Critical social work with children and families: Theory, context and practice (2nd ed.)

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This is a much-needed update on critical social work considering the United Kingdom (where this book is contextualised) has gone through austerity, Brexit, and the coronavirus pandemic since the first edition. Aotearoa New Zealand has, and is experiencing, similar economic pressures which makes the context familiar (and here I find myself thinking that the Hyslop (2022) could be a companion read to emphasise local context). The reader can make easy links to Aotearoa New Zealand, and a pertinent one emerges in the first pages when the author writes, "it is little wonder that further cuts to public services and a cost-of-living crisis will blight the lives of children and families, all of which adds to the argument for critical social work" (p. 5). This is a warning that people now have to rely on themselves and their networks rather than the state. The local link is seen here (just one example) with a government minister stating that emergency or social housing occupants will be evicted for anti-social behaviour, and "will have to go and bunk with friends and family", despite "this being a place of last resort, that it's there as a final port of call for people who actually need it" (Bishop, 2024). Our most vulnerable, too, need to rely on their own networks even if they do not have any. This is the time for critical social work.

The book is in two parts: an explanation of critical social work and the context in which critical social work operates (the spectre of neoliberalism looms large behind each page turn), followed by an exploration of the various branches of social work (child protection, care, mental health, youth justice, asylum-seeking and refugee, and disabled). These second half practice chapters draw on case studies (many from the author's own practice), and while this approach is not a new or unfamiliar tool for an author to bring theoretical and conceptual discussions into relief, they are sharp and focus the reader on the salient points. The familiar tool of a "key points" summary at the end of each chapter also provides a useful snapshot of what the reader ought to hold on to.

As noted above, Part One focuses on explanations of critical theory and why critical theory is needed. Early on, the author aptly identifies a crisis in social work, in part caused by social workers being told what and how to do their practice by managers "who are focussed on ensuring organisational goals rather than meeting service users' needs" (p. 2). For some readers, this statement will seem like a simplified version of a far more complex issue, but this level of writing will be attractive for many social workers who feel alienated from the world of academia. The author uses this almost conversational (accessible) style to open the world of critical social work to social workers who might struggle with praxis.

There are some more nuanced arguments presented here. Including a discussion about how contemporary social work's individual-reformist approach dominates the socialist-

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collectivist approach (which the author notes is where critical social work exists). This gives rise to considerable thought, especially when the author notes that the state has gained control of social work and social workers via control over social work education. Here, in Aotearoa New Zealand, the state has also achieved this through the Programme Recognition Standards and then also the Core Competency Standards (see Vol. 25(3), of this journal for more discussion around this). Again, social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand can easily find similarities and obvious linkages.

Part Two provides the practice considerations for social workers to navigate and challenge their workplaces and government policies. These six subject matters (as noted earlier) are obvious choices as a starting point into critical social work. The chapter "Looked-after children and care leavers" is an interesting read given our local context where "reverse uplifts", the subsequent policy changes, and now the imminent repeal of s7AA have significantly reshaped opinion on what state care ought to be. This chapter reminds the reader, or challenges us, about "avoiding the rush for permanence" as set out in a case study of the same name. One could easily relate what is happening in the United Kingdom into our local context, how close are we to their practice where "the social work role has been reduced to little more than completing paperwork and undertaking statutory visits aimed at ensuring there are no signed of abuse"? (p. 84).

It is easy to throw stones from a critical lens, and there are criticisms of critical theory in this regard (for example, Finlayson, 2009). What are the solutions? There are numerous examples of resistance in the last seven chapters. These examples could be summarised as a critical and relational approach that continues the slow advance towards equality and social justice. And that might be a significant point: the solution is not a Pollyanna demand to end inequality and social injustice, but for social workers to have "a broad responsibility to seek" those social work goals (p. 95). And question the common sense of the times. And challenge the accepted ways of doing. In the concluding chapter, the author asks us to consider feminist approaches in social work to achieve social justice, equality, and emancipation. The rationale is clearly set out for understanding that feminist (and other anti-oppressive approaches, I carefully suggest) approaches are the solution to managerialism and authoritarianism.

Those radical and critical social work lecturers amongst us should have this as a required textbook as part of their social work programme. It could be as memorable and useful as Malcolm Payne's (2014) seminal *Modern Social Work Theory*, the pages of which continue to be thumbed through by this writer several decades on. This book deserves the same attention.

References

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