP’ do not flow in a logical way from unmediated knowledge about the social world. They grew up in a specific context, mediated by a range of factors, and they might have been otherwise.

The Discovery of Harm as an Impetus for Practice

Just as the discovery of a particular problematic phenomenon has been characterised as the precursor of ASP policy and legislation at a Scotland-wide level, so the discovery of an instance of that phenomenon has been characterised as the precursor of ASP practice on the ground. ASP activity is conceptualised, in other words, as something that happens when ‘harm’ to an ‘adult at risk’ is suspected or established. Definitions of ‘harm’ and ‘adults at risk’ are a core focus of all national ASP training and publicity materials (Scottish Care, 2009; Scottish Government, 2012b; Scottish Government, 2012c; Scottish Government, 2012d; Scottish Government, 2013). Such resources might explicitly recognise that applying these definitions is a complex process of professional judgement, and that actual interventions in ASP cases might follow a wide range of trajectories (Scottish Government, 2012d). A key premise, nevertheless, remains consistently unquestioned. Namely, it is the identification of a discrete phenomenon that is suggested to mark the only proper threshold between concerns and activities that fall within the sphere of ASP and those that do not.

One corollary of this line of thinking is the sense that is made of certain research findings. Specifically, it has commonly been found that there are inconsistencies in the implementation of ASP or safeguarding policies and procedures: that is, different practitioners have been shown to employ different understandings of what counts as ‘harm’, ‘abuse’ or ‘vulnerability’ (e.g. McCreadie, Mathew, Filinson, & Askham, 2008; K. Taylor & Dodd, 2003) (e.g. Parley, 2010; Taylor & Dodd, 2003). Under the discovery model, these inconsistencies suggest that some professionals are understanding and identifying the problem of harm/abuse more effectively than others. The solution, then, is more training in definitions and procedures for raising a concern, together with efforts to ensure that policies are clearer, and that they are translated from national to local level in sufficiently standardised ways (e.g. Northway, Davies, Mansell, & Jenkins, 2007).

Nothing in the present argument conflicts with these types of inferences *per se*. It might indeed be the case that understanding and/or adherence to a given set of policies and procedures is problematic amongst a given professional group. It might indeed be the case that certain policies and procedures are unclear. However, it is also the case that several significant bodies of theory predict the types of complexities observed in ASP implementation practices, and they suggest additional ways to understand and respond to these.

Alternative Understandings: Construction in Practice

One such body of theory comes from social policy. In the social policy literature, the idea that debates over definitions and appropriate responses take place at national level and are handed down to implementers in a ‘top-down’ way is contested by ‘bottom-up’ understandings of policy formulation and implementation. Bottom-up understandings acknowledge that conflict, compromise and situated decision-making take place at every level and stage of the policy-making process (Bacchi, 1999; D’Cruz, 2004), with some research and theory particularly emphasising the role of front-line practitioners or ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Ash, 2013; Lipsky, 1980). According to these theories, practitioners make implementation decisions based on a number of local-level factors, from their own agreement with the ends and/or the means of a given policy (Barnes & Prior, 2009) to workload demands and their particular strategies to manage these. These decisions then ‘effectively become’ the policy as it is enacted on the ground (Lipsky, 1980).

A sizeable body of research from the field of ASP aligns well with these understandings. For instance, Taylor and Dodd (2003) identified a reluctance to report abuse under English ‘vulnerable adults’ policies where staff lacked confidence that doing so would improve outcomes for the person concerned. Hogg et al. (2009) in pre-ASPSA Scotland and McCreadie et al. (2008) in pre-Care Act England found that considerations like a desire not to jeopardise delicate relationships with particular service users and/or carers could contribute to diversion from ASP or safeguarding procedures. In a slightly earlier English policy context still, Brown and Stein (1998, p.390) suggest that staff operate ‘adjustable thresholds’ for instigating protection procedures based on ‘a kind of cost-benefit analysis in terms of their own workloads and the likely outcomes’. Thus markedly different ASP referral rates between local authorities might be explained in terms of a number of contextual factors; in particular, where staff anticipate the response dictated by local management and procedures to be inflexible or overly bureaucratic, they will ‘bend definitions’ to divert more concerns away from ASP (Brown & Stein, 1998). These examples are evidence of influences on practice more nuanced than the understanding or non-understanding of policy, and also more complex than the commitment or lack of commitment to over-arching policy aims.

