

Critical Social Work Praxis

edited by Sobia Shaheen Shaikh, Brenda
Anne-Marie LeFrançois & Teresa Macías

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Excerpt

I

CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

An Introduction

*Brenda A. LeFrançois, Teresa Macías,
and Sobia Shaheen Shaikh**

WHAT WE PRESENT TO YOU in this edited book is the culmination of over forty years of our combined critical thought and pedagogical praxis in the teaching of social work theory. Having spent much time thinking about and teaching social work theory, mostly using articles and book chapters cobbled together from a variety of multidisciplinary sources, we feel the time has finally come to put the knowledge we want to convey to students in one volume. Each section of the book covers a particular theme, beginning with a chapter which offers the main tenets of a particular theoretical social work tradition or approach (or theory, if you will), followed by a praxis chapter and ending with a short commentary chapter to support students in thinking critically about each of the contributions. This theory/praxis/commentary format arises in part from how we solicited our invitations to leading social work thinkers to contribute to this book: we asked them to focus on and discuss either the theory or practice dimensions of their social work praxes. In addition to the three chapters in each section, we include a pedagogical note where we, the editors, identify central themes contained in the section and propose some key ideas for students and teachers to consider. Our intention in this book is to provide a broad range of theoretical approaches to critical social work praxis that social workers can draw on.

* Brenda A. LeFrançois is a professor at Memorial University. An academic for twenty-five years, their teaching and activist scholarship focuses on anti-racist praxis from mad studies, anarchist and childhood studies perspectives.

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UNDERSTANDING THEORY

Social work theory and practice, as students and new practitioners learn, are intertwined. Theorizing is grounded on making sense of everyday occurrences, and social work practice is based on ways that we use theory to make sense of what we see, feel and experience. Despite the fact that social work courses are sometimes characterized as “practice” or “theoretical,” social work, as a discipline and as a profession, is based on the relationship between theory and practice (whether the practitioner is aware or not, all practice, or action, contains theoretical assumptions). In critical theoretical traditions, the link between theory and practice and especially the link between praxis, or theoretically informed practice, and social transformation is particularly important to understand. The idea that theory and practice are inextricably tied, that is, as praxis, is at the heart of this book.

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The various ideas we include in the book reflect a broad range of mainly western traditions and schools of thought. In our selection, we are particularly attentive to interventions that challenge the dominance of western epistemology and hence cover the ideas of decolonial and Indigenous thinkers. We understand theory to mean a set of ideas and concepts informed

by specific ways of seeing, perceiving, knowing and being in the world. Theories are based on specific *ontological* (ways of being) and *epistemological* (ways of knowing) foundations. Theories are also grounded on particular *axiological* (ways of valuing) foundations. Theorizing includes those aspects of human experience that we consider worthy of placing at the centre of our philosophy, where they may be reflected and acted upon. Theory formed through practice, fundamentally, provides explanatory power which we can then use to inform action.

We can broadly categorize theories based on whether they are: 1) modernist; 2) poststructuralist and/or postmodernist; or 3) outside of, or counter to, western thought. *Modernist theories* may be classified as either *positivistic* or as *materialist critical theories*.¹ Assumptions underlying *positivism* include the uncovering of truth and knowledge through an adherence to Enlightenment notions of rationality, reason, progress, the scientific method and observation. In this western theoretical tradition, truth and knowledge are understood as free-standing realities that are considered objective, knowable and observable (Hamilton 1992). *Materialist critical theories* arose in critique of positivist and depoliticized ways of understanding the social world. These theories are informed by identity politics and a critique of the status quo and are often formed in solidarity with oppressed people. The ultimate goal of critical theorizing is emancipation, with human liberation being understood as the highest purpose of intellectual activity. Like the positivists, critical theorists can

understand truth as existing in the real world, but rather than having one observable and objective reality, truth is instead understood differently based on the lived experiences of different groups in society — what we may call *perspectivism* or *standpoint*: being conscious of the position from which we know the world.

Poststructuralism — often associated with the study of discourse — arose in critique of modernism, both positivist and materialist. Poststructural theoretical principles are enriched by postmodern ideas. *Postmodernism* is both an era as well as a set of ideas that rejects the epistemic and ontological certainty that characterizes modernism. As such, underlying assumptions within postmodernism include understanding that many truths exist simultaneously rather than the positivist understanding of a single observable truth or the materialist understanding of a subjective group perspective on truth. Poststructuralists also propose that truth is discursively produced. That is, truth emerges and is constituted through discursive practices and through the work of power in discourse (Foucault 1984, 1997). Poststructuralism aims to transcend identity politics; it both celebrates and is tolerant of diverse understandings of the world. Poststructuralism exposes the false dichotomies inherent to materialist theories and provides an analysis of the discursive aspects of oppressive social relations and practices (see O’Connell; Janes; and Strega [all in this volume]). Poststructuralism never attempts to bring us to a complete understanding of the world and human experiences within it, but instead may be used as “a lens to help deconstruct and resist normative practices that reproduce and reinforce oppressive social relationships” (LeFrançois and Diamond 2014: 54).

