BOOK REVIEW

Social Work Practice: A Conceptual Framework

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Uschi Bay

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Throughout our history, social work scholars and practitioners have debated the purpose and ethics of our profession. The question of what it means to be an ethical practitioner stands at the centre of these debates. In her new book Social Work Practice: A Conceptual Framework, Uschi Bay draws on the work of European scholars Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault to interrogate and develop the purpose of contemporary social work. In this work, Bay is keen to foster ethical activism in social work, that is, forms of activism in which social workers collaborate with others to achieve social and environmental justice.

Through part of this book, Uschi Bay analyses the influence of Foucault's thinking on critical social work. Many social workers would be familiar with the work of Foucault given the extensive incorporation of his thought into the critical social work literature (see Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2000). In this work Bay presents a succinct summary of the central tenets of Foucault's work and their implications for social workers. Her analysis focuses on Foucault's concerns about the power relations that exist within human service professions and the oppressive implications of the emancipatory intentions of modern professions, particularly those that aim to cure, to help, and to educate. The analysis provides a good introduction to Foucault's project and its actual and potential influence on our profession.

What is particularly new here is the reading of Arendt for social work. Arendt's work has received little attention in social work. This is surprising given social workers' interest in the human condition and questions of personal responsibility for creating change. As a Jewish person fleeing Nazi Germany, Arendt became fascinated with understanding the dynamics of totalitarianism, personal responsibility and violence. In her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of Hitler's highest-ranking officers, Arendt (1994) proposed that the evil committed by him arose not from a psychopathic personality or malicious intent, but rather from his inability to think critically about the project in which he was involved. She coined the term *banality of evil* to suggest that evil is a product of thoughtlessness and a failure to take personal responsibility for one's conduct or the failure to act to prevent injustice.

Picking up on this central theme in Arendt's work, Bay (2014, p. xxii) suggests that "one of the hardest things to do: [is] to think about what one does and all of the consequences that flow from one's actions or inactions." Bay seeks to encourage social workers to understand the importance of thinking in a critical and reflexive way about our practice and the implications, intended and unintended, of what we do.

Bay (2014, p. xxiv) proposes that a key objective of her book is to "combine the political and ethical concepts of Arendt and Foucault carefully in order to facilitate critical reflexivity in social work practice and in explicitly political and ethical ways." In the opening chapters of the book, Bay introduces concepts underpinning Foucault's and Arendt's philosophical projects showing that both were committed to critical approaches to power and ethics. Bay seeks to demonstrate how the perspectives encouraged by these political philosophers support critical reflexivity in practice. According to Bay (2014) social workers need to engage in an ongoing critical analysis of how knowledge and the self are constructed in practice if we are to be fully conscious and responsible for the political consequences that flow from the social work practices in which we engage.

Bay challenges us, as many other critical authors have done (see McDonald, 2006), to be vigilant about the unintended negative impact of the work we do. Yet I felt some frustration, too: insights from the philosophical work of Foucault and Arendt were presented as unique when, in fact, they are well known and well debated positions within the field of social work. For example, Bay (2014, p. 147) states that we are asked "through both Arendt's and Foucault's political theorising, to pay attention to the messiness of life, to the contingency of the world, to the always indeterminate…" This notion of valuing uncertainty and living with the indeterminate has long been at the centre of debates about science and art in social work. Aside from these academic debates, in my practice experiences I have often found that social workers are charged with responsibility for working in the grey zones of the human condition. This work would have benefitted from further consideration of how the philosophical works discussed coincided, or not, with existing social work debates and experiences.

I felt also that the work could have gone further in grounding the political and ethical insights discussed, particularly from Arendt's work. For instance, Bay (2014, p. 147) proposes that Arendt promotes "political storytelling, making informed judgments and the revaluing of political action." Bay adds that the work of both Foucault and Arendt urge us to be critically reflective about our practices and to engage with others to challenge oppressive aspects of modern governing relations. I found myself struggling to understand what these aspirations would look like in practice and, in particular, did these proposals for thinking and action reflect what politically engaged practitioners already do, or was something different being proposed? Politically engaged practitioners tend already to act "in concert" through, for example, participating in professional associations, unions or political parties and through social development and advocacy bodies. Further, while there was some use of practice examples, often taken from secondary sources, more use of original illustrations could help the reader better understand the practical implications of the ideas discussed.

Overall this is a book of big ideas for social work. I recommend it to those seeking to understand the influence of Foucault and the potential influence of Arendt on contemporary social work practice. The author urges us to think critically about who we are, what we do and the implications of our actions. The book offers new insights into these extensively debated concerns within our profession.

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