

Applying critical thinking and analysis in social work

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Before I read this book, I was of the belief that perhaps critical thinking and analysis could not actually be learned. I thought maybe it was a skill with which you are born, much like tongue-rolling (I can't), and no amount of education could change that.

Engaging in Chapter 8 of this book ("Reflexivity and the Use of Self") showed me that I could not be more wrong.

Critical thinking and analysis in social work can not only be *learnt* – this is the book to *teach* it.

I unashamedly loved this book.

It was both academic and accessible—carefully taking critical thinking/analysis apart and putting it back together again. The book never departs from its central educative goal: What is critical thinking? Why do social workers need it? How can we *actually* practise it in a neo-liberal world where social work has never been more important?

Although ostensibly aimed at the student social worker, a social worker of many years' experience (that would be me), could still find it hugely useful, if only to remind and validate.

For example—Part Two comprises two chapters—"Critical Reading" and "Critical Writing." I did my undergraduate degree 36 years ago (though not in social work) and these chapters are as relevant now as they were then. Learning and social theory might

come and go, but sound critical reading and writing principles simply do not date and are the same regardless of discipline.

The book's layout is clear, comprehensive and methodical, with each chapter building on the last—an elegant process of scaffolding which is one of its most useful hallmarks.

The book is divided into three parts – An Introduction to Critical Thinking and Analysis; An Introduction to Critical Reading and Writing; Critical Thinking and Analysis in Practice. Within this framework there are a total of nine chapters and each of these chapters have the following components: *Theoretical Background*; *Relevance to Social Work Thinking and Practice* and *Real-World Challenges*. The comprehensive integration of theory and practice is one of this book's strengths.

Within each of these chapters you will find a series of relatable activities, theoretical positions, key points, "danger points" to avoid, exercises and realistic case studies which are built on and examined from different perspectives. This variety within a single chapter ensures the book's ongoing "readability."

The case studies are carefully chosen to reflect that chapter's particular focus and, rather cleverly, the writers have used the same case study to approach the situation from a number of perspectives. For example, in Chapter 7, "Critical Analysis: Working with Risks and Strengths," we are introduced to the Hall/Jones family.

Off to the side we learn that mum, Deena Hall, has an adult daughter Jasmine, living elsewhere in a nearby village. I promptly forgot this as the focus was on Deena, her 12-year-old daughter Chantal, Deena's husband (Joe Jones), his five-year-old son (Logan) and the impact of family violence on this little family.

Four pages later, Jasmine is re-introduced to us through another case study in the context of analysing risk and Jasmine's world living with a learning disability is opened up to us. Yes—this is Deena's adult daughter. In terms of social work practice, there does not need to be a link between these two families but the connection cleverly reinforces the text's links between concepts, practice, theory, describing, summarising, analysing and other core principles.

Each chapter concludes with a summary, skills learnt and further reading.

Whilst not always the easiest of reads, the authors have done a sterling job of breaking down complex theories and concepts into simple language. The four-page glossary is a bonus. And on that subject, the last 26 pages of the book include the glossary and a useful appendix on learning styles as well as the obligatory references and index.

Given its UK setting, what relevance does this book have in Aotearoa?

Critical analysis is critical analysis, regardless of location and social work is committed to social justice, no matter the country or its geo-political framework.

Aotearoa's explicitly bi-cultural framework (perhaps more theory than practice at this historical juncture) differs from the UK which has a more multi-cultural settlement flavour and lacks a treaty with the indigenous occupants, honoured or otherwise. However, in keeping with many European countries, we share a history of colonial oppression/invasion and a subsequent history of institutional and casual racism.

Obviously the legislation referred to is not the same as in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, I did not find it a big stretch to mentally substitute similar Aotearoa New Zealand statutes.

The effect of several decades of neo-liberal political practices in both countries has resulted in a not dissimilar socio-economic landscape where the division between rich and poor has grown exponentially.

However, we have Jacinda and they have Boris, so our respective socio-economic climates may differ in the future.

In conclusion, the strength of this book lies in its ability to lay the foundations for the very building blocks of critical analysis (the words "**knowledge**", "**values**" and "**skills**" are in the book's *Introduction* in bold type—meaning that they are also defined in the *Glossary*), logically developing the argument.

Word by word, concept by concept, theory by theory until the result is an elegant treatise on not only the importance of applying critical thinking and analysis in social work but how this might actually be achieved.

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