Finally, some theories are grounded on worldviews outside of western thought that include ways of understanding what constitutes truth, reality and knowledge from primarily Indigenous epistemological, ontological and axiological sources. As Indigenous traditions of thought that are not Euro-western in origin, these traditions cannot be categorized within the above formulation based on modernism and/or postmodernism. Indigenous theories, as the contributors to the Indigenous social work section demonstrate, use distinct conceptions of knowledge, relationships, time and space. They are also characterized by intimate associations among humans, animals and the natural world, land and ancestry. Similarly, decolonial theorizing looks for opportunities for non-western philosophical traditions to engage in critical dialogue.

Social work practice, activism and research commonly combine different theories in order to formulate conceptual frameworks. Doing so may help social workers to better make sense of the experiences of oppression and violence experienced by people and communities, and to identify possible, relevant and socially just actions and strategies. Theoretical frameworks or approaches are also useful for allowing social workers the flexibility to form ethical attitudes within the context-specific situations

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they find themselves in, and that may change on a day-to-day basis (Macías 2016). While some chapters in the book discuss quite distinct theories such as Marxism, others trace the diverse theoretical roots informing particular theoretical frameworks or fields of study. Thus, theories often converse with one another in ways that change over time and blur and contest boundaries. We identify, in our pedagogical notes, instances where readers may reflect on the relationships among the different theories offered in the book.

Some critical theories have had a well-recognized and long-standing influence in social work. This is the case in Marxism, structuralism and feminism. The influence of other theories is relatively recent, as is the case with poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and Indigenous and anarchist thought. Theorists are often bricoleurs, borrowing from different traditions, incorporating new or different perspectives and modifying or adapting older ones. Such drawing-from-the-past is especially visible in the cases of anti-oppression and queer theory, and mad and critical disability studies. Some theoretical traditions emerge in response to, or to upset and politicize, pre-existing theories — previously and unproblematically taken for granted. This is the case, for instance, with the contributions of Black feminism, Marxist feminism, transnational feminisms or feminist poststructuralism. Other theories completely depart from western conceptions of knowledge. This is the case, for instance, with Indigenous epistemologies, which may incorporate concepts from other theories such as Marxism while presenting a completely distinct conception of the world and of the relationship of people in it (see Coulthard 2014). Many Indigenous thinkers advocate for a uniquely Indigenous way of knowing, and as a result, their understanding of social work, social workers and of being in the world is also distinct (see the Indigenous social work section of the book).

We have not included positivistic modernist social work theories or models of practice that are commonly found in social work theory texts, such as systems theory, person-in-environment or bio-psycho-social models. Nor have we included strengths-based approaches, cognitive behavioural or brief solution-focused therapies. We exclude these theoretical approaches to social work because, quite frankly, we consider them as outdated and, in some cases, harmful. They often oppress and patronize service users. As such, we do not consider them appropriate to include in a book focused on critical social work theories, as they tend to reinforce untenable positivistic ideas and re-enforce dominating cultural values. We instead chose to focus on providing students with the tools to consider how specific conceptualizations of praxis might support individual and social transformation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAXIS

The indivisibility of social work theory and practice (or practice and theory) — the idea that all intentional practice is based on theorizing, or making sense of the world — is something that critical theorists take to heart. As Stephen Brookfield (2005: 3) writes in his book *The Power of Critical Theory*, theory is “nothing more (or less) than a set of explanatory understandings that help us make sense of the world ... Theory is eminently practical. The more deliberate and intentional action is, the more likely it is to be theoretical.” Among critical social work theorists, the idea that theory and practice are indivisible is called praxis and involves an intentional and continuous dialogic process of action and reflection. While the notion of praxis has a long history in western thought going back to the ancient Greek philosophers, this book follows Paulo Freire’s (2000 [1971]) basic conceptualization. Freire saw how the notion of praxis (as a continual dialogical process of doing and thinking and thinking and doing) destabilized the common-sense idea that theory, practice and commitments to social change were distinct and separate.

