Current Trends in Social Work Theory Subjects
in Australian Social Work Education

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1 Introduction

This paper seeks to explore current trends in social work theory subjects in Australian social work education through analyzing the content of teaching materials. Since the 1930s, social work theory in Australia has had a long tradition of drawing on psychodynamic and bio-medical models of modernist social work from the United States (Lawrence 1967). The Eurocentric 'modernist' tradition in social theory depends on truths that originated from the scientific paradigm that seeks reason and facts through a positivist view. This paradigm emphasized strong notions of order, containment of nature, a belief in unity and progress and rational scientific objective facts (Phillips 2008). The modernist tradition has been central to 'modern' social work theory not only in the West but in Japan in order to develop a professional identity. This is evident, for example, in the defined traits of doctors' knowledge, techniques and values as a full profession (Flexner 1915; Funaki 2005; Mishima 2007).

A strong criticism of modern psychological and bio-medically based social work theories has occurred in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia since the 1960s especially in relation to modernist perspectives which emphasize material conditions, social structure and structural location such as radical, structural and feminist social work perspectives (Fook 2002, p.5; Pease 2007, p.107). However, despite this postmodern critique, social work education in Australia has continued the importation of psychological and bio-medical based modernist models and techniques. Text books developed overseas were used in local social work education curricula and social work practice in the 1980s. This has resulted in ongoing dynamic debates in scholarship (Healy, Rimmer and Ife 1986, p.96; Ife 1988, p.24). Radical and structural approaches to social work were developed in UK by Bailey and Brake (1975) and in the US by Galper (1980), in Canada by Mullaly (1993) and in Australia by Rees (1991) and Fook (1993) to criticize this traditional social work for the emphasis on individual forms of helping. These approaches would be seen as an original and modern version of 'critical social work'.

Despite the continued adherence to 'modernist theory', the influence of post-modernism on social work theory has also been influential as a critique of modernist social work theory in Australia since the 1990s (Ife 2005, p.3-4). Postmodernism and poststructuralism, mainly developed by French philosophers Foucault and Derrida, are generally a reaction to the dominance of modernist thinking in the social sciences and humanities over the twentieth century. 'Post' ideas challenge the views of modern traditions of social work such as concepts of client's identities, client needs and social work responses, as socially constructed through language, power and discourse. They also value difference and promote understanding of local details and complexities that prior modernist interventions

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failed to respond to. These include complex narratives and subjectivities of people's lives and social problems that are highly changeable in any given context. (Healy 2005, p.195-196; Phillips 2008).

Recently, critical social work, mostly developed by Australian scholars, has drawn international attention as a new social work approach (Payne 2005). However, there is controversy around the level of 'the postmodern turn' in critical social work among Australian scholars. For example, Bob Pease and Jan Fook as early participants in radical and critical social work movements in Australia in the 1990s, developed different conceptual frameworks under the name of 'critical social work'. Pease developed a theoretical framework grounded in 'postmodern critical theory' that attempted a reappraisal of the 'modernist side' of critical theory (Pease 2007, p.110). Fook's theoretical approach, 'critical postmodernism', doubts about modern critical theory which implies there is a singular underlying truth and an emphasis on a structural analysis of oppression (Fook 2002; Healy 2005, p.191). There is no single theoretical framework for critical social work, including critical social work trends in North America and the United Kingdom (Hick and Pozzuto 2005, p. ix).

