

**Social Work: Critical Theory and Practice, Fook, J. (2002) London: Sage Publications, £17.99, Paperback, 179pp. ISBN: 076197251X**

For a book aimed at social work students and practitioners, this is a challenging read. It sets the current buzz concepts in social work education, 'empowerment', 'reflective practice' 'difference' firmly in their origins in postmodern, poststructural thought.

The book is divided into three parts. The first examines currents in social work over recent decades, looking at radical, feminist and structural approaches of the 1970s and 80s, and moving on to consider issues such as globalisation and changes in ideas of professionalism which are the context for contemporary social work. The second section is the core of the book, and is called 'Rethinking ideas.' It does just that. The third section attempts to apply these ideas to practice settings.

As someone whose professional training occurred many years ago, I found the definitions of postmodernism and Fook's application of this way of thinking to social work contexts very helpful. For example, she criticises the 'modernist' conception of power because it is seen as being 'possessed' by particular groups, rather than being 'exercised', a crucial distinction. A postmodern analysis of power relations allows for us to assume different identities at different times and in different contexts. Social workers notoriously perceive themselves as powerless within the bureaucracies which employ them or as they are identified with 'powerless' service users. This book challenges them to 'deconstruct' this, and many other ideas, and reconstruct them within a new discourse.

Jan Fook identifies herself as a Chinese Australian, and some of her insights into her own experience of being seen as 'different' in a predominantly white male academia were particularly vivid. 'The point I am making is that it is not what type of power (structural or personal) I have at my disposal which is important, but how I use, engage with and create the opportunities available to me.'

She advocates the use of critical incident analysis as a tool for learning reflexivity. She takes the examples of making an assessment and case management to show how her ideas are relevant to practice, by putting the service user's own narrative and meaning at the centre of the process.

Fook's arguments need mental effort and concentration to follow, but she does lighten her text by interspersing it with reflective exercises which help the reader keep up with her ideas, and relate them directly to personal experience. Overall this is a book which will repay the effort you need to make to understand it.

**Judith Niechcial**

**Social Work trainer and practice learning co-ordinator**