INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK THEORY FROM "DOWN UNDER"

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The dominance of Western Europe and North America in the theoretical field of social work is weakening. Not all good comes from "above" (Western Europe and North America) these days, but also from "Down Under". To understand this development, it is necessary to place it in the specific economic, social and cultural context of Australia. After that, I will review two major books of Mel Gray and Stephen A. Webb.

AUSTRALIA

Australia has a relatively small population of 22.5 million, of which approximately 65% live in big cities. The country is doing very well economically (fifth highest Gross Domestic Product, GDP, in the world) and socially (second in the Human Development Index of the United Nations), and has low rates of poverty (Wikipedia, 2012a,b). Thanks to its

natural resources and its role as supplier of raw materials with China as its major customer, the country has not been hit hard by the global financial crises until now.

Australia is a popular destination for immigration, like the USA and Canada. A quarter of Australia's population were born "overseas" (as they say over there). The largest immigrant groups originate from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Italy, Vietnam, and China. The indigenous population of Aborigines and the Torres Strait Islanders forms approximately 2.5% of the total population. These groups experience higher than average rates of imprisonment and unemployment, lower levels of education, and lower life expectancy (Wikipedia, 2012a).

Since 1973 the government has encouraged and promoted racial harmony based on a policy of multiculturalism. Like many other developed countries, Australia is experiencing a demographic shift towards an older population, with more retirees and fewer people of working age (Wikipedia, 2012a).

Australia has a liberal welfare state, managed by a relatively small government and financed by one of the most progressive systems of income tax in any OECD country. These income taxes, as well as the social benefit system are the most "efficient" at reducing inequality of any rich country in the world (Whiteford, 2011).

According to Alexander (2010–2011), Australia offers in this respect a genuine alternative to both the low-spending but high-inequality United States and the high-tax but socially egalitarian countries of Northern Europe.

AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORK

The first professional social workers were hired in the 1920s, while social work training began in Australia in 1940. The profession took direction from schools in England until the 1960s, when a more US-style model took hold. Most high-level training and theory was imported from abroad until the 1980s. Since the 1990s, Australian social work has affiliated itself more with Pacific Islander and New Zealand approaches (Wikipedia, 2012b).

A growing number of Australian social workers is employed "in the public sector, in Common wealth, State and local government departments, in health, social services and corrective services and at all levels, front line, management and policy/planning. The non-government welfare sector is the other major employer. A more recent trend is for social workers to contract themselves out as service providers" (Napier & George, 2001, p. 76).

More than 6,500 of the approximately 20,000 qualified Australian social workers are members of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). This is a very high organization rate compared to other countries. The AASW is

the standard-setting body for the profession of social work in Australia and it has no competitors. The AASW "reviews and accredits social work degrees (Bachelor Social Work and Master Social Work, w.b.) offered by Universities throughout Australia" (AASW, 2012a). The AASW is well-organized as an "incorporated company, guided by a constitution and nationally managed by a Board of Directors, elected from and by the membership […]. The Chief Executive Officer leads our team of 30 staff working in the Branches and our national offices located in Canberra and Melbourne" (AASW, 2012b). The association works according to four-year Strategic Plans, aimed at enhancing the quality of social work, influencing social policy and strengthening the position of social workers (AASW, 2012c).

The AASW is an active member of the International Federation of Social Workers. It has its own international peer-reviewed journal: *Australian Social Work*. "Published quarterly by Taylor and Francis, the journal promotes the development of practice, policy and education, and publishes original research, theoretical papers and critical reviews that build on existing knowledge. The journal also publishes reviews of relevant professional literature, commentary and analysis of social policies and encourages debate in the form of reader commentary on articles" (AASW, 2012d).

As in Western Europe and North America, the position and functioning of social work in Australia is affected by neoliberal social policy which relies on market mechanisms and managerialism in the public and non-profit sector to achieve high productivity rates and limit the use of services. According to Napier and George (2001), "the Australian welfare state" is changing in response to pressures towards economic efficiency, privatization of responsibility and of core services" (p. 76). "The need for social work has never been higher, both in direct service and developmental roles, yet demand for social work specifically is retracting under economic and managerial dominance over social need" (p. 80).

The impact of neoliberalism on social work is clear, but seems to be less severe than in countries with a different type of Welfare State, a higher tax level and a less competitive economy than Australia.

SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

In an article on the history of Australian social work practice research, Crisp (2000) concludes that practice research has historically occupied a marginal place in Australian social work but that this changed rapidly in the 1990s.

Napier and George (2001) draw a firmer conclusion:

> The past two decades have produced an enormous expansion of Australian

scholarship, and an indigenous literature, that is tied to neither North America or the United Kingdom, has developed. It may draw from both, adapting, extending and contextualizing ….. Now, Australian publishing of textbooks and monographs in social work and social policy flourishes. Given the dimensions of diversity in Australian society, the debate about how knowledge is built in social work is very important, and is reflected in this literature. Over this period, social work has grown in size, professionalized, developed diversity in fields of practice and professional function, working with groups increasingly diverse and complex, affecting the nature of social work education. (p. 79)

It is remarkable that the AASW, the professional organization of social workers, also considers research to be essential for social work practice. According to the AASW "client needs, organizational goals and social policy are addressed through the application of the social worker's values, knowledge and skills in the research process" (AASW, 2012c).

CONDITIONS

As part of an emerging, multicultural immigration nation with a liberal welfare state and a high grade of urbanization, Australian Social Work operates in a relatively fruitful intellectual climate these days, supported by

advanced systems of research, development and education with connections all over the world. Under these circumstances, an obvious local and indigenous focus on social work goes along with the almost "natural" international orientation of the profession, unveiling simultaneously local differences and global similarities in approach, theory and methods. These relatively unique circumstances offer a sociological explanation for the theoretical work of Mel Gray and Stephen Webb.

INCLUSIVE GLOBAL VIEW

Mel Gray originates from South Africa, while Stephen Webb moved to Australia from the United Kingdom. Since 2007, they have combined their theoretical efforts for social work as professors at the Research Institute for Social Inclusion and Wellbeing at the University of Newcastle, Australia (RISIW).
Gray and Webb (2010) share a global view on social work that includes the diversity of cultures and approaches.

While (the) emerging diversity of approaches to social work appears quite striking, there continues to be something of a "mainstream" even though it is navigated by fewer than before. Internationally, social work has grown in stature and influence as well as making important contributions to the social sciences … because it explicitly attempts to cut across diverse social, cultural, economic, and political

dimensions. Within the contemporary situation, social work also addresses many of the pressing problems facing people across the globe. (p. xxiii)

Between 2008 and 2011, the following four major works of Gray and Webb were published:

- Social Work Theories and Methods (2008)
- Evidence-based Social Work: A Critical Stance (2009) (with Debbie Plath)
- Ethics and Value Perspectives in Social Work (2009)
- International Social Work – Four Volume Major Reference Work (2010)

I will review *Social Work Theories and Methods*, and *International Social Work* because both publications offer selected parts of what is called *the body of knowledge of social work*.

SOCIAL WORK THEORIES AND METHODS

Social Work Theories and Methods was published in 2008, two years before the publication of the four-volume work entitled *International Social Work*. Gray and Webb characterize this book as "an edited volume of chapters from leading international authors" (p. 7).

The book brings together five important theorists (part 1), six theories (part 2) and six perspectives for professional practice (part

3). A total of 22 well-known authors made contributions to the book.

The theorists whose work is described in part 1 are: Jürgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. The theories in part 2 are: feminist social work, critical social work, structural social work, multiculturalism, neoliberalism, and postmodernism. The perspectives in part 3 are: social network analysis, ethno methodology, ethnography, discourse analysis and reflexivity, evidence-based practice, and ways of knowing.

The aim of "Social Work Theories and Methods" is "to make explicit the extent to which social work turns on competing social science theories and philosophical commitments" (p. 7). For this purpose, the book outlines "key theoretical and methodological ideas that have been formed within social work and shows how these have been adopted and critiqued by social workers" (p. 7). The selection is done carefully: "We have sought to highlight those who, in our opinion, have contributed significantly to theoretical discussions shaping social work in recent years" (p. 8).

The book is well-written and well-designed. It has almost all the characteristics of a textbook, namely:

- an outline of the contribution made to social work by a key theorist, theory or perspective;

- a selective bibliography of each thinker or approach;
- a glossary defining key words, with cross-links to key theorists and perspectives;
- a timeline of key publications;
- study questions at the end of each chapter.

