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An A-Z of Social Work Theory, Malcolm Payne, Sage Publishing, London, pp 282, price £19.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781526487254

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This is a welcome book by Malcolm Payne, who is a very well-respected social work academic and writer. He has written extensively, his collaborations with Dominelli and Adams are well respected as is his work on humanistic social work and social work in a modern context. I was pleased to receive this book to review, and I came at it with much anticipation. The book is designed for students and newly qualified social workers, and my initial focus of review was for this audience, but I also considered the wider social work audience, including social work educators as well as a more public audience. Afterall social work is a profession delivered by people to people. Having helped draft a book on social work theory myself I am aware there is quite a bit of literature already available in this field. Most of this literature concentrates on aspects of theory and tends to propose theoretical perspectives and recommendations for practice or extend theoretical debate. There is less reference material which presents theories without offering opinion and it is here I feel this book is aimed. Payne states his intention is to be succinct and get "straight to the heart of the concept or theory under discussion" tailored for a social work audience. I am also interested in how such a book compares to an internet search or popular online encyclopaedias which provide brief introductions to many topics.

It was with these in mind that I reviewed this book. To be honest I would have been saddened, such is how I respect Payne's work, if I had found this book disappointing. Thankfully I did not. To cut to the chase I found this book delivered on its intentions and is a very good resource for social work students and practitioners. Readers are introduced to a topic which they can then explore further by the references and suggested reading. Chapter one begins with 'Acceptance' which it explains is an ethical and practice principle in social work relating to interpersonal relationships. This entry then reflects on some historical debates concerning acceptance in social work including Timms who in the 1980s explained acceptance was more than an attitude because social workers have a duty to work with people who are hard to sympathise with. This entry on acceptance is more than 700 words and demonstrates the degree of depth Payne goes into when providing relatively succinct accounts. Other entries, such as 'Affiliation' are shorter at less than 100 words. The 'Ageing' entry provides a succinct definition and then offers some social theories of ageing, such as disengagement theory. I like the way Payne deals with each entry on its merits and alters the style of entry accordingly. I am going to suggest students read the entries on anti-discrimatory, anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice because they are accessible and explain how they are different. Alongside topics, the book includes authors, such as Ulrich Beck. Naturally, there will be topics others would include, or sections expanded. I think the entry on critical realism, for instance, should include Bhaskar and Archer, but then everyone has their preferences and books are ultimately limited by wordcount.

My conclusion is this is a super book. It meets the author's intentions. I think it shows how such a well-constructed and thoughtful reference book can out compete internet searches and online encyclopaedia by relating specifically to social work. Would I recommend buying this book, yes. University libraries should contain an electronic version and at least several hard copies because this is a very good book for students, as well as practitioners, and I have no doubt it will be extensively used online.