As a Japanese social work scholar, I have noted with interest a recent increase in Australian social work literature circulating at an international level. This appears to have occurred after enormous efforts toward ending a long history of the importation of literature and teaching texts into Australia from overseas. Similar to the Australian experience, mainstream Japanese social work theories have also been imported, particularly from the US after World War II, and have strongly affected social work practice in Japan (Kitajima 2002, p.329). For social work academics in Japan, the influence of postmodernism on social work theory has been limited to US trends of the 'narrative model' (though the original work was developed by an Australian practitioner Michael White). A 'narrative' discourse approach was introduced with a postmodern turn away from the mainstream social work models in the USA such as 'case management', 'system-ecological approaches' and 'life model' approaches since the 1980s (Kihara 2002, White & Epston 1990). However, practitioners in Japan have a strong tendency to espouse psychological and bio-medical social work theories and practice models from the US as a result of the deliberate intention of policy makers in the central government (Kubota 2002, p.114). With recent increasing trends towards neo-liberal discourses in social policy fields, the tendency of policy to promote economic rationalism and commodification has brought about a strongly 'positivist' model of social service delivery. This is evident through the introduction of a 'Care Management System' in Long-Term Care Insurance in 2000. However, these 'positivist' modernist models of social work have not been sufficiently successful in addressing complex issues in a rapidly changing society such as the increase of child abuse, domestic violence against women, suicides of students in schools, and ethical issues like organ transplants in medical settings, etc (Yokota 2007, p.3). Given these changes, there are some parallels in recent trends in the external influences on social work theory between Australia and Japan in terms of the history of the importation of social work theory from the J.S. This paper is primarily concerned with Australia's distinct contribution to postmodern social work theory at an international level and how this is reflected in and contrasts with the ongoing utilization of 'modernist' theory in the domestic curricula. It is significant to discuss these important theoretical issues and the recent trends of Australian social work education to develop social work teaching in Japan.

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Since the mid 1990s, Australian academics such as Pease and Fook (1999), Ife (1999), Healy (2000) and Fook (2002) have published extensively in social work study fields, rather than importing texts from other developed countries such as North America and the United Kingdom (Pease 2007). In addition, the Australian government has promoted Australia's social policy approach in the following way:

"Australia is one of the advanced nations in the health and social welfare fields internationally and the highly developed studies and professional practices will attract students from mostly Asian regions to Australian schools" (Australian Embassy of Japan 2004).

Recently, two Japanese books introduced 'critical social work' from Canada (Kitagawa, Matsuoka, and Murata 2007) and from Australia (Yokota 2007) and discussed the possibility of utilizing some aspects of 'critical' approaches in social work, although these studies did not include sufficient theoretical discussion in both countries. Moreover, there is ample Australian literature that explains the theoretical emphases in social work theory teaching in Australian social work education.

Based on research conducted in Australia, this paper explores the current trends in social work theory subjects in the Bachelor of Social Work curricula in Australian tertiary education. As part of the research, a content analysis of subjects or units of study outlines related to social work theory was conducted. This occurred through 23 Australian universities that were offering a social work program in 2005. The main focus of the research was to analyze the use of language in teaching materials, including reading lists, in each school. Findings of this study showed a clear growth in 'critical' approaches in social work theory related subjects in Australian universities based on language and bibliographical references as well as contemporary complexity in social work theory in Australia. This paper explores the implications of this research by examining the importance of 'critical' approaches in social work theories, the influence of postmodernism, and social justice discourses in relation to Australian social work education. The study comprised a part of my broader research about the influence of postmodernism on social work theory in Australia that engaged a discourse analysis in the study of the theoretical transition from modernist social work theories to postmodern critical social work theories.

2 Review of literature

This section will review literature in relation to social work curricula in Australian universities. It draws particularly on trends in social work discourses since the 1960s in Australian social work education. As mentioned earlier, the adoption of overseas modernist models of social work, especially from the US, has been criticized in Australian literature in relation to a heavily theoretical tendency toward micro-level practice and the dependence on recruiting academic staff from overseas in the 1960s and 1970s (Puckett & Jones 1979; Rosenman 1980). A criticism of the dominance of modern psychological and bio-medical social work came from a fact that social workers equipped with micro-oriented social work techniques found it difficult to respond to social inequality and poverty in spite of economic growth under the Liberal-Country coalition government in 1960s in Australia (Funaki 2007, p.80).
Jim Ife, one of the first social work scholars to publish on critical perspectives in social work, argued that there were two social policy failures of Australian social workers since the 1970s (Ife 1997). First, social workers who learned non-political professional techniques in micro levels of personal problems were lacking the ability to deal with the expansion of social work education programs and employment in social policy, planning and community development fields such as the Australian Assistance Plan from 1972 to 1975 under the Whitlam government. Second, modern social workers appear to lack the ability to counter new managerialism in social policy during the 1980s. Although social workers and academics in Australia attempted to criticize the inequality of managerialism and economic rationalism, they were not successful in developing a logical criticism and an alternative plan within political and social movements.

