

# Book Review

Parrot, L. (2014). *Social Work and Poverty: A Critical Approach*. Bristol, United Kingdom: Policy Press.

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*Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, Volume 11, Number 2 (2014)  
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Lester Parrot, who is Senior Lecturer at Keele University, has over 18 years of experience in both residential and field social work. He continues to teach, write and to explore the implications of social policy on social work practice, ethics and values.

In eight very readable, often passionate chapters, the author presents a compelling case for social workers to reconnect to the underlying bedrock of the profession and practice. “Why do you wish to be a social worker?” The inevitable reply, “I want to help people.” And Mr. Parrot seeks to generate a campaign to unite community and the profession in order to actively and realistically address poverty by focusing attention to the individual, the organization, as well as the social aspects of poverty. Advocacy is a powerful tool if it is honed to respond to crises rather than turn into a “social worker practice that has become increasingly tied to fulfilling managerial procedures that limit their professional judgment.” (p.140)

Although the focus is on social work and poverty in the United Kingdom, the history and events clearly will resonate with many who live in the United States. Beginning with poverty and social work in the historical context within the UK, the author re-counts how approaches to poverty were initially “communal,” but with the advent of industrial capitalism, approaches became more individualistic with a primary focus on self-help. A key to this focus of self-help was the establishment of the Society for Organizing Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendacity (COS, Charity Organization Society). COS sought to introduce scientific

principles to examine and evaluate the poor and then establish methods for helping them develop principles of independence and self-help.

As an example of policy leading to practice, through the establishment of COS the casework model was adopted as a promising practice. It was to be “scientific,” and thereby use established principles to examine and evaluate the poor. The caseworker was to be detached from personal or familiar entanglements with the poor in order to maintain objectivity. The caseworker would be a ‘role model’ and help the poor develop principles of independence and self-help. The underlying philosophy of this approach was “any help that was given should be temporary and reformatory to restore the applicant to independence.” (p.14) These ideas and principles had significant influence and spread throughout the UK, Australia and the United States where they retain some credibility and power even today.

The author provides an excellent overview of the concept of poverty, its definition and the major theoretical perspectives used to examine the cause(s) of poverty. He builds upon this consideration by then observing the service user perspective and the utility for social workers in better understanding the circumstance and events. For example, the role of language in communicating with people living in poverty can establish either useful dialogues or alienation between the service user and provider. One must recognize the power dimensions associated with language and the stigma that is attached to being poor.

As social work organizations respond to poverty in the United Kingdom, the author is critical of the influence of neo-liberalism on professional social work and suggests values and discretion are being undermined in a drive toward rational management. Consequently, the author suggests social workers must assess their organizations in terms of achieving social justice and seek to return to the original mission of the profession.

In each chapter, a case study is provided to illustrate the concepts and encourage further thought and debate. These are helpful for the student of social work as well as a useful refresher for prac-

tioners. The reader should understand this book provides a strong case for advocacy reform and action for the poor and as such, does not seek or promote parity. And while the focus may be on poverty and social work in the United Kingdom, the events, changing policies and implications for social work practice are equally insightful for social workers in the United States. Anyone with an interest in social welfare policies and programs should find this book worth their time and attention, especially given the current political environment in the UK and United States, which has aggressively sought to reduce resources to address the significance and growth of poverty.