I agree with Gray and Webb that this book will be valuable for undergraduates, graduate students, post-graduate students and researchers in social work. I consider it to be a handy, transparent textbook that can be helpful in the process of developing a personal view of social work and its functioning in society. I would recommend using it from the second year of social work study.

INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK

International Social Work (Gray & Webb, 2010) contains a collection of 92 articles, organized into four volumes of international researchers' significant and original contribution to social work. Two of these 92 articles are Webb's and three are Gray's. The selection is meant "to provide a systematic reference to both the leading traditions of thought in social work and to reflect the trends and changes that have occurred in recent times" (p. xxvi). The readings are organized thematically:

- *Volume I* contains 20 articles on Welfare Theory and Approaches, from various authors such as Paul Pierson, Claus Offe, Michael Lipsky, Jane Lewis and Michael Woolcock.

- *Volume II* concentrates on Social Work Practice, with 22 articles including Gambrill's "Behavioral Social Work", Goldstein's "Knowledge Base of Social Work Practice", and Ward and Mullender's "Empowerment and Oppression".
- *Volume III* brings together 25 readings on Social Work Research, varying from articles on qualitative social work research, via those on evidence-based social work, to articles on critical perspectives.
- *Volume IV* focuses on Future Challenges for Social Work, with 25 articles including contributions by Joel Fischer, Lena Dominelli, Bob Hudson, Peter Beresford and so on.

Each volume is prefaced with an introduction that summarizes and contextualizes each particular contribution.

In an extensive "Editor's Introduction", Gray and Webb search for "the level of integration on which the different texts unfold" (p. xxvii) in identifying, the nature and role of social work, the essential logic of the profession, and some other aspects of the approach and knowledge of professional social workers.

NATURE AND ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK

Gray and Webb (2010) conceive of social work as both an established academic and professional discipline. From a systems

perspective, they understand the nature and role of social work "in terms of three related dimensions: network, discourse and function" (p. xxvii). With regards to normative aspects of social work's functional position:

> it achieves these effects through a highly specific form of ordering of the social world, e.g. good or bad, enough parenting, eligible or ineligible for social resources and so on. Moreover, social work inevitably rests upon determinate normative, theoretical and empirical assumptions about how human society works. (pp. xxvii–xxviii)

Gray and Webb describe social work as:

> a complex and dynamic process that may not easily reduce to either- or type distinctions. In practice contexts, this involves continual permutations of actions some of which become standardized and embedded in the local agency context. (p. xxxiii)

However "social workers are active interpreters of information who occupy multiple contexts – interprofessional and intra-agency – of use and practice". As such, doing social work "is a dynamic combination of active interpretation and rule following". (p. xxxiii)

The most effective way for the social worker to cope with this is by "adopting a critically reflective approach to practice". Such an approach is necessary "to move beyond managerially imposed performance and procedural regimes to scrutinize their own practice in relation to personal and professional value commitments". (p. xxxiv)

THE ESSENTIAL LOGIC OF SOCIAL WORK

Another of Gray and Webb's findings is "that the essential rationality of modern social work is ambivalently configured through (the) twin logics of regulation and security, which work in and through each other" (p. xxxi). *Regulation* is a mode of ordering, "achieved by legal rules, procedures, policy requirements and regulatory mandates that are likely to be backed by behavioral sanctions and standards" (p. xxix). *Security* "includes safety, vulnerability, coping strategies, social support, and care and protection" (p. xxx). These logics mirror Max Weber's distinction between instrumental rationality and substantive rationality.

I (Blok, 2012) share this finding, by explaining it in more simple words:

> Social work has always had two faces, and continues to do so: on the one hand helping people, and on the other hand supporting the established order and relations in society, even when they are unjust. In other words, the social worker is a stalwart support to needy and vulnerable citizens, and in so doing contributes to the (further) adaptation

and integration of these people into the established societal order and social relations. (p. 15–16)

In my opinion "International Social Work" is a major reference in social work that should be present in all libraries of social work studies in the world, where it should be placed next to the International Encyclopedia of Social Work. Having said this, I nominate Mel Gray and Stephen Webb for the title of "Australian Librarians of International Social Work". Support me and let's make it happen!

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