Further insights from the field of interpretive sociology, moreover, predict complexities in the ways that policies are implemented beyond this conscious exercise of practitioner discretion. Rather than the focus on policy- or societal-level constructions adopted by some other sociological approaches, interpretive sociology has a focus on interactions between individuals and the variations and nuances of meaning-making on this scale. There is, again, a founding assumption that the meanings represented by our linguistic categories do not reside in the world waiting to be discovered. However, interpretive approaches are distinctive in their focus on the ways we re-create these categories and/or contribute to their evolution each time we put them into use (Blumer, 1962; Burr, 2003; Parton & O’Byrne, 2000). From this perspective, people in interaction are always actively engaged in constructing their social world. Policy-level constructions of concepts like ‘harm’ or ‘adults at risk’ certainly

influence these micro-level constructions, but further contextual factors inevitably affect them too, including the ways that power is distributed between participants in each negotiation, and the ends that each participant is consciously or unconsciously seeking to achieve (Burr, 2003; Holstein & Miller, 2003; Martin & Dennis, 2010). Struggles over meaning of this type might not be consciously waged nor even recognised. For instance, analysis of data generated in pre-ASPSA Scotland found that different practitioners had different implicit working assumptions about the kind of practice that ASP was thought to represent (Sherwood-Johnson, 2014). One social worker might consider that ASP can accommodate sensitive negotiation with both victims and perpetrators, for example, whilst another might consider ASP to have punitive overtones. These different working assumptions affected the ways that different practitioners conceptualised the boundaries between ASP work and non-ASP work. Thus the defining question became not ‘what kind of situation is this?’ but ‘what kind of practice is required here?’, and the source of variation in referral rates to formal protection processes was not solely practitioners’ different working definitions of harm/abuse, but also their different working definitions of ASP itself.

A number of research findings might be interpreted as evidencing the structural contexts that impinge on this type of meaning-making. In particular, both Ash (2013) and Johnson (2012b) highlight factors that can narrow the field of identified ASP issues beyond those delineated in written ASP policies. Based on her research in Wales, Ash (2013) argues that familiarity with imperfect contexts can condition social workers not to ‘see’ some forms of abuse. For instance, where many care homes for older people are known to provide poor quality of care, social workers might lower their standards rather than raising challenges about the reasons for this. Johnson (2012b) suggests that professionals’ perceived power to tackle a given concern affects its identification or non-identification as an ASP issue. Hence the effects of a particular family carer’s behaviour and the effects of a particular NHS policy might equally fit the formal definition of ‘harm’ to an ‘adult at risk’, but only the former might be categorised as ASP where social workers feel powerless to address the latter. Conversely, practitioners have been shown to initiate ASP proceedings where they feel that these would help, even where the fit of the circumstances with formal definitions of harm/abuse is arguable and/or has not been explicitly considered (Johnson, 2012a). This is all in line with the predictions of interpretive sociology that we categorise the world in order to act upon it, rather than merely to describe it, and that the categorisations arrived at might be negotiated differently in different local contexts because of the range of factors shaping and/or impeding particular actors’ abilities to exert influence in any given context.

The idea that the identification of harm/abuse is a techno-rational task that precedes intervention work also jars, of course, with areas of social work theory and research. For instance, Taylor and White (2006) have discussed the uncertainty characterising child protection work, where decisions about intervening must inevitably come before and/or take precedence over attempts to establish the ‘true’ nature of particular presenting circumstances.

Buckley (2003, p.15) describes a ‘divergence between the way in which the work [is] actually experienced by practitioners and service users and the perceptions which [are] held by other stakeholders’ where this order of precedence in practice has been under-acknowledged. Parton (2003) highlights tensions between the expectation that practitioners categorise presenting problems in an ‘objective’ way, on the one hand, and theories of knowledge based on pluralism, in which the person using services might conceptualise their circumstances in a different and equally plausible way, on the other. He explicitly proposes that pluralistic epistemologies are most suitable to the professional provision of care.

In summary, then, the idea that ASP practice is grounded on the identification of a distinctive phenomenon called ‘abuse’ or ‘harm’ sits uneasily with some theory and research in the fields of social work, social policy and interpretive sociology. This tension between different understandings of ASP in practice mirrors the tensions between understandings of ASP in policy as outlined above. Specifically, there are debates to be had over the senses in which key concepts in the field are or have been ‘discovered’, and the senses in which they are or have been ‘constructed’, both at policy and at practice level.

Discovery versus Construction Models in ASP Education

This concluding section of the paper summarises key aspects of the discovery and construction models, and considers their uses in ASP education. It adopts a pragmatic perspective (Borden, 2013), arguing that both models have strengths and limitations, depending on audience and purpose. The section opens with some contextualising information about current ASP education. Each of the models is then summarised and appraised in turn.

Education about ASP is provided within public, private and voluntary sector organisations across Scotland by in-house and/or external trainers. It is also provided as part of professional programmes including qualifying social work degrees and a small number of specialist postgraduate courses. The Scottish framework for qualifying social work education is centred around transferable knowledge, skills and values (Scottish Executive, 2003), whilst postgraduate ASP courses have no prescribed curriculum and are not requirements for practice. There is therefore scope to teach about ASP in a range of ways. Meanwhile, in-service educational needs have received more specific consideration, and national training materials exist based on a three-level model of increasingly specialised content (Scottish Government, 2012a).

