

Women and Social Work: Narrative Approaches

Milner, J. (2001) Palgrave, £15.99, paperback, 192pps.

In recent years there has been a change within social work towards an acknowledgement of the value of biographical and narrative approaches, especially within work with service users. Until comparatively recently, however, little has been written in this area specifically for social workers. This volume is a welcome addition to this small body of literature. It is to be additionally welcomed because it deals with a rather neglected area: that of women and social work, and is the first book to attempt a comprehensive approach to the combination of narrative and solution-focused approaches in gender specific ways.

There are a number of reasons why such approaches are particularly valuable. Not least of these is the fact that most service users and most social workers are women. The book examines the interconnections between care-giving and care-receiving and considers the ways in which caring is constructed by women and consists of a number of different methods employed. This is then translated into a useful and necessary consideration of caring within social work, with an emphasis on how to achieve effective anti-oppressive practice. The chapter on power and issues of ethics and values is particularly helpful and is very clearly expounded.

Through detailed and constructive use of case studies, the principles of narrative and solution-focused approaches are explored, particularly in relation to work with children (both child protection and more general work in child care) and community care with adults. There is a good contextualisation of the methods in relation to contemporary social work practice in the UK. This is necessary, but well executed by the author. The case studies are particularly valuable in providing clear suggestions as to how service users and workers can establish their own solutions to problems within everyday life in ways which are both positive and future-oriented. What it also provides are clear demonstrations of the validity of the solutions that service users adopt in their attempts to resolve difficulties, some of which may be life-long, without involvement in the search for the reasons why difficulties have occurred. In addition there are useful examples of how women service users can work with women social workers in constructive ways, with apparent benefits to both parties.

The book is written in a generally clear and accessible manner and is recommended for all those who work in, or who are interested in this field. It is well structured and thorough. The case studies are used to good effect without being overused. The inclusion of sample 'homework sheets' to use with service-users is helpful and provides useful food for thought for practitioners. The summaries in point form at the end of chapters are also helpful. This book will be of interest and value to students, practitioners and academics. It should prove a lasting contribution to the field.

Bridget Penhale, University of Hull