However, even in the late 1980s social work education in Australia was still strongly influenced by micro-focused social work theories from the US. For example, Jan Fook (1991) collected 12 course outlines in 1987 from all AASW (Australian Association of Social Workers) accredited courses and 12 from AIWW (Australian Institute of Welfare Workers, currently, AIWCW; the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers) accredited courses in Australia and analysed the trends of casework content in teaching materials. This research suggested that the course content of casework focused heavily on psychology oriented interpersonal theories and techniques rather than the traditional inter-disciplinary base of social work despite the utilization of literature based on radical, structuralist and feminist perspectives that were prominent in the UK and Australia. At the time no course taught clearly radical, feminist or structural perspectives, although five courses attempted to include these viewpoints regarding social work practice. Casework was taught from the perspectives of a systems approach, problem-solving approaches, life model approaches, humanistic approaches and a task-centred perspective. However, there was evidence of radical and feminist social work in the 1980s among women social work academics in Australia. This could be seen as an earlier version of critical approach in modern social work. For example, women social work scholars established the ‘Women in Welfare Education’ journal in 1983 and continued to assert a need for radical and feminist perspectives in social work education through publishing women’s social work journals and organizing conferences (Marchant, et al. 1986).

In spite of some radical and feminist trends in social work education in Australia, in the late 1990s psychology oriented interpersonal theories continued to be influential in Australian social work education. Interview based research about the language use among social workers and students in Melbourne was conducted by Hawkins, Fook and Ryan (2001) in the late 1990s. They argued that social justice language such as rights, equity or social change was hardly used among social workers and students while more therapeutic and individually oriented social work discourses were dominant. In a recent study, Valentine (2005, pp.207-216) analysed expressions of social justice in the subject outlines, reading lists, reading packages and assessment tasks among 14 schools of social work in Australia. This study found that there seemed to be significant differences between the statement of social justice in the AASW code of Ethics and the quantity of learning about social justice by social work students. However, the theoretical emphasis in social work teaching has not been sufficiently investigated in social work studies in Australia, thus prompting research to explore what sorts of texts are being used and what social work theory is currently being taught in Australia.
3 Research Data collection

I initially emailed the heads of schools or administrative staff in AASW-accredited Bachelor of Social Work programs in 23 Australian universities in October 2005. I also followed up most schools with a second E-mail and a formal letter. I also directly requested cooperation in this research at the AASWWE conference in November 2005. Subject outlines related to social work theory were to be collected. The information required included course aims, learning outcomes, the structures of courses, teaching methods, assessments, reading lists and course schedules in years 2005 or 2006. Handbooks of each BSW program were also collected for general information. Individual units of study from each program were then selected for analysis.

I collected sufficient materials to satisfy the research aims from 16 of the 23 Australian universities. Two schools’ data were supplemented from universities’ Web sites because they did not include enough information for the study. The locations of the universities included all states of Australia. However, course types and structures were varied. Five universities offer a two-year BSW program after two years of liberal and social science units of study and others offer four-year BSW courses or a three-year BSW with one year of another major. All universities surveyed had social work theory related subjects as ratified by the AASW for BSW course accreditation. Eight universities had subjects that directly included ‘theory’ in the subject title such as ‘social work theory and practice’. Five universities had a subject of ‘Introduction to social work’ to teach ‘theory’ at a more introductory level. Two universities had a subject title including ‘critical’ rather than ‘theory’. One university taught all programs by issue-based subjects that integrated ‘theory’ into all subjects.

