

Carole Zufferey (2017)

***Homelessness and Social Work:
An Intersectional Approach.***

London; New York: Routledge, pp. 160, £95,00

Dr Carole Zufferey is Senior Lecturer at the University of South Australia since 2002. As a social worker she worked in different areas like child protection, aged care, disability, mental health and homelessness in Australia and the UK. According to her professional website (<http://people.unisa.edu.au/carole.zufferey>) homelessness is her most important research interest. In her book she wants to “construct a new intersectional approach for understanding social work and homelessness” (p.8). Besides the current state of research, she presents results of her own intersectional research in the last more than ten years.

Structure

The book is structured in seven chapters. Following her introduction, outlining her research question and theoretical framework, the second chapter is about homelessness and social work. There she pleads for a “multilayered conceptualisation of intersectionality” (p.14) as a frame for social work with homeless people. In the next chapter she focuses on social work research and homelessness, using literature of third parties and her own research. She states that research in social work tends to ‘other’ marginalized groups like homeless people and to homogenise their lived experiences. Afterwards social policy and homelessness are the centre of attention, arguing for an intersectional perspective that would improve policy approaches to homelessness. With the fifth chapter about social work practice and homelessness, amongst others, she aims to “reinforce the advocacy and social change mandate of the social work profession” (p.104). The lived experiences of homelessness are her focus in the sixth chapter. She promotes to identify and use the user’s perspectives and narratives about home and homelessness which would be often different to the professionals’ view. She ends with her conclusions (which are more a summary of the first six chapters of her book). At the end of every section a list of references is to be found.

Appraisal

Carole Zufferey identifies homeless people as a marginalized target group of social work. She demonstrates that 'homelessness' is a construction that depends on the perspectives and presuppositions of the observer, whether it be a social worker, a policy maker or a homeless person themselves. In this context she shows the unequal distribution of power and furthermore asks, "who defines who is oppressed and privileged?" (p.22). Her theoretical framework is described as critical/structural as well as post-structural (p.1). In her book she takes up and reinforces exciting aspects and questions and I support her pleading for an intersectional approach in the context of homelessness as a social worker and researcher as well. I also understand that her focus is a theoretical one. But I got a little restless when she repeats constantly phrases like "intersectional social work research can contribute to constructing more complex and dynamic understandings of social work responses to homelessness" (p.40) without moving to conclusions: HOW do I work using an intersectional approach? And what are the concrete effects for the service users? So I drooled over practical outcomes at least from the end of chapter four. She advocates for a self-reflecting approach of social workers about their own privileges and reminds of the profession's political mandate which should be state of the art in all social work areas. But the title "*Homelessness and Social Work*" promises more than to convince the readers of a critical thinking about individualising and categorising homelessness, using an intersectional approach.

I also had a lot of difficulties to follow constantly the author's way of arguing. An example: She criticises some of the current definitions of 'homelessness' which focus on places of habitation like living in the streets, temporary housing etc. because this would include to define homelessness as a problem and housing as the only solution. Her proofs are references to other authors arguing the same way, but no (for me) comprehensible explanation is given: Where is the connection? Someone living in the streets can be defined as 'homeless' due to his housing situation without presuming a problem at the same time. In a similar way she criticises the definition of individual risk factors of homelessness. Although she refers to literature debating individual as well as structural causes for homelessness some lines before, she connects this discussion to the individual sickness paradigm that she understandably refuses (p.48).

In the same way she determines 'Housing First' concepts as "one size fits all approaches" (p.84) without citing research or statements where 'Housing First' is promoted as the only way to react on homelessness. But "Housing First is not designed to act as a solution to all forms of homelessness", as we can read for example in the Housing First Guide Europe (Pleace, 2016, p.75). She assumes also that 'Housing First' is a reaction to media representation of homelessness and the

costs for chronically homeless persons (p.77) and is to be seen as a neoliberal concept. At the end of the book she even goes one step further by claiming that, specifically with regard to 'Housing First', "legislation and policies have partly transformed social work thinking about homelessness" (p.150) – and not the other way around as I have perceived over the years.

So, although a lot of her statements are interesting and – for me – convincing, her attempt to persuade through good argumentation is not constantly successful. She also doesn't set good examples when she pleads to deconstruct the categories of client's identities and on the other hand talks e. g. about "different population groups" (p.52). Furthermore she claims to have checked the relevant literature in the US, UK, Europe and Australia. Reading the book one finds out (what is easy to understand), that she only checked literature in English. As a lot of European social workers and researchers only publish their ideas and findings in her native language (e. g. Germans and East Europeans) she can't claim to have a global overview about the current state of research. For example, the discriminations of homeless women are examined in Germany often using an intersectional approach in the last years (e. g. Schwarz, 2014; Reher, 2016). Sometimes she jumps from topic to topic, which is hard to follow. Furthermore, some parts of the book handle with her own research, but not with homelessness (e. g. "ageing and sexuality", p.132.). Also her reflections and research results about "mental homelessness" (p.137) are interesting, but what does that mean for homelessness care?

Conclusion

There are a lot of theoretical and methodological ways to look on homelessness like systemic or holistic approaches. The intersectional approach is one and for certain it is a very interesting and important one. But reading Carole Zufferey's book, I had the feeling that she tries to convince me by devaluating all other approaches and frameworks. As she states at the end of the book: "I argued that the complexities of this book distinguish it from other work in the field of social work and homelessness" (p.147). Nevertheless the book can be read as an interesting statement about an intersectional approach in social work and social policy using the example of homelessness.

› References

Pleace, Nicholas (2016) *Housing First Guide Europe*. [on-line] Available at: <http://housingfirstguide.eu> [03.04.2017]

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