

Practising critical reflection to develop emancipatory change

Christine Morley, 2014

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I selected this book from a pile available for review attracted by the title which included “critical reflection” and “emancipatory change” as, that time, I was working in the social work education field and was also looking to retrieve my social justice mojo. I thought I could learn something useful to apply to the variety of social work roles I had then and into the future—and I certainly did.

This work has a clearly articulated theoretical base in critical reflection (postmodern feminism) building on the work of Jan Fook (2012) and others. This is the underpinning perspective as well as forming the research framework within which the stories of six counsellors/advocates for victims/survivors of sexual assault practising in Australia are introduced and developed using a questioning framework facilitating deconstruction and reconstruction of the narrative. This is done to demonstrate and apply the tools of this understanding of critical reflection to find opportunities for emancipatory change at the interpersonal level of practice.

The book is structured like a thesis but there are some chapters that some practitioners could find useful without reading the entire work. Although the book begins with a focus on the inadequacies of the Australian legal system, its personnel and processes, the analysis could have parallels in Aotearoa New Zealand. The next chapter focuses on summarising the implications from previous research on victim/survivors’ experience of secondary victimisation and the damaging

social myths about sexual assault which constitutes a well-structured literature search of this topic. The opportunities and limitations therein for challenge and change are then considered via structural change and law reform as the sites for change suggested by feminist perspectives. Here Morley suggests that this macro and system focus can lead to a “lack of sense of agency in practitioners to challenge [the legal systems] oppressive processes and practice” (p. 6). Morley then turns to the opportunities offered by critical postmodernism to examine opportunities for change at more immediate and interpersonal levels through the examination of dominant discourses, rather than the systems that could contribute to this “sense of powerlessness” but which could also provide for possibilities to envision change. Again, this is a well-constructed chapter about theoretical ideas—I think I understood postmodernism a little more and it allowed me to see possibilities for my own practice.

The subsequent chapters present the stories of the research subjects through the discussion of a self-selected critical incident with each participant facilitated to “unearth” their own assumptions and discourses and therefore find creative responses through use of deconstruction (and then reconstruction) questions developed from Fook (2012). Some of these stories and their discourses were quite relatable to my own experiences as a practitioner. Morley then presents findings using themes which demonstrate the possibilities for change. The book finishes on a hopeful note concluding that, even in “oppressive” contexts, workers can envisage

power and alternative responses and that critical reflection can assist practitioners to connect with their sense of agency.

This work would be useful to educators to explore critical reflection and the application of critical postmodern theory. Practitioners could find the literature search on survivors' stories useful as well as considering the counsellors'/advocates' stories and possible parallels to their practice as a start to "unsettle" their own thinking. Supervisors could use this work to consider how to utilise deconstruction and reconstruction processes in their work with practitioners.

Reviewed by **Shelley Crawford** External supervisor;
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However, as it is research for academic purposes, it is not an easy read but worth persisting with. The author herself acknowledges that different people will "read and engage with this work from their own perspectives" (p. 207). From my perspective, it has led me to consider what is meant by "critical reflection" and confirmed that interpersonal work can be a site for emancipatory change built on critical reflection as presented in this work and others. Just what the author intended.

Reference

Fook, J. (2012). *Social work: A critical approach* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage.