

Book review

Kleve, H., Wirth, J. V. (2009): Die Praxis der Sozialarbeitswissenschaft (The practice of scientific social work) Hohengehren; Schneider Verlag.

Price 19.80 Euro

Subject

The intention of the authors is to give both social work practitioners and social work teachers an innovative instruction about how to handle social work as practice and as science from a systemic perspective. According to their opinion social work is in a constant “identity crisis” because of the heterogeneity of its wide set of fields of activity and therefore has to be developed as a “transdisciplinary discipline”, and that the nature of social work as practice and profession can be developed as a “semi- profession” in such a way. Within such a “post modern” position social work is able to work between systems, professions, responsibilities etc. All in all social work is the only practice which does justice to a world which is determined by ambivalence and ambiguity.

Authors

Heiko Kleve is Professor for social work at the applied university of Potsdam. He is author of a multitude of texts and books about theoretical and methodological aspects of systemic social work. Jan V. Wirth is a social worker and an external lecturer at various universities.

Content

As the book is aiming at changing the traditional view of social workers and social work teachers it starts with very basic statements about “observation” and gradually develops a more general and theory-based level of “reflection”.

Chapter 1 invites the readers to (re)learn the competence of “astonishment”, in order to be able to fully comprehend and estimate life. Using a systemic terminology the authors try to show that “reality” is only one “possibility” and that “paradoxes” should not confuse or irritate us but stimulate our readiness for “transformation”.

Chapter 2 explains the difference between theory and ideology. For the authors ideologies are not able to deal with “ambivalence” and to lead someone to believe something as supposed truth. Good theories should be able to integrate ambivalent perspectives as, especially, systemic theories do.

In Chapter 3 the authors are recommending supervision as the best means to develop a “reflective behaviour” amongst social work students. According to their opinion supervision enables students to build up systemic hypotheses and thus to realize any solution as an “already bygone solution”. With this in mind students and practitioners are more open for new solutions and capable to motivate systems to change.

In Chapter 4 and 5 the authors explain their theory of social work as a transdisciplinary practice and science. Against the background of different social work theories they try to name principles which should guide social work actions. Some overall thesis as e.g. “social work has to move on eclectically” or “social work as to decide between help and non-help a multitude of systemic, everyday-life and social space oriented principles are introduced and explained”.

Chapter 6 is on “Stimulation” and is aimed at showing the possibility to create changes through “systemic setting up” of families, organisations, etc. The “tetralemma” scheme about

the four possible positions against different standpoints (one party is right, the other party is right, none of the parties are right, all parties are right) is taken as an example to overcome “binary” thinking and to open up social workers’ minds for new and unexpected possibilities. Chapter 7 is offering 12 theses about a scientific understanding of social work practice. All in all the authors speak up for a transdisciplinary understanding of social work based on systemic methods. According to them the future of social work lays beyond the traditional understanding of scientific thinking and – with its positive interpretation of paradoxes - is able to take a post modern world into account.

Critical discussion

The argumentation of Kleve and Wirth is not totally new; a lot of arguments of the book have already appeared in former texts. The authors are claiming that a post modern social work has to stick to the methodology of the systemic theories and use its methods and techniques to help clients to cope with their life problems. But does this approach do justice to all clients of social work, such as the strong ones who are able to reflect and make a choice, as well as the weak ones? And are all possible solutions of a “tetralemma” always just and fair and what should a social worker do if clients are at risk? The most important problem of the book is not its content as both authors know their “craftsman’s work” and are presenting an interesting book which readers will enjoy and partly surprise with new ideas. It is the assumption that their systemic perspective towards and within social work could cover social work in all its different settings.

European relevance

Although the subject of the book seems to be very German its theoretical and methodological relevance seems to be European and international. For a post modern world a systemic approach in social work and social care seems to be very logical. And therefore students and teachers of social work should improve their knowledge about this theoretical approach and try to prove its relevance against different client groups and social work fields.

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