

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Both Textbook and Handbook – a Review of Lisa Parkinson’s “Family Mediation” (3rd edition)

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Anxiously awaited by fans of the 1st and 2nd editions of Lisa Parkinson’s definitive work on Family Mediation, the Third Edition of this book was published at the beginning of the year. Drawing on decades of experience and scholarship, Parkinson, one of the “founding mothers” of family mediation in the UK, has produced a comprehensive, up to date text of relevance to a wide variety of audiences. The last few years in the UK have seen dramatic changes to the legal and social environment in which family mediation takes place: changes in legal aid, a family justice review and resulting legislation, developments in child inclusive practice and new standards in training and accreditation. Nonetheless the author has managed to weave these changes into her work, making it relevant and useful for mediators, lawyers, policy makers and other professionals working with families in conflict. Furthermore, the book, with its practical, skills-orientated focus, and its new content on international family mediation, has been translated into xxx languages and has appeal for mediators in many different countries. So read on!

I could name a number of the book’s highlights from many different perspectives but choose instead to focus on those that are particularly relevant to me as a practising family mediator on the one hand, and a lecturer and trainer in family mediation, on the other. In my early years of working as a family mediator, I would take Parkinson’s 2nd edition to all mediations with me, secreted in my handbag, not (just) as a sort of talisman but because, thanks to its logical, structured layout, I could take it out in breaks between sessions and re-read the bulleted summary charts and lists on, say, managing impasse, or dealing with high emotions, when things got difficult. The 3rd edition has now taken its place, also containing such resources like, for example, a summary of techniques which can be deployed when dealing with deadlocks in Chapter 11.

The beauty of this book is that it sets out, clearly and logically, such techniques, but also gives the rationales and theory which underpin them. The chapters on child focused and child inclusive mediation, for example, cover the central findings of research on children and parental conflict, such as what children need in such situations at different ages, and practical skills and strategies for working in relation to and directly with children. Most essentially, numerous case studies and examples are woven throughout the book, which give life to its contents, and remind us of just how complex a subject family mediation can be.

Putting on my lecturer and trainer’s hat then, what makes Family Mediation particularly useful is its multi-disciplinary approach. It is rare to find a mediation book that doesn’t have at least a slight bias in terms of content based on the author’s profession of origin, be that as a social worker, lawyer or psychotherapist. While of course the legal content is mainly relevant to the UK and thus

is not initially relevant to those practising in other jurisdictions, the sections on the interface between the justice system and mediation, and lawyers and mediation, are relevant to all, and some stark lessons can be learned from some of the more radical reforms the UK has seen recently and their impact on mediation services.

Despite coming from a legal background, I have always had systemic leanings, so Parkinson's theory and practice of ecosystemic family mediation resonates with me, and offers a valuable tool for training family mediators in viewing and assessing families in conflict. Using an ecosystemic framework for mediation facilitates the involvement and consideration of all the members of a family, and takes account of the systems in which they live, be they legal, social, cultural, religious or similar. An ecogram, a diagram or "map" similar to the genogram used by some systemic therapists, can be drawn and used to inform choices made by the mediator in relation to process models, interventions, skills needed and, where relevant, other professionals that might need to be involved.

In some ways, Family Mediation offers an ecosystemic view of the discipline of family mediation itself, highlighting its contradictions and complexities by addressing the systems within which it occurs, the different focuses it can take, the breadth of knowledge and skills it requires, and even the fact that it isn't always the right choice and doesn't always work! The question, asked by Parkinson in Chapter 14 on Becoming a Family Mediator, of whether mediation is a science or an art draws on an ongoing dialogue which I am privileged to be part of, and is one which is crucial to remember in these times of increasing drives towards professionalization and regulation of mediation services which, while necessary, can have the unwanted side effect of inhibiting creativity and intuition in the practice of mediation. The quotes from poetry and literature which pepper the book serve as little reminders of this aspect of family mediation throughout.

I generally try to include some suggestions for improvement in a book review but in this case I must honestly say I don't have any, other than that I'd love an Irish edition and I would have welcomed more space being given to the science, art, and future of mediation BUT, Lisa Parkinson has addressed this very question in her article for the Mediation Futures series on mediate.com so that is covered to.

I can only recommend this book, not just because I respect and admire its author so much but because it managed to be a practical handbook for mediators at the same time as being a textbook for scholars and professionals.

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