Read literally, discovery model thinking is prominent in public information and professional educational materials, including all three levels of the national ASP training materials

(Scottish Government, 2012b; Scottish Government, 2012c; Scottish Government, 2012d). To briefly re-cap, the discovery model contends that our increasing awareness as a society of a phenomenon that we call ‘harm’ led to the formulation of legislation, policies and practice to address it. ASP practice is understood to begin where an instance of ‘harm’ is discovered or suspected. In materials that support a discovery model, definitions of ‘harm’ and of ‘adults at risk’ are presented as facts to explain the emergence of ASP legislation and to guide practitioners and others into making appropriate ASP referrals. *Identifying* suspected instances of the problem, on the one hand, and deciding if and how to *intervene*, on the other, are presented as separate or at least as separable activities.

When ASP is understood this way, it makes sense for education about definitions and referral procedures to be targeted at personnel like support workers and care assistants (Scottish Government, 2012cc), and for education about investigations and interventions to be targeted at more ‘specialist’ ASP staff (Scottish Government, 2012a; Scottish Government 2012d). Discovery model approaches have advantages, moreover, in respect of the clarity of messages conveyed. This is particularly the case where educational programmes are severely time-restricted and/or modes of learning with limited scope for interaction are employed. The idea of a single ‘correct’ definition of a given phenomenon, against which presenting circumstances can be measured, fits with certain common-sense ways of understanding, and it avoids the pitfalls associated with misinterpretations of ideas about construction. Specifically, the avoidance of discussion of construction avoids encouragement of the flawed inferences that problems don’t ‘really’ exist, or aren’t ‘really’ very problematic, or that individuals are justified to practise without reference to policy requirements (Burr, 2003; Parker, 1998). Contemporary ASP developments grew out of concerns that some deeply objectionable social conditions were not being taken seriously enough by social services and others. There are some contexts in which assumptions from the discovery model might prove the easiest vehicle for communicating that this needs to change.

In contrast with the discovery model, the construction model contends that ASP legislation and policies present particular understandings of the issue(s) at stake, reflecting the outcome of multifaceted political negotiations within a specific cultural context. ASP practice is understood to involve similarly complex processes of meaning-making, negotiated amongst actors with potentially different perspectives and/or degrees of influence, to identify those issues that are and aren’t to be considered under ASP. Under the construction model, there is no ultimate truth about what ‘harm’ to ‘adults at risk’ *really* is; rather, circumstances are designated as such in order to achieve specific ends. This is not a criticism of anybody’s practice but rather a corollary of the sociological proposition that this is how meaning is made.

The advantages of introducing construction model thinking into ASP education include the scope to better connect with practitioners' lived experiences. Rather than the implication that their understandings of policies and procedures are at fault, some learners might benefit more from an approach that acknowledges the contingencies and ambiguities with which they are struggling, and supports them to work through these in a critically reflexive way. Construction model thinking gives practitioners sophisticated insights into conflicts over meaning, not least in the more contentious of ASP practice contexts. Moreover, given that their identification of ASP issues will involve the making of judgements including, arguably, some judgements about the *consequences* of settling on particular types of meaning, it might be advantageous to acknowledge this, so that the judgements made can be owned, analysed and articulated for debate with reference to professional ethics and values. This applies, importantly, to direct care and support staff as much as to 'specialist' ASP staff, because the construction model is not compatible with ideas about the 'identification' of problems for referral on as a straightforward task uncoloured by values and interpretation.

A further advantage of embracing construction model thinking concerns the tools it offers learners to engage politically and to feed their practice experiences back into policy processes over time. Specifically, practitioners who view definitions as negotiated meanings to be evaluated on their consequences might feel more confident to articulate weaknesses in the policy-practice interface for a local and/or national policy audience. For instance, they might raise challenges where they are aware of overly-bureaucratic local service responses constraining their construction of some issues as ASP concerns (see Brown & Stein, 1998) or where ASP procedures are experienced as unhelpful because they conceptualise harm as an aberration from the norm, when what is needed in a given context is a challenge to the norm itself (see Ash, 2013; Mandelstam, 2009). Again, these expectations render the roles of staff at every level more complex, because they emphasise the making of judgements and the taking of action based on principles rather than the acceptance and following of rules. The principle-based nature of the ASPSA itself is compatible with such an approach, however (Patrick & Smith, 2009) and debating the meanings and application of its guiding principles is a useful core exercise at every level of ASP education.

In conclusion, educators might draw on the discovery model to impart clear messages about the actions to be taken when 'harm' to an 'adult at risk' is suspected or alleged. Operating as though social problems are 'discovered' will help practitioners to comply with important policy and legislation, particularly in cases that contemporary opinion would not dispute to constitute 'abuse' or 'harm'. Educators might draw on the construction model to deepen practitioners' understandings of the processes at work in the formulation and implementation of policy, enabling them to negotiate the 'swampy lowlands' (Schon, 1983) of ASP practice more confidently, to work sensitively with diverse knowledges including service user knowledges (Beresford, 2000) and to critically analyse the judgements that they make. The introduction of construction model thinking into education in this area carries certain dangers,

particularly where complex ideas are misunderstood. The dangers can be countered and the advantages maximised by allowing space for reflection and debate, with a focus on openness and on professional ethics.

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