
15 Emancipatory social work for a postmodern age

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How have the chapters in this book developed possibilities for social work practice from a postmodern critical perspective, and what further questions need to be explored? In this final chapter, we will integrate the main themes and issues raised in the book: rethinking modernist social work concepts, reconstructing our educational practice and addressing the political dilemmas and possibilities. We conclude by engaging with some of the major criticisms directed at postmodern critical theory and its relevance to emancipatory social work.

RETHINKING MODERNIST SOCIAL WORK CONCEPTS

Most chapters are premised on the notion that traditional modernist notions are inadequate in representing practice experience, and have therefore begun with an analysis of existing social work theories or practices. The critique has been developed to formulate principles from which new ways of thinking and practice may be forged. In this section, we will outline some of these major principles.

- 1 *Reconceptualising the links between theory, practice and research.* The oppositional characterisation of theory and practice in social work, and the limitations of this conceptualisation in understanding and developing social work experience, comprise a major theme for both of us. We both experienced a disquiet about the split ways in which theory and practice were taught—Bob felt disquiet over the split between radical theory and practice; Jan was concerned by the clash between the espoused theory and the ‘lived’ experience of radicalism. The theory/practice split was also a major issue for Peter Camilleri.

A postmodern view, which recognises that the dichotomisation of theory and practice is a modernist construct, allows for a more

relevant conceptualisation of experience, so that theory is seen as a way of constructing meaning from concrete experience. Social work practice theory thus arises out of concrete and direct experience, and is developed in context; it must therefore be understood in relation to that context. Jan Fook's chapter on critical reflection illustrates how research can be linked with theorising practice experience, so that theory, practice and research are interconnected. Perhaps a way forward is to create a new language which does not carry such dichotomous connotations. We could speak about meaning, action and investigation, or about experience as an holistic phenomenon.

- 2 *Rethinking the organisational context of social work.* Postmodern critical theory criticises the meta-narratives of organisational efficiency and hierarchy as the dominant discourse of organisational life. Gary Hough suggests that clusters, networks, alliances and flat, flexible structures will displace the bureaucratic form of organisation as we move into the next century. Such developments allow for the construction of counter-discursive interventions by social workers and service users against the bureaucratic discourse and support for attempts to create alternative organisational forms.
- 3 *Rethinking the concept of power.* The modernist concept of power, and the associated identity categorisation, is questioned by Karen Healy, Karen Crinall and Stephen Parker et al. for its potentially disempowering effects. By conceptualising power as a commodity, identities are forced into 'powerful/powerless' or 'victim/helper' dualisms which do not do justice to either multiple diverse experiences, or the agency inherent in the choice (in the case of some young women) to follow a non-mainstream pathway. According to Karen Crinall, some homeless young women may construct their identities as a form of survival in difficult circumstances, rather than define themselves in deference to mainstream lifestyles. Karen Healy suggests that we need to understand and construct power by negotiating power relations in each context. In this way, the emphasis is on the fluid and changing processes of power. Karen Crinall suggests that we need to recognise and reframe 'victimhood' as resistance and survival against remarkable odds. Stephen Parker et al. adapt Minow's (1985) concept of 'the dilemma of difference' to reformulate empowerment from a postmodern perspective. All three approaches open up new avenues for reconstructing power relations in society.
- 4 *Affirming the importance of agency.* The issue of agency is crucial to the emancipatory project. For Bob Pease, a postmodern critical perspective opens up new forms of resistance to dominant forms of masculinity. By exploring the subjectivities and practices of profeminist men, he argues that the postmodern concept of the decentred subject has greater critical potential for provoking inner change in men than the humanist notion of an innate self. He dem-

onstrates how the contradictions in patriarchal discourses enables men, as well as women, to construct (pro)feminist subjectivities committed to egalitarian gender relations.

- 5 *Acknowledging diversity, difference and multiple subjectivities.* Many of the chapters have argued that recognising difference, diversity and multiple perspectives is empowering, and is indeed a necessity if codes and principles of practice are to be relevant to the many different groups of people with whom social workers associate. Linda Briskman and Carolyn Noble stress that we must engage in an ongoing project of interaction and dialogue to reformulate practices and codes which are relevant to particular groups or constituencies, in particular contexts. Lee FitzRoy acknowledges the political dilemmas, however, which are inherent in such a position. The political struggle risks becoming diluted if the focus is directed towards difference and experiences which do not necessarily bear out the collective argument. The risk is that the collective struggle disintegrates into a new type of individualism. How is difference to be celebrated, when collective solutions are sought at a structural level?

Perhaps an answer lies in recognising that a process of dialogue and partnership, which also respectfully acknowledges difference, may be an effective pathway to discovering commonality. Perhaps the critical postmodern pathway is one of process and dialogue, and in this process relationships are formed which encourage diverse people to act together. Hearing, recognising and valuing difference may be the first step towards inspiring people to act collectively.