The concept of praxis can be traced in particular to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he described it as a form of knowledge linked to the practical action of doing. Aristotle, born in 384 BCE in ancient Greece, made the distinction between *poiesis*, which is to produce or “make something,” and *praxis*, which is to act or “do something.” In the twentieth century, philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt (1958) revived the Aristotelian notion of praxis as a theory of action, in part as a critique levied against intellectualism. Through this revival, Arendt forced us to rethink and make explicit the “distinction between purposive action and productive activity” (Melaney 2006: 466). Arendt’s notion forces us to rethink and make explicit the interconnectedness of thought and action, avoiding both intellectualizing without acting and engaging in thoughtless or purposeless action. Here we begin to shift the presumed superiority of theory over practice and can begin to conceptualize their interconnectedness as praxis, a crucial pursuit not only for public intellectuals and university-community engagement but also for all of us in our understandings of action as a mode of human togetherness. Deeply intertwined in Arendt’s view of praxis are political and ethical commitments, interlinked with notions of participatory democracy.

The idea of praxis, theory-in-action, can be found in non-western thinking and writing as well. For example, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī (Rumi), a philosopher-poet and social activist born in the thirteenth century in present-day Afghanistan, understood both theory-as-knowledge and action-as-knowledge to be a living force. Rumi believed that we cannot privilege theory over action, or action over theory, just as we cannot privilege knowledge based on reason and rationality over intuition, passion, love, mysticism and emotion, as “all the pebbles are pearls and gems” (Rumi,

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as cited in D'Souza 2014: 4). Human spirits, hearts and minds may access knowledge from many sources: placing privilege or superiority over one limits the possibilities of our praxis. In the same way, theory and action cannot be understood as separate from each other; both represent important forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. Praxis, in this way, may be viewed as an aim to transcend the gaps of what is an artificial theory-practice divide.

Paulo Freire (2000 [1971]), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, further entrenched notions of transformation, liberation and emancipatory struggle into the definition of praxis. Here the goal of praxis became one of participatory political struggle to fight oppression and transform society. This liberatory and transformative praxis involved being critically aware and engaged in purposive actions on the part of social change-makers. For Freire, then, praxis itself was at the core of liberation from, and transformation of, oppression. His proposal was that a dialogic and intentional action-reflection approach would be an important method for engaging “the oppressed” in the struggle for liberation.

Praxis remains arguably one of the most important concepts in critical social work. Engaging with praxis, where social justice commitments mean analyzing ideas and where theory-and-action-informed practice is actively engaged, can be activated

Praxis is the thoughtful relationship between our actions and the knowledge that informs them and between our knowledge and the actions that inform it.

in our work with and within service user communities. Our knowledge in critical social work is at once theoretically rich, applied, practical, intuitive, passionate and action-based, and hence is a form of political, ethical and spiritual praxis. In short, praxis is the thoughtful relationship between our actions and the knowledge that informs them and between our knowledge and the actions that inform it. For this reason, theory courses in social work cannot simply involve an intellectual curiosity about theory but must make connections between theoretical ideas and other forms of knowledge and social work practice.

What we think must inform what we do. Therefore, we must ensure rich theoretical study in social work alongside its thoughtful application in practice.

In our collective experience of teaching theory over several decades, we have found that most students (not all) often find moving from theorizing to praxis quite difficult, especially at the undergraduate level, but also at graduate levels. Oftentimes, instructors who are academics steeped in theory may even have a hard time explaining to students how to apply theory in practice. We have also been part of conversations where social work practitioners, educators and researchers unreflexively dismiss theoretical discussions as if they are unrelated to practice in any way whatsoever. We

hope that this book will provide pedagogical tools and create moments for students and educators to discuss why praxis may sometimes be so difficult to conceptualize, verbalize, write out and act upon. We hope that the chapters that follow will become key sites of learning where students and educators can discuss and consider how to better exemplify praxis in the classroom, within internship field placements and within social work practice.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is organized in sixteen sections, each reflecting a particular critical social work praxis tradition or approach. The organization of each section mimics the logic of praxis as a circular process, involving a theory chapter that outlines the main concepts or tenets of a particular theoretical tradition (reflection), a praxis chapter that focuses on theoretical approach-in-practice (action) and a commentary chapter that engages the two previous chapters in the section (reflection).² We assume, as we set out earlier in this introduction, that all theorizing, or reflection, comes from the active process of making sense of the world and from our actions within that world. And we presume that, as social workers, our reflection feeds into some sort of activity in the world and outside of this text, and that activity may be pedagogical, practice-oriented or even related to communicating these ideas.

Each chapter is written by a different theorist-practitioner-scholar, the collection of which we offer to readers as a diversity of perspectives within each theoretical approach. The reflection-action-reflection pedagogical approach is at the heart of critical social work theory. The theory chapters provide students with a brief and to-the-point overview of each critical social work tradition. The praxis chapters demonstrate the application of theory in practice, based on research, practice or teaching experience. The commentary chapters provide critical analysis of both the theory and praxis chapters. The commentary chapters, along with the pedagogical notes at the beginning of each section, are intended to provide further support to students, and in particular to help them think through the issues provided in the previous two chapters. The commentary chapters should also support instructors in teaching critical analysis skills.

