

Book Review**Social Theory for Beginners**

Ransome, P. 2010.. Policy Press. Bristol.

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Why social theory is important to youth work practitioners.

Youth work is a term which describes a variety of interactions, but which is essentially to do with the mediation between children and/or young adults and other members of a wider community. This might involve, but is by no means limited to, basic education surrounding health, morality and societal mores, politics, sharing of skills or even just the free use of a dedicated space. The role of the youth worker changes according to context and purpose but can include: providing support and encouragement, striving for social justice and equality within and between communities, responsibility to the children and young people under the worker's jurisdiction and an integrity which may serve as an example. Because of these roles, and the responsibility that they confer upon the worker, it is beneficial to have at least a basic understanding of society and the social relations within it. An introduction to social theory can help workers to be more critical of assumptions surrounding communities and their 'problems'. At its best, this kind of critical engagement with current representations of 'community' and 'youth' allows youth workers to avoid the reification of negative stereotypes, and gives them an insight into the structural issues behind the situations that they experience in practice. Most importantly, an understanding of social theory gives youth workers a theoretical insight into why it is so important to challenge essentialist conceptions of youth behaviour and community relations.

Ransome's text is extremely well laid out and explains, in depth, the most important aspects of social theory to the beginner. This is achieved, in the first instance, by displaying information in easily digested sections with an introduction and recap to the ideas in each. There are also a number of refresher questions at the end of each chapter in 'practice boxes'. These encourage the reader to engage again with the key points but also to place the ideas in a more familiar context. For example, in the 'practice box' for the chapter entitled 'Karl Marx, capitalism and revolution' one of the tasks posed is 'Think of two activities and compare them in terms of their relative use value' (2010:97). Although a basic task in some ways, this forces the reader to consider Marx's theory of value *in practice* and it is this which turns abstract theory into useful and relevant explanations of lived experience.

Throughout each chapter great attention is paid to the context of each idea and theory. The intricacies of the dialectical development of theory are discussed extensively, a detail which too many texts omit. This allows the reader to link theories and theorists, eventually building a fairly comprehensive theoretical framework of ideas. The historical context of each theory and theorist is just as important as the theories themselves. Ransome places ideas in a specific timeframe in order that the reader understands not only the theories, but also the material and social context to which they owe their inception.

Written in accessible language and at a good length, the book is well suited to the beginner. Ransome manages to avoid the academic exclusivity implicit in many other texts, often reinforced through overly-complicated prose and use of alien terminology without sufficient explanation. The ‘key points’ boxes at the end of each chapter reinforce the learning, and the book’s extensive glossary condenses the trickiest concepts into concise definitions.

Overall, the book’s accessible tone and the attention to contextualising theories and theorists make this a very strong entry-level text for students and practitioners. Theory matters – and this book explains why!