Social Work: Themes, Issues and Critical Debates

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Sociology for Social Work

Social Work

Themes, Issues and Critical Debates

Edited by

**Robert Adams, Lena Dominelli
and Malcolm Payne**

Consultant editor: Jo Campling

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Introduction

ROBERT ADAMS, LENA DOMINELLI AND MALCOLM PAYNE

This book introduces the main currents of theory, research and practice in social work, but it does not provide only a single and preliminary summary of the important features of social work. The book is introductory, in the sense of being an invitation: we invite the reader into the territory of social work contexts, values, approaches and practices. We introduce into this territory some of the ideas that participate in current debates in social work. Readers should feel free to be swept into these debates. You should apply your mind and experience to understand, evaluate and criticise the positions taken. In this way, you are introducing yourself into social work and introducing social work into your thinking and action.

We have provided chapters which are more than pure expositions of each topic, based simply on asking experts to summarise their research or their major book in their specialism. Each chapter offers an 'insider' perspective on its particular topic, but also adopts a critical 'outsider' position. This makes it possible to examine issues, engage in debates with other aspects and sustain throughout the book the spirit of what Lena Dominelli (Chapter 1) calls 'dialogue over controversies'.

Whilst some readers of this book will be new to social work, no-one should regard themselves as a beginner. The backgrounds of all readers will impinge on its contents. Students will bring their life experiences and academic and personal preparations for social work to bear on the book's coverage of essential aspects of social work; practitioners will be able to illuminate its analysis of current debates with their own experiences; general readers from other disciplines and professions, with an interest in social work, will find easy access to its subject matter to chart against their own perspectives. In every case, readers bring themselves to the book and can examine the effect of reading it on their understanding and practice.

Many edited collections of essays achieve a degree of integration through the selection of contributors from a single network or a

shared, unifying perspective. This book, in contrast, arises from Macmillan bringing together three editors of different experience and stance, who have in their turn recruited a group of 21 authors from diverse backgrounds and traditions, and who have enabled this diversity of experience and perspective to interact and, on occasions, bite on each other.

We are living and working in a period when, in the UK at any rate, the monolithic social services department is about to disappear. It is more realistic to participate in continuing debates about the future of social work than to invest in the fallacy that the structures and organisations which sustain it will continue for ever. However, irrespective of how the personal social services are labelled, and how their staff are designated, social work will not disappear. This book contributes to the affirmation of the centrality of knowledge and values of social work, irrespective of such changes as the deconstruction of social services departments.

In the way we have set about creating this book, it occurs to us in retrospect that we have put into practice several core values of social work: respecting other people's views, active listening and not competing with someone else over their point of view, and rejecting conflict and anger, whilst valuing difference and diversity. Such values have a quality which in our view transcends some postmodern perspectives, asserting the fragmentation of all realities. We are doubtful of the view that all reality is ephemeral. We believe that in social work, to say nothing of other aspects of life and work, people share their dreams, visions, ideals and continuities, for example in the personal and professional values they espouse. To be human is to go beyond the ultimate fragmentation of individualism and competition, by collectively creating and ordering responses to the world. Social work, as a socially constructed project aiming to tackle oppression, is in this sense a perpetually changing and unfinished project. It faces enduring divisions and inequalities in societies throughout the world, where problems such as poverty and a lack of access to other resources such as education affect people's ability to fulfil themselves and others. Poor people, for example, cannot get a purchase on participation, no matter how professionals go on about empowerment. We give these ideas about poverty – from an historical perspective (Chapter 3) and informed by contemporary research (Chapter 4) – due prominence in Part I of the book, but these are not matters for academic debate alone. They are aspects of widespread human need which require challenging in ways not always recognised adequately from the vantage point of a postmodern perspective.

Therefore, we believe that social justice is a theme woven into everything we do, as a way of approaching social work, not as part of a hierarchy of knowledges and objects 'out there', or a reductionist set

of ideas, but as a perspective which informs our thoughts and feelings. For justice to be done to the ideas and experiences addressed in this book, practitioners' passions as well as their intellectual attentions are likely to be engaged. Authors' views also interact with their feelings about their subjects. There should be no segregation either between academic and practitioner perspectives. Viewing knowledge in a broader sense, as crossing personal, professional and disciplinary among many other boundaries, is difficult but worthwhile, since in the process intellectual and experiential knowledge – academic and practice wisdom – interact, sometimes very creatively. Where appropriate, we have deliberately encouraged the authors to display their commitment and, by implication, their individuality through the strength of the cases they advance for their viewpoint on their topics. This also is a feature of social work: the capacity to allow individuals to express their diversity and their uniqueness, the quality of their ideas and experiences, through their work.

All three of us believe in academic discourse being essential. None of us can describe the nature of social work in a simple way, but we are convinced of its existence being shaped and influenced continually by a number of key debates. During the process of developing the book, we have met and engaged in such debates. The purpose of this book is to create wider opportunities to share in and extend those debates. This book sets out to provide more than a 'reader' of someone else's ideas, by involving you and us in the issues and debates within it. Such debates are open-ended, since they are ongoing, with no starting or finishing point. They do not converge on a set of guidelines on what social work is and how to do it. They involve a continual journey, whose outcome will never be complete understanding or a finished project. This is an anxiety-provoking reality, but it is also exciting, because, like work with clients, it offers people practising social work the reality of engaging in a profession which is in the ferment of continual change and continually in the process of considering, and sometimes taking, new directions. Some subject matter crops up in more than one place in the book. This reflects the reality that we can approach some aspects of social work from more than one direction, and that more than one view of them exists. We have cross-referenced – in the text and through the index – many of the places where this occurs, rather than artificially attempting to edit out the differences and discontinuities which result. Unsurprisingly, therefore, having set the diversity of social work themes and debates going in this book, the fact that we offer no conclusion to the book mirrors the reality that social work offers no global solutions in work with people, and reflexively – holding the mirror up to our own practice – no final answer to the question of what social work consists of.

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The structure of the book reflects our view that we draw on social work approaches in our practice, in a societal context which affects us at every turn. Thus, Parts I, II and III deal respectively with social work contexts, approaches and practice. Part I offers a number of major topics which interact to a greater or lesser degree with anti-oppressive practice (Chapter 1), which provides its linking theme. Part II sets against the linking theme of encouraging reflectiveness on theory in practice (Chapter 10) a selection of those social work approaches we view as generating debates and controversies. Part III considers social work with the major client groups – children and families, adults and offenders – against the backcloth of unfinished debates on social work processes (Chapter 21). Thus, the structure of the book offers the reader the opportunity to use the introductory chapters to the three parts in dialogue with the other chapters in them.