RECONSTRUCTING EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Because of the uncertainties and the unfinished nature of postmodern thinking and acting, the education of social work students becomes potentially more difficult. The process of postmodern critical analysis necessarily involves a critical deconstruction of received ways of thinking. This process can be unsettling for many students, particularly when the work for which they will be employed will require decisive and effective action, often in situations which are unpredictable and beyond their control. The chapters in this book which deal with educational aspects begin from a position of deconstructing present thinking, but then continue to develop alternative approaches based on postmodern critical theorising. Helen Jessup and Steve Rogerson do this in relation to interpersonal communication theory and practice, and Lister Bainbridge in relation to mental health. Jan Fook's chapter articulates a process whereby students and practitioners can uncover or deconstruct their own approaches to prac-

tice, thereby laying a foundation for reconstructing their practice theory in ways more amenable to the emancipatory project. A challenge for social work education from a postmodern critical perspective is to foster in students the confidence to enter new situations prepared for dialogue and uncertainty, and with the creative tools to resist, challenge and reconstruct processes which will be more affirming for all parties. We hope that the process of critical reflection, throughout the chapters in this book, will help social work students and practitioners to begin this endeavour.

REASSESSING THE POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES

Jim Ife has raised serious concerns about the relevance and applicability of postmodern theorising to critical social work. He believes that critical social work's commitment to counter-oppressive practice may be undermined and weakened by the postmodern rejection of the meta-narrative. He is also concerned that the postmodern scepticism of universal principles may be used to justify the oppression of minorities.

We share these concerns, and we distance ourselves from those expressions of postmodernism that reject a commitment to social justice. We believe, however, that these issues are best addressed by linking progressive postmodern thinking with critical perspectives, to formulate a postmodern critical approach, transforming both postmodern theory and critical theory in the process. Jim differs from us in that he argues that critical theory *per se* can encompass what is useful and progressive in postmodernism. Rather than incorporating the postmodern critique within critical theory, as Jim advocates, we believe that many of the modernist premises of critical theory need to be rethought in light of the postmodern critique.

We find Hirschmann's (1992) distinction between postmodern feminism and feminist postmodernism useful in this regard. She agrees with those who argue that the tenets of postmodern theory make the concept of an emancipatory feminism impossible, but maintains—we think correctly—that there can be a postmodern feminism that uses deconstruction and other postmodern methods to deconstruct patriarchy and allow the marginalised voices to be heard. It is for this reason that we use postmodern as an adjective instead of postmodernism as a noun throughout this book.

We believe that one of the difficulties in accepting postmodern thinking lies in the modernist assumption that theoretical positions are mutually exclusive, implying that one can have

allegiance to only one at a time. It is our contention that postmodern thinking does not attempt to posit one underlying causal explanation for phenomena. Thus there is no logical reason why aspects of postmodern thinking cannot sit easily with other causal theories, since it does not seek to *replace* other explanations, but rather to make observations about our process of *deriving* explanations.

In this sense, we have ongoing questions about how postmodern critical thinking can be helpful in specific concrete situations, rather than about whether it should replace all existing theories. One of the difficulties we have found in introducing a postmodern critical perspective to students is that they sometimes feel they have to give up all past ways of thinking in order to embrace the new. We invite them to consider the idea that a postmodern perspective offers a *new way of thinking about thinking*, rather than trying to *replace the content of their old ways of thinking*. This emphasis on process is evident in Mary Lane's chapter, where she stresses the importance of openness and uncertainty, responsiveness to context, resistance to imposed agendas and values and rejection of arrogant professionalism which privileges expert knowledge over lived experience.

We also acknowledge that there is a need to further refine the political agenda of a postmodern approach. Partly because postmodern thinking allows a refocusing on the personal and individual, many progressive thinkers mistake this for an *apolitical* agenda. Modernist conceptions of power have determinedly located political struggles at the structural level, so that power tends to be associated only with collective, 'objective' struggles.

We believe that political struggles must take place on all different levels, since this is how life is experienced. We believe that it is important to change the modernist dichotomy that separates the individual from the social so that we are able to locate ourselves, reflexively, into a holistic contextual picture. From our point of view, postmodern critical thinking is important for emancipatory practice because it puts the individual back in the picture, while at the same time contributing to a reconstruction of the social. In the process of transforming ourselves, we contribute to social transformation through prefiguring alternative subjectivities and practices. The choices today of practitioners, educators, students and service users will form the basis of the collective politics of the future. We hope that this book contributes both to the transformation of individual

lives and to the reconstruction of the emancipatory collective project.

REFERENCE

Hirschmann, N. (1992) *Rethinking Obligation: A Feminist Method for Political Theory*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca

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