

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Doing Critical Social Work: Transformative Practices for Social Justice**

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Bob Pease, Sophie Goldingay, Norah Hosken and Sharlene Nipperess  
Allen & Unwin, NSW, Australia 2016  
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This edited collection pulls together a diverse array of writers all loosely connected to the theme of critical social work. The book is split into five sections, ranging from the theoretical to the very practical. These include: addressing the theoretical tensions in critical social work; how to confront privilege and promote social justice; critical practice in the organ-isational context; doing anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice; and transformative collectivist practice. Recent legislative proposals in Aotearoa New Zealand have suggested that employers be allowed to define if their employees are, or are not, “social workers.” Such definitional matters strike at the heart of social work, and at the heart of this book. After all, the ability of an employer to change your profession for their own purposes grates uneasily against the notions of social workers being able, because of their unique perspective and position at the interface of employers and citizens, to exercise their discretion in creative and critical ways. As Baines points out in the introduction to this book, social workers (despite feeling increasingly controlled by employers and funders) still occupy a space where they are “well-positioned to initiate unique forms of dissent, foster resilience and resistance and nurture hope as a critical social work practice” (p. xiii). This book offers both structural and poststructural accounts of critical social work and, due to its breadth and focus, wards off the chronic critique of texts on critical social work that they are theory-heavy and practice-light.

Most authors here address this directly in the text: for example, Bob Pease and Sharlene Nipperess ask from the outset: “How do we ensure that the critical practices we advocate contribute to the transformation of structures within society that reproduce oppression?” (p. 11). As they and others point out, this is especially the case in the contexts that many of us work within where neoliberal concepts shape practice in a variety of ways. These include both the structural methods (directing material resources away from people who need them), and the poststructural methods of creating ideas, language and discourses that normalise this process, even co-opting social work terms in order to do so. Incorporating various ideas relating to freedom, resilience, solutions, strengths and self-determination, the neoliberal machine convinces us that both we as practitioners and our “clients” should be increasingly self-responsible, yet all are subject to the accountabilities of technocratic workplaces. It is books such as these that are charged with the task of denaturalising both

the languages and structures of an increasingly invisible neoliberalism. Several chapters particularly caught my eye as they align with my own interests. Hosken and Goldingay do a very lovely articulation of the theoretical differences previously discussed (structural/poststructural) and how they actually affect the way they might shape practice—from Hosken’s “socialist-feminist informed practice” to Goldingay’s “post-modern/post structural” informed practice. Both give detailed accounts of how this affects both their views on their contexts of work, and on their practice, including detailed case studies. The inclusion of case studies, and a strong practice focus are strengths of the book. As an educator, this is what makes a difference were I to use it in teaching. What I also liked was implicit in this chapter—that, despite their differing perspectives, they were able to work together to co-write a chapter! The implicit collegiality was heartening, as nuanced theoretical differences should be approached (in my view) within a more general inclusivity of spirit that is sometimes lacking in both academic and political realms.

Many other authors also include practice examples or have a practice focus. For example, Stephanie Gilbert asks, in her chapter on “Challenges for indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners in the neo-liberal workplace”, “What does good practice look like?” (p. 223), before describing specifically the organisational conditions that allow this to happen. Norah Hosken’s “Poverty aware and class cognisant” practice has already made it into my classroom, as again the thoughtful narrative applying the concepts to a practical case study was especially useful. This encourages students to see exactly how such theoretical positions can inform practice just as much as their preferred micro theory, and in doing so, might even dislodge the dominance of the micro as the theory of explanation.

Overall, this is a book with a firm practice focus and a wide-ranging scope.

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