Social Work Theories and Methods Authors: Mel Gray & Stephen Webb Publisher: Sage Publications Ltd Year of publication: 2013 (2nd edition) ISBN: 978-1-4462-0860-1 978-1-4462-0859-5

I worked as a social worker for a short time with an inner-London local authority in the early 2000s. After moving on, I revisited my frontline child protection team approximately 18 months later: over half my former colleagues were no longer working there, some completely exiting social work. The local authority was not under special measures; it was deemed to be performing satisfactorily and good management systems were in place. Churning of staff is not uncommon within frontline social work teams. I suspect this is not helped if supervision arrangements do not respond adequately to the psychic needs of social workers bearing witness to trauma on a daily basis. And an inadequate staff support culture may have emerged because we cannot agree on the breadth of knowledge underpinning social work practice.

Into this fray Gray and Webb (2013) return with their second edition, putting their stamp on key theories and methods in social work. One of their aims is to demonstrate how social work practice is influenced by ‘competing social science theories and philosophical commitments’. Their 20–chapter edited book is structured in three parts: theorists, theories, and perspectives for practice. Five theorists are examined in part one: Habermas, Giddens, Bourdieu, Foucault and someone I never heard of before, Judith Butler. I liked how each chapter in this section followed a similar structure: background on theorist, key ideas, relevance for social work, and implications for social work practice. But like those end-of-year ‘greatest hits’ television programmes which omit your favourite singers or genres, where are the contemporary psychological thinkers?

Gray and Webb’s principal aim in part two is to focus on theories ‘continuing to shape sociopolitical and philosophical thought’ – a lofty ambition – and on certain social work theories. Consequently, there is a potpourri feel to the middle section of the book. The reader will find chapters on attachment theory, feminist social work, critical social work, structural social work, multiculturalism, neoliberalism and postmodernism. While each chapter contains an assortment of ideas, a detailed section overview or summary may have helped the reader to map out how the ideas discussed hang together or apart. Again I feel this section was too dominated by sociological, cultural and political theories.

Part three is an even larger vessel of spices, leaves and dried flower petals, with eight chapters. The editors focus on perspectives for practice, examining the links between social work and methodological approaches. Specific areas explored are: cognitive-behavioural approach, ecological approach, social network analysis, ethnography, ethnomethodology, discourse and reflexivity, evidence-based practice and a final chapter, ways of knowing in social work. This section – even the chapter on cognitive-behavioural therapy - has little to say about the emotional education of service users or social workers.

The book is targeted at undergraduate and postgraduate social work students, and no doubt specialists can pick holes in various disciplinary areas covered. As a lecturer training social professional students, I would be happy to recommend this book to students looking for background information and further information on certain topics. But as a lecturer I also think about how social professional students integrate, apply and generate different kinds of knowledge to become competent practitioners. Consequently, in the next edition of this book I would like to see more space given to psychodynamic and emotional labour theories. I would also like to see a final chapter where the editors show students how to synthesise ideas aired earlier in the book, supporting them to become capable social workers.

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