4 Framework of analysis

This research relied on content analysis for testing the occurrence of theoretical concepts in subject outlines of social work theory related subjects in social work programs in Australia. Content analysis by simple word counts uses a quantitative research method, but it would be possible to analyse the contemporary complexity in social work theory teaching in Australia as qualitative data (Silverman 2001). This study focused on the theoretical perspectives that were reflected in the language and references used in subject outlines. Some key codes for representing modernist social work perspectives included psychodynamic, behavioural, systems, case management, feminist, anti-oppressive, structural, radical, strengths approach, social change, and social justice. Codes implying postmodern social work perspectives included narrative approach, discourse, difference and context. It might be difficult to generalize terms such as difference or context as ‘postmodern’, but postmodern social work literature in Australia was likely to include these words as a postmodern aspect (Fook 2002, Healy 2000). Also, ‘Critical’ is one of the important words that reflects the challenge to Australian social work theories. It should be noted that it includes complex meanings and perspectives from both modern and postmodern sides (Funaki 2007).

The texts that were analysed included core readings as well as recommended readings written within subject outlines. The content analysis did not consider how often language related to social work theory is used in each school, rather it counted how many programs used language related
to social work theory more than once in subject outlines. Therefore, the content analysis did not examine to what extent language related to social work theory was influential in each subject outline or each program in the school. The content analysis in each program reflected what sorts of theory perspectives were taught and what social work discourses appear to be influential in social work education in Australia. The primary value of the content analysis was to support an analysis of the politics of social work curricula within contemporary social work theory in Australia.

The research also supported an examination of the importance of ‘critical’ social work theories. The influence of postmodernism and social justice discourses in relation to Australian social work education. Any personal names and university names are not revealed, as all information was analysed anonymously. This research aimed not to make comparisons or to evaluate course content but to gain an understanding of the broad tendencies of social work theory in BSW programs in Australian universities.

5 Results of analysis

Chart 1 reflects the language use in social work theory related subject outlines in more than two universities. The most frequently used language in subject outlines related to social work theory was ‘critical’. The subject outlines of 15 out of 16 schools included ‘critical’. ‘Critical’ is used in various ways, such as critically reflect (6), critical perspective (3), critical social work theories (3), critical reflection (3), critical theory (2), critical thinking (2), critical social work (1), critical social theory (1), critical approach (1), critical/postmodern approaches (1), critical and interpretive (1), critical and reflective thinking (1), critical reflective process (1). I did not count reflective practice (2), reflectivity (1) or self-reflection (1) as terms related to critical reflection as Fook (1999, p.202) points out that although ‘reflective’ and ‘critical approach’ share some common features such as a critique of positivism, a recognition of reflective ways of knowing, a reliance on interactional process in the generation of this knowledge, ‘reflective’ does not include the emancipatory project, an important aspect of the ‘critical approach’ which transforms social relations with the analysis of the ‘social’.

The second most frequently used language references in the subject outlines included ‘feminist’. ‘AASW Code of Ethics’ and ‘anti-oppressive’. Six universities included texts on these areas of theory in social work theory related subject outlines. ‘Feminist’ was used as feminist social work (3), feminism (2) and feminist and radical (1). ‘Anti-oppressive’ was used as anti-oppressive practice (3) and anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory approaches (2). Based on some recent

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research conducted on the presence of feminism in social work teaching in Australia, there appears to be a very strong commitment by social work scholars to maintaining feminist frameworks in their teaching (Phillips 2007). The third most frequently used language reference was ‘systems’ (5) and ‘power’ (5). ‘Systems’ was used as ecological, systems, eco-systems theory (3), eco-systems model (2), systems theory (2), systems perspective (1). The fourth frequently used language reference included ‘postmodern’ (4), ‘empowerment’ (4) ‘structural’ (4) and ‘radical’ (4). ‘Postmodern’ was used as postmodern and narrative (2), postmodernism (1), postmodern approaches (1), critical/postmodern approaches (1), postmodern discourse (1), postmodern developments (1). ‘Empowerment’ was used as empowering or empowerment. ‘Structural’ was used as structural perspective (2), structural theory (1) and structural social work (theory) (1). ‘Radical’ was used as radical social work (theory) (3) and feminist and radical (1).

The second aspect of the research relates to bibliographical references used in social work theory related subjects. There was a wide variety of bibliographical references in subject outlines surveyed, exceeding more than two hundred articles and books. Chart 2 shows references used in social work theory related subject outlines in more than 4 universities. The most frequent references included Adams, Dominelli & Payne (eds) (2002) Social work: themes, issues and critical debates, Payne (1997 & 2005) Modern Social Work Theory, O’Connor, Wilson & Setterlund (2003) Social Work and Welfare Practice. 13 universities out of 16 used these references in social work theory related subject outlines. The first two books were written by social work scholars in the UK and both discuss comprehensive social work theories and methods mainly in the UK and Australian contexts. The last book edited by social work scholars at Queensland University, discusses social work practice in Australian contexts and had been published as a fourth edition. This was a first for an Australian social work text. The next most frequently used references were all written by Australian social work scholars and mainly focused on critical social work theories, including Ife (1997) Rethinking Social Work: Towards Critical Practice (10), Fook (2002) Social Work: Critical Theory and Practice (10), Pease & Fook (eds)(1999) Transforming Social Work Practice: Postmodern Critical Perspectives (9), Fook (1993) Radical Casework: A Theory of Practice (8), Allan, Pease & Brishman (eds)(2003) Critical Social Work: An Introduction to Theories and Practices (8), Healy (2000) Social Work Practices Contemporary Perspectives on Change (8), and Ife (2002) Community Development (8). These 10 references used in subject outlines were by and large written in terms of critical social work theories. Moreover, 15 universities used at least one of these 10 references. Seven of these 10 books explicitly included ‘critical’ or ‘radical’ in its title. Except for Fook’s Radical Casework (1993), they were all written after the late 1990s.

6 Discussion

This research clearly indicates that there is an infiltration of ‘critical’ approaches of social work theories within social work theory related subject outlines in Australian schools of social work. Although 15 out of 16 schools included ‘critical’ in the subject outlines, it would be inappropriate to conclude that there is a single theoretical direction to ‘critical social work’ as there are diverse theoretical backgrounds even in critical social work theories such as radical, feminist, structural, and critical (Healy 2005). Also, 9 out of 16 schools included the terms ‘critical reflection’ or ‘critically
reflect'. The original idea of combining critical and reflective approaches for social work practice in Australia came from Fook's work (1999) in one of the first Australian 'Critical' social work books, Fook and Pease (eds)(1999) Transforming Social Work Practice. While the level of emphasis on postmodernism has been diverse in the later development of 'critical social work' (Allan, Pease and Briskman 2003; Fook 2002), 'critical reflection' would be regarded as a common important tool for social work education and practice in Australia (Healy 2005; Phillips 2008).

The use of critical social work theories also illustrates that there is extensive authorship of texts in social work literature by Australian social work scholars. The two most frequently used references written by the UK authors clearly express the recent influence and dominance of critical social work theories produced by Australian scholars. Compared to prior research, it can be said that there is a tendency toward changing from psychology oriented interpersonal theories in the late 1980s (usually from the US and the UK) to 'critical' approaches being used by Australian scholars in teaching materials for social work theory in Australia although there is a mix of theoretical backgrounds in 'critical' theories.

In addition to the infiltration of critical social work theories, the influence of postmodernism is regarded as a part of the current stream in Australian social work education. The word 'postmodern' itself is not used by many university outlines in social work related subject outlines. However, if the language related to 'postmodern' is included, 11 universities use at least one postmodern language reference like power (5), narrative approach (2), difference or valuing difference (2), context (2), discourse, language and narrative (1), and socially constructed (1). Fook's critical social work based on 'critical postmodernism' clearly focuses on these four keywords to criticize the modern concepts (Payne 2005, pp.241-246; Fook 2002). However, it might be problematic to generalize 'power', 'discourse', 'language', or 'difference', as postmodern language because a different interpretation of each term will occur in different contexts. This is a possible limitation of the content analysis method. One should note that 'power' has been used not only in critical postmodern social work but in modernist social work theories with a critical tradition such as Bob Mullaly's structural social work (Mullaly 1993). Critical postmodernists regard 'power' as a product of discourse in social relations rather than something which is possessed by specific identities such as 'male' while modernists focus on minimizing fixed repressive power differences (Healy 2005, p.202). In terms of frequently used references, only one title included 'postmodern'. However, Australian social work authors especially since the late 1990s explicitly express positive postmodern/poststructural influences in their studies (Fook 2002; Healy 2000) as well as 'tensions' with universal ideas of social justice and human rights (Ife 1997; Allan et al 2003).

Social justice discourse is the most explicitly stated framework by the AASW. For example, "Social work is the profession committed to the pursuit of social justice, to the enhancement of the quality of life, and the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society" (AASW 2000, p.4). Some literature after the 1990s has attempted to explain social justice discourse as a fundamental value and a long historical tradition in Australian social work (Benn 1991; Tesorio and Verity 1993; Camilleri 1999; Ife 1999; Martin 2003). However, similar to Valentine's research (2005), this research shows that social justice discourse is not likely to be very influential in social work
theory related subjects. While the subject outlines of 6 programs included the AASW Code of Ethics that expresses social justice as a central value of the social work profession in Australia, only three universities' outlines include 'social justice'. Valentine (2005, p.215) indicates that some reasons for the lack of social justice discourses in teaching materials are that the AASW's accreditation does not require social work education to include literature on social work values and social justice and each school of social work is free to implement its own approach in terms of ethics and values in its BSW program. However, frequently used references written by Australian authors explicitly express 'social justice' as an important value of Australian social work. In addition, in terms of critical social work at an international level, the goal of critical social work is the creation of a more just and satisfying social world despite the diverse features of critical social work theories (Hick & Pozzuto 2005, xi). However, the theoretical origin or historical backgrounds of social justice discourse are not sufficiently explained and defined in the Australian context (Funaki 2007; Valentine 2005).

7 Conclusion

The findings of this research do not necessarily reflect the entire curricula of Australian social work education as the extent of content analysis focused on only subject outlines related to social work theory. Explanations of the context in each social work discourse are limited in the texts of subject outlines. The content in subject outlines is explained and supplemented by lectures and tutorials. However, this research showed a tendency toward changes from 'modernist' models of social work theory to 'postmodern' models with a complexity of 'critical' perspectives in Australian social work teaching. In an era of social welfare backlashes by neo-liberal discourses in Japan, that Australian society has already experienced, it is important to consider the social and political contexts in relation to current discourses of social work theory in the texts in further research. This content analysis also clearly illustrates that recent social work theory teaching in Australia has lessened importation of ideas from the U.S and has produced original teaching materials by Australian scholars. Social work education in Japan has been criticized for the ongoing importation of positivist modern models in social work theory from the U.S. Therefore this study offers an understanding of possible future developments in the teaching of social work theory in Japan.

Future research issues from this study should focus on the following questions, first, how have social work discourses changed from psychology oriented interpersonal theories (from the US and the UK) to 'critical' approaches of social work theories by Australian scholars in Australian social work education, second, how has the complexity of 'critical' approaches of social work theories in Australia influenced the understanding of students in social work education, third, how has Australian social work attempted to reduce the theoretical tensions between a universal value such as social justice and anti-essentialist perspectives of postmodernism in critical social work theories.

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Current trends in Social Work Theory Subjects in Australian Social Work Education

References


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SUMMARY


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This paper explores current trends in social work theory subjects in Australian social work education at tertiary level. A text analysis of subject or units of study outlines related to social work theory was conducted through 23 Australian universities offering a social work program in 2005. This research aimed to analyze the use of language in teaching materials including reading lists in each school. Findings of this study showed a growing trend of critical social work theories in social work theory related subjects in Australian universities based on language uses. The references used for critical social work theories illustrate that there is extensive authorship of texts in the social work literature by Australian social work scholars. The discussion also covers the importance of critical social work theories, the influence of post-modernism, and social justice discourse in relation to Australian social work education.