Unlike in other social work theory books, we have not ordered and listed the chapters according to any particular linear progression. We think this type of trajectory is no longer sufficiently coherent to provide a meaningful learning experience for students. For example, although some materialist theories remain staunchly structural in understanding social work praxis, others take on board some poststructural principles or postmodern ideas, leaving the classification of theories on the basis of this trajectory limited and possibly misleading. This type of classification also obfuscates how so many poststructural analyses have sprung from and continue to engage with

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structuralism. Instead of attempting to arrange the book's topics according to some logic of linear progression, we have organized the book according to a chronological logic, that is, when a particular theory under discussion entered into social work education and practice. This, too, is an imperfect classification, as some theories may have entered social work relatively simultaneously. Given this, we also took into consideration which theories would benefit from being covered prior to or after others. Such attention to order increases the explanatory power of theories that are either similar, borrow considerably from each other or have emerged as a critique of another particular theory. Pedagogically, this seemed to us the best way of proceeding in introducing new theories in the classroom. However, we recognize that this is just one pedagogical possibility among many others for how the book may be used as a course textbook. As such, we encourage instructors to consider whether moving through the book in a linear fashion will work for a particular course, or if assigning chapters to read out of order may be more useful. One example of this may be to consider that although social anarchism has entered social work education most recently, and, hence, is included later in the list of theories, it may also be read by students simultaneously with the first section of the book, on Marxism, in order to highlight the similarities and differences between these social theories. This may be appropriate given that anarchism emerged as a social theory more than two centuries before it appeared in social work education. In another example, although white feminism entered social work earlier than listed in this book, our section on feminism highlights Black feminist thought, transnational feminism and Indigenous feminism — all approaches to feminist theory that have been historically sidelined, excluded or made invisible in social work education until more recently. As such, we have listed feminism prior to, but in close proximity to, Indigenous social work, anti-colonialism, postcolonial theory and decolonization as well as critical race theory. We felt that these topics may best be taught in conjunction with each other and sequentially.

PEDAGOGICAL USES

We have included sixteen sections to cover sixteen different theoretical traditions in this book. Not all theory and praxis chapters within a particular section discuss the issues in similar ways. This situation highlights the range of ideas within each topic and the fact that theoretical orientations are not necessarily homogenous. Inconsistencies in the ways that theories are taken up should provide spaces for rich teaching and learning moments. We encourage readers to make a point of exploring and uncovering these differences in order to develop more complex understandings of different tendencies within theoretical perspectives and practices. Finding the inconsistencies between theory and praxis chapters, as well as the diversity of engagements within each theme or tradition, are likely to make for excellent classroom dis-

cussion or even assignment questions. To exaggerate the range in which theoretical approaches were expressed, we asked the contributors to write in isolation from each other. Our aim here was to avoid an inevitable artificial homogenizing of the material across the two-chapter groupings and to allow for inconsistencies to emerge freely between them. We were also able to capture some of the various ways of knowing and doing within the particular theory's different tendencies. Some of the commentary chapters pick up on these different ways of knowing and doing, others do not. We encourage classroom discussion on the messiness of these issues, rather than perpetuating a misconception that social work theory and its application is tidy and uniform both in thought and action.

The commentary chapters are all written by leading experts in the theme or tradition under discussion. As so much social work theory is borrowed from other disciplines, not all of the commentaries are written by social work scholars and practitioners. However, all commentaries are written by social theorists who have a stake in the knowledge production and actions emanating from the particular type of theorizing. We find that those looking in at social work from the outside often have unique perspectives on how social working is thought about and enacted in relation to the social theory being used (Chapman and Withers 2019). With this in mind, we have commentary contributions not only from social worker theorist-practitioner-scholars but also from theoreticians and scholars from social and cultural studies, education, critical disability studies, mad studies and geography. Arguably, we may come to a better understanding of our own theorizing and praxis through reflecting on the critiques provided by theorists who are both inside and outside the field of social work.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Many materialist critical theories are associated with the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School of critical theory was established in the 1930s as a multidisciplinary and materialist program. It is associated with theoreticians Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm and Max Horkheimer.
- 2 We should note that most of the chapters in this book are not written within a Freirian pedagogical framework. In part, this is because the history of praxis is multiple, and the kind of liberatory and revolutionary education that Freire advocates is not easy to replicate in the academy and other liberalized spaces. For these reasons, there is a diversity of approaches to theory, praxis and commentary within this book.

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