

Book Review

Rosenberger, J. B. (Ed.). (2014). *Relational social work practice with diverse populations*. New York, NY: Springer.

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The use of “her” as the dominant pronoun in this book reflects the importance of marginalized clients who stand to benefit from the application of relational social work. The book’s purpose is to demonstrate how relational social work can be employed with traditionally marginalized populations. Relational attunement and maintenance as part of relational social work are particularly important when trying to create a therapeutic safe space for minority clients.

Relational social work blends the social constructivist and psychoanalytic approaches. This blend is reflected throughout the text by the use of psychoanalytic terms such as corrective experience, transference, countertransference, holding space, and therapeutic alliance as well as self-in-relation, empathic attunement, cultural alignment, and co-construction of meaning that are more social constructivist in nature. The authors suggest that relational social work can be used with other approaches such as solution-focused therapy.

Astute self-reflection and expert supervision are required to help the social worker manage issues of transference and countertransference. This involves the co-creation of a therapeutic space where a client and social worker can address issues that emerge through the process of relating. This therapeutic relationship becomes an “internalized working model for the client’s life with others” (p. 100). As such, in relational social work, the

therapeutic relationship is the central intervention used to facilitate healthy functioning.

To further explain the application of relational social work, this book is divided into five parts. The focus of the first part is to detail the theoretical foundation of relational social work. Parts two and three demonstrate how relational social work may be used with clients based on race/ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. The last part addresses the use of relational social work to assist clients with significant life-altering event, such as release from prison, return from combat, and homelessness.

The use of an edited book is ideal for this subject. Each chapter has a consistent framework. Variation in author and client population creates the space for a slightly different description and application of relational social work. As a result, the reader is able to intellectually engage with the authors as they co-create in the definition of relational social work. This process was facilitated by case examples and questions about the content at the end of each chapter.

Hence, the authors do an excellent job in demonstrating how to apply relational social work; however, there are some technical and conceptual weaknesses that should be noted. Some conceptual weaknesses of the book will be reviewed given the implications for social work practice. Central to these concerns is the lack of discussion about the

limits of relational social work, role of self-care, and ethical risks associated with heavy reliance on the therapeutic relationship as the mode of intervention.

Relational social work seems to be more emotionally intimate than traditional approaches, but such intimacy carries with it ethical risks that could potentially violate client psychological safety and threaten professional self-care that leads to burnout. For example, does increased subjectivity associated with relational social work interfere with clinical judgment? Does it lead to inappropriate expectations for the relationship during and/or after treatment or the experience of secondary trauma among relational social workers?

Curiosity about a client's experience is also a key feature of relational social work, but such questions potentially shift the burden of educating the social worker about client diversity to the client. What if a client does not want to assume the responsibility for sharing personal experience of being a minority to educate the social worker? Hence, the book needs more exploration on ways to ensure that operating from a position of "not knowing" does become another expression of power and privilege.

Although the authors suggest that relational social work could be applied with other treatment approaches, case studies are not provided beyond direct application of relational social work to delineate an eclectic approach. How might therapeutic issues, like sexual abuse, be treated with relational social work? The limits of relational social work are not detailed in the book either. For example, are there some clients who are not likely to be responsive to relational social work due to having a personality or psychotic disorder?

It is clear that the recognition of such treatment issues relies heavily on keen insight and supervision. Given the centrality of the therapeutic

relationship, limits in these critical areas may limit treatment effectiveness and even cause unintentional harm to clients. Therefore, the book needs to more fully address the challenges associated with applying relational social work. It would also be an interesting to further explore the importance of relational social work in non-clinical roles with clients, like providing case management.

Despite such criticism, this book still makes a strong argument for the power of relational social work. It is an excellent resource for more sophisticated application by experienced social workers. Future editions of this book could easily address the issues above as well as expand with more chapters on application with diverse populations (e.g., older adults) and to address other life-altering experiences (e.g., natural disasters or the end-of-life). Minor edits could enhance the overall presentation and utility for graduate social work students.