



Jan Fook (2002): Social Work: Critical Theory and Practice. London: Sage, pp. 179.

Karen Healy (2000): Social Work Practices: Contemporary Perspectives on Change. London: Sage, pp. 165.

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In his recent book on the contemporary politics of social work, Powell (2001) nominates Jan Fook and Karen Healy as two Australian authors who have made significant contributions to the radical or critical social work tradition. I have chosen to review them together, as each, in different ways, attempts to achieve the same purpose. That is, they attempt to provide a convincing account for adopting a critical approach to practice in the contemporary conditions of the 21st century and, in doing so, re-invigorate the radical tradition of social work practice. My first comment, important for the readership of this international journal, is that both books easily ‘travel’ beyond the Australian context.

A prolific author on social work practice, Fook, in this book, calls on and synthesises much of her previous work. Presented in three parts, she locates practice, and critical practice in particular, in the contemporary unstable environment (Part 1); she then draws on post-structuralist epistemology, analyses of power, notions of discourse, language and narrative, identity and difference to provide a theoretical framework for critical practice (Part 2), and finally, she sketches the contours of what she calls ‘redeveloped practices’ (Part 3).

The book has a number of significant strengths. First, Fook confronts the perennial problem in social work of the relationship between theory and practice, and the notion of what constitutes practice theory. Largely through adaptation of the ethnographic process of reflexivity within a conceptual framework of critical postmodernism, she re-conceives theory as a set of intellectual tools which provide a beginning frame of reference from which to make sense of new situations. In doing this, she frees practice theory from being a prescriptive set of rules (which we all know are rarely applied in practice) to being a process by which social workers think through what they need to know to go on in their daily practice.

Second, in reiterating the (post-structural) notions that social work practice is discursive, that language is very important particularly in how it constructs actual material outcomes, and that more fluid notions of identity are useful, she draws out of post-structuralism ideas useful for practice. In effect, what she does is borrow from that complex and diverse corpus of work for her own purposes, without surrendering to the worst rigidities and orthodoxies that it can impose.

Third, in a chapter on what she calls ‘contextual practices’ she makes the point, so often downplayed in accounts of social work, that it is a form of acting and a way of thinking which

can engage almost anywhere. Accordingly, there is no one thing called 'social work'. Instead, there are many actual (and potential) ways of 'social working'. This point, I contend, is especially useful, indeed important, in uncertain and unstable times.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the book is extremely accessible. Undergraduate students will love it, as will practitioners, as it is written for and to those groups. In the latter chapters for example, Fook generates a series of lists or recipes for critical social work practice, an approach that will endear itself to readers struggling with uncertainty. This latter tendency, however, partially illustrates what I consider to be the two major weaknesses of the book. First, while rejecting the prescriptive nature of much practice theory, that approach is then re-created in the final chapters. Second, it is too simple conceptually. While, for example, it proposes a Foucauldian-inspired understanding of power, it rarely actually engages with the complexity and ubiquity of the operations of power, and in failing to do so, more or less continues to let social work off the hook about this most central of discursive practices.

Healy, on the other hand, is anything but simple conceptually. In contrast to Fook, she engages with what is undoubtedly complex theoretical material, but with a deft and sure hand. The structure of the book is somewhat similar to that of Fook. She begins by outlining the contemporary challenges facing social work, couched in terms of the 'post-fordist abyss or grounds for hope', she then traces the trajectory of the development of social work, particularly radical and critical social work. Drawing together Foucault and feminism, she also covers discourse, deconstruction, power, identity and subjectivity. Like Fook, but in a more deliberative and theoretically sophisticated manner, she develops a conceptual framework for the development of 'change practices'. Her treatment of post-structuralism is, however, not uncritical, but she does use it to confront what I have already suggested is a key 'problem' for social workers: the issues of professional power and identity. The book concludes with three chapters detailing how critical practice can be undertaken.

This book also has significant strengths. First she demonstrates the sort of hard-edged and sustained scholarship in which social work must engage and, in doing so, models how to incorporate developments in social science. Social work must do this, for failure to do so runs the very real risk of marginalising social work knowledge and, more importantly, our knowledge-generating processes. Second, like Fook, she moves beyond the impasse between traditional social work and critical social work, something that has to happen if social work is not to spin into irrelevance. Third she demonstrates what an alternative approach to 'evidence-based practice' can actually be. By exposing critical social work practice to reflection and examination, the author is able to demonstrate not only what really happens in forms of critical social work, but also how we can modify practice. In this way, it is more 'grounded' than Fook's work in the book here reviewed. Using practice examples, Healy demonstrates how a Foucauldian approach to power can inform social work practice (for example, that power is more complex than we think, and is not necessarily evil). She also demonstrates that much of what has passed as critical practice or a critical perspective has been quite sexist.

Healy indicates towards the book's conclusion that promoting social work activism (critical social work practice) is important not only for the future of social work as an activity in and of itself. Rather, it is important because it is an avenue or means by which social work can fulfil its traditional mission of extending social citizenship in different contexts of practice. Clearly, this is becoming more and more imperative in the contemporary context as many

nation states systematically abandon any vestige of responsibility for their citizens, and increasingly strip the traditional models of and vehicles for the promotion of citizenship of any meaningful capacity.

Both Fook and Healy are concerned with developing a sustainable, appropriate and politically informed mode of social work practice. Both are tolerably successful in this clearly difficult task and I would suggest that Healy does this better than Fook, although in a more conceptually taxing way. Nevertheless, both retain what for this reader is a curious attachment to the whole notion of the 'profession'. To a certain extent I find this odd, particularly given their attachment to critique and their use of post-structuralist thinking. For this reader, social work as a profession is largely immaterial. Rather, the processes of engaging in critical or activist social work, wherein 'social work' serves as a synonym for a particular mode of engagement, is where the real implications are to be found.

References

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