

BOOK REVIEW

How to be a Social Worker: A Critical Guide for Students

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The challenge for any introductory book in social work is the breadth of content that must be covered to give a reasonable overview of the varied knowledge bases drawn on in modern social work theory and practice. With such disparate knowledge bases (theories, content issues, ethics, practice skills) it is a formidable task, particular as the debate about the proper inclusion or emphasis one should take is far from settled. The contestable nature of the parameters for such a book leads every reviewer, including myself, to have one's own biases and convictions about what should be included or excluded, and what should provide the basic framework for holding it all together, influenced by one's own national context and education. I apologise for this in advance.

This caveat stated, this book examines the social work role within the framework of Mead's theories of the self, that is, the claim that selfhood is created through sociality and relationships with others, rather than springing from innate qualities. In general, this provides a welcome critical challenge to the dominance of psychoanalytic theory and its somewhat deterministic consequences. In its first chapter, this concept is linked to the ecological model and present approach of social work that emphasises social context, and draws attention to the role of reflexivity in making the self, that is, creating selfhood through interactions with others. Overall, theorising the social work role and identity in this manner is useful, as it emphasises both reflection and social context—important aspects of any social work text. However, it may be a little overstated in places, for example I am not so convinced that "...although we may be unable to articulate our work, in practice, social workers develop creative and innovative ways which characterise their practice and identity". In this book, the focus is upon the social work self: how to be a social worker involves understanding oneself and "how selfhood is theorised" (p. 31). While development of a social work self is by all means important, nevertheless a significant aspect of social work, (particularly in a context of high contestability around the role of social work), is that we should be able to articulate what social work is, and why we are practising in the manner we are. Surely this is purpose of teaching theoretical orientations, ethics and critical reflection? Further, understanding oneself, or developing a social work identity/subjectivity/

self, does not necessarily require the type of theorisation of selfhood that is promoted in this book, or rather, the content of the developing self is perhaps of more value than making claims about the process by which it occurs, especially at this early point in a student's education.

This aside, however, the book goes on to cover many important areas of modern social work practice, and the succinct way of explaining complex concepts is a strength of the text. For example, the chapter on human development gives a solid overview of major theorists and makes excellent use of case studies. These will be particularly useful for the beginning student. Occasionally the effort to simplify a large amount of research leads to some important elisions. For example, “[r]ecent research into resilience and childhood: this has found no evidence that adults will be at risk of poor mental health if their childhood experiences are traumatic. Rather, research has demonstrated that some children are able to thrive despite adversity” (p. 44). Without referencing, it is difficult to evaluate such a huge claim. It seems the author is trying to emphasise that early trauma is not entirely deterministic—valiant, but the language used here needs extreme care. Perhaps “...no evidence that adults will necessarily experience...” would better reflect the research. Many studies show that early trauma does increase *the risk* of future mental illness, but is not wholly deterministic, that is, others with the same experiences can thrive. A minor, but relatively important, distinction.

The third chapter, on communication skills, provides details of important basic skills, much needed in social work practice, and often absent in basic theoretical texts. These include aspects such as the use of self and the impact of emotion on practice. This latter element is often missed in summaries of issues in engagement and communication. Scripted passages in this chapter will prove useful to the beginning student, who often requires concrete examples. Particularly useful are the in-depth case examples, and the building of the chapter to encourage a purposeful approach to interviewing that considers, not just immediate skills, but also the framing and aims of the conversation.

The section on social work theory uses an attention-grabbing introduction that held its power throughout the chapter to illustrate the tensions between popular culture, the influence of a watered-down psychodynamic theory, and other theoretical orientations and choices. There are many interesting leads for students to follow up here and a strong focus on understanding the person in context. I was surprised to see narrative and solution-focussed approaches omitted here, as both are currently practised as part of the canon of social work theory. As narrative theory, in particular, is a direct application of the constructionist and reflexive theorising used to frame the book, it is surprising this is not included.

The ethics chapter also makes great use of a case study to ground the theory in realistic decisions encountered in social work. Of particular importance is the inclusion of the potential for social worker impairment and the framing of this as an ethical issue.

The research chapter likewise summarises some difficult and complex debates in a clear and succinct manner, and provides a useful section on how to actually use research in

social work. The use of relevant case studies again demonstrates a problem-based approach to teaching that clearly elucidates how to extrapolate, from a case example, the relevant bodies of research that might inform practice.

Overall, an ambitious book that provides a useful framework for beginning students and ties together the many threads required in a social work text.

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