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Book Reviews

S. R. Smith (ed.) (2007), *Applying Theory to Practice: Issues for Critical Reflection*. Aldershot: Ashgate. £50.00, pp. 174, hbk.
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This book is an edited collection of papers which have been brought together with the highly laudable purpose of illustrating the ways in which engagement with 'theory' and 'philosophy' can potentially provide the 'critical tools' necessary to better inform the purpose and direction of policy and practice. The underpinning assertion is that there are a range of methodological problems associated with moving from the level of philosophical and theoretical principles to policy and practice-based concerns. These problems are summarised as being: accessibility regarding the abstract nature of theory; the relevance and 'fit' of theoretical models; and those problems associated with the fact that philosophical principles are by definition focused at a level of generality that does not lend itself to direct translation into recommendations for policy and practice.

The structure of the book consists of seven practice-orientated chapters (in the areas of legal practice, probation, counselling, social work and disability) which seek to demonstrate how these theory to practice issues can be addressed in 'real world' settings. An introductory chapter sets out some general principles of engagement with theory, and a concluding chapter discusses some of the philosophical problems associated with the uncritical adoption of theory.

The introductory chapter sets the tone for any edited collection. In this book, the rather esoteric conceptualisation of 'theory' offered in the first chapter does rather distort the way in which the proceeding practice-based chapters are perceived. Here, a rather forced duality is set-up between, on the one hand, 'fact-based' objectivist – 'naïve positivism' – approaches to the assessment of policy and practice that are based solely on the measurement of pre-defined outcomes whose ethical and political bases remain unquestioned, and, on the other hand, 'theory' – here essentially conceptualised as normative ethics theory – which is able to provide the tools for an analysis of the 'value-ends' of policy. The reader is then briefly introduced to a debate assessing the merits of a Utilitarian versus a Rawlsian normative ethics in assessing policy debates. In a book entitled *Applying Theory to Policy and Practice*, readers would reasonably expect a broader outline of contemporary debates in social theory and methodology applied to practice, but this is not the case here. To take just one example, realist evaluation, which is becoming increasingly influential in the field of public policy and practice evaluation, is not mentioned. This is despite the fact that several of the practice-based chapters specifically adopt this approach in their application of theory to practice.

To add to the frustration, the collection is book-ended with a concluding chapter that is entitled 'Beyond practice and theory'. This is a somewhat surprising inclusion given the declared aim of the book is to promote the application of theory to practice. This chapter, by David Morgans, is primarily a critique of the forms of knowledge produced by social theorising. Drawing upon Wittengenstein's notion of the 'language game', Morgans argues that words or concepts only have meaning in grounded use or social practices, and outside of these situated contexts theories serve only to 'hide from us the actual forms of life from within which our

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talk makes sense' (p. 153). In what he describes as the 'no theory' approach, Morgans goes on to suggest that rather than searching for the 'correct theory' to account for our practice which ignores the 'embedded and embodied' nature of practice, as practitioners we should be engaged in a much more reflexive examination of our prejudgements and interrelationships with others. While this individualisation of practice may or may not have a relevance in particular areas of social and health care practice, as a 'no theory' theory of practice it certainly does not address the ethical critique of policy concerns set out in the introductory chapter.

Book ended between these introductory and concluding chapters are seven original papers which do actually address the issue of the application of theory to policy and practice. James Sweeney's chapter on the legal processes involved in asylum appeals is a well-written and detailed account of the way in which immigration judges utilise and extend 'rationalist' notions of what constitutes a legal 'fact' in order to actively construct what is 'true' and what is 'false' in the evidence offered by asylum seekers in asylum appeals as set against the 'facts' presented by the Home Office. Cowe, Deering and Vanstone's persuasive chapter continues with the theme of what constitutes 'evidence' in their critical account of the emergent 'orthodoxy' of the evidence-based model of practice in probation work. The authors propose a new non-prescriptive 'collaborative' model which, rather than imposing a narrow perspective of practice, seeks to give practitioners a much greater role in evaluating practice through an active process of engagement with practice-based research that will lead them to value and act upon findings through a process of critical reflection. In her chapter exploring the relationship between theory and practice in counselling and psychotherapy, Sheila Spong makes the case for the adoption of a 'theoretical scepticism' to enable practitioners to resist the temptation to engage in what she describes as 'authoritarian forms of practice' that are seen to follow on from the wholesale adoption of expert forms of knowledge. Lana Morris's chapter builds on this theme of the necessary tensions that exist between belief and scepticism in her critical examination of competency-based practice, focusing on the 'evidence-based' theory and skills taught to students on the BA (Hons) Social Work programme and their application in Care Management through the standardised Unified Assessment process.

The introductory chapter's focus on the application of normative ethics in the critical assessment of 'value-laden' practice and policy is reflected in the following two chapters. Gideon Calder critically examines the teaching of ethics of vocational programmes in higher education, and argues that for ethics to have a 'use-value' for practitioners this can only come through the promotion of a critical self-awareness of the contested nature of ethical debate rather than through the didactic method of learning pre-established rules. Alan Carling's informative account of the building of Bradford's 'Programme for a Peaceful City' (of which he was the Chairman in its formative period) following the 2001 riots, focuses on the problems faced in attempting to overcome the tensions existing between the different ethnic and social groups in that city. Carling argues that through a process of collective deliberation and reflection it was possible to develop normative principles that would allow a constructive dialogue between these groups to emerge. The final practice-based chapter is written by Nadia Heredia who draws upon discourse analysis to assess the impact of the social model of disability in the Latin American context. Although this is an interesting account of the conflict between representations of disability, it does rather sit outside the other chapters in the collection with their focus on the perhaps more prosaic concerns of policy and practice in the UK.

In conclusion, while this collection does lack a clear unifying structure – reflecting the limitations of the introductory chapter – the majority of the practice-based chapters are accessible, informative and do stand-up in their own right.

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