CRITICAL APPROACHES TO SOCIAL WORK

Week One
Overview and Theories in Social Work Practice

Lecture

Critical Social Work Theories
• Theories tell us what to do, how to do it and to better understand the contexts and people in and with which we practice
• Shannon & Young (2004) identify three levels of social work theories:
  – **Micro** (psychodynamic, attachment, strengths etc.)
  – **Meso** (organisational, group, family systems etc.)
  – **Macro** (Critical theories...)
• Critical social work is an approach to social work practice that draws upon critical theories.

Critical Social Work Theories
• Critical Theory (Frankfurt School)
• Structural Theory
• Radical Social Work
• Post-colonial Theory
• Anti-racist Theory
• Anti-oppressive Theory
• Anti-discriminatory Theory
• Feminism/s
Post-modern Theory

And more...
• **Green Social Work**
• **Queer Theory**
• **Social Model of Disability/Mental Health**
• **Social Constructionist Theory**
• **Human Rights**
• **Marxist Theory**

Definitions
“...the term critical social work.. refer[s] to a broad range of practice theories that share the following orientations:
• A recognition that **large scale social processes**, particularly those associated with **class, race and gender contribute fundamentally to the personal and social issues** **social workers encounter** in their practice;
• The adoption of a self reflexive and critical stance to the often contradictory effects of social work practice and social policies;
• **A commitment to co-participatory rather than authoritarian practice relations.** This involves workers and service users, as well as academics, practitioners and service users as co-participants engaged with, but still distinct from, one another;
• Working with and for oppressed populations to achieve social transformation.”


General Principles of a critical theory approach

• A historical approach
  o (if you don’t know what came before, how can you evaluate a new idea/proposal)

• The world is in conflict – different groups enjoy differential levels of command over resources and possibilities – whether this is class conflict, or conflict between men and women, conflict between nations/cultures

• Language does not just reflect/describe, but constructs reality
  o This is more subtle than ‘what I say is real, is real’

• “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” (Marx, K.(1924/1938) Theses on Feuerbach, thesis eleven.)

• Critical analysis – understanding the nature and limits of an idea/theory/strategy through exploring the assumptions (about human beings, about the nature of the social world, about the interactions between human beings and the social world)

How will we be approaching the learning objectives?

1. Locate critical approaches to social work practice and their philosophical and political bases in the history of social work theory development and the history of ideas:
   • Quasi-narrative history of the development of social work in Australia (building on your work in History and Trends and other first year courses)
   • The emergence of critical approaches to social work

2. Identify the assumptions about human beings and society underpinning contemporary ideological and political debates in social welfare policy:
   • Framing and re-framing (see Lakoff reading)
   • Contemporary debates including – ‘entitlement’ versus ‘self-sufficiency’; responsibility for wellbeing of self, v others

3. Consider the relationship between social structures and contemporary social inequalities:
   • Discussion of different fields and examples of practice and the challenges that face critical thinkers in the contemporary world
   • Debates about the construction of social ‘problems’ and their solutions

4. Critically analyse how power relationships, history and language frame the experience of individuals, families, groups and communities:
   • Analysing the thinking that informs the doing, and the power relationships that constrain human freedom

5. Recognise the scope and limitations of critical approaches
   • Exploring the different arguments for and against critical social work approaches (critical analysis of critical theories)
   • Critical reflection (what do you believe?)
Main Messages:

- Social work is informed by a theory base that is extensive and not always consistent.
- We can artificially divide the different theory clusters as (a) **psychologically derived**, and (b) **sociologically derived** (or ‘social science’ derived).
- Psychological theories informing practice seemed to be easier to recall.
- Social science theories - less easy to recall - including those from disciplines such as political science, philosophy, sociology, social theory.