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Review of *Sex-Positive Social Work* by S. J. Dodd

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Book Reviews

S. J. Dodd, *Sex-Positive Social Work*. Columbia University Press (2020). 288 pages, \$35 (paperback).

Sexuality and sexual health is an understudied and under-discussed area of social work practice in dire need of attentive development; fortunately, the strengths-focused, sex-positive approach of the author is just what is required. The author seeks to help us have discussions with our clients and students around issues of sexuality and to acknowledge sexuality as an important area of wellbeing. Dodd would like us to develop our knowledge about sexual topics and develop comfort with discussing a wide range of sexual issues. After all, it is time we figure out as a profession and as practitioners how to have these important discussions.

Dodd begins each chapter with CSWE competencies as a way to anchor the reader, and ends each chapter with discussion questions and suggested resources for further exploration. Dodd starts by using the CSWE competencies to emphasize the importance of bringing sexuality into our practices. Reminding us that we need to have self-awareness of our own biases and preconceptions, Dodd urges us to push through our initial discomfort with discussions of sexuality and sexual behavior. The author encourages us to practice, to learn appropriate language, and to create sex-positive physical or virtual spaces for our clients. She also offers helpful lists of demographic questions we may ask our clients as a way of beginning to bring sex, sexuality, gender expression, sexual behavior, and sexual health into the room and make them available for discussion.

The explication of anatomy, physiology, and arousal provides basic sexual education that may be missing for those growing up in a culture which may be missing good general sex education. Dodd acknowledges the differences between sex and gender and reminds us to consider how clients may experience these aspects of themselves. She sensitively addresses issues of intersexuality and reproductive characteristics with a vagina or a penis as a way of acknowledging those who have varying expressions of embodiment,

all the while encouraging readers to avoid making assumptions that may erase or invalidate those whom we serve.

In a chapter on taking a sexual history, Dodd walks us through the importance of doing this sensitively, from bringing up the topic of sex, to breaking the ice with our clients, and watching the language we use in our discussions. She then offers several different methods of obtaining a sexual history and encourages the reader to find one that works for them and their style of practice. Helpful chapters explore sexual identity and gender identity, and sexuality across the lifespan. Dodd emphasizes that a focus on communication about love and intimacy is an important part of this work. Dodd characterizes as “alt sex” those sexualities that move beyond practices “that are procreative, heterosexual, monogamous and genitally focused” (p. 156) and acknowledges that this may well be an area of particular discomfort for teachers and therapists. Dodd brings great sensitivity to the topic, and reminds the reader to practice the nonjudgmental, strengths-based, sex-positive attitude she has been presenting in the text. This is followed by a chapter presenting sexual dysfunctions and disorders that commonly present in current practice. Here again, she utilizes a sex-positive, strengths-based lens to view these issues and to explore their impact on client relationships and wellbeing. In each of these chapters devoted to specific topics, Dodd includes an assessment model to use in practice.

Closing chapters address social work ethics in detail, drawing upon social work values and their importance in this area of practice. She unpacks issues of erotic transference and countertransference, and provides suggestions on how to navigate these potentially thorny issues. Finally, she concludes the text with an overview and much encouragement for those in the beginning stages of doing this work. She stresses that this is a lifelong journey of learning and growing, and encourages the reader to find their own authentic professional self to use in this important work. At the same time, she gently reminds the reader to avoid pathologizing client behavior and refrain from assuming that sexual behavior is relevant to the presenting problem, unless and until the client identifies it as such.

Overall, Dodd has given us a thoughtful, comprehensive, and welcome text for this area of study and practice. Although we have improved our abilities to recognize and deal with many aspects of

human behavior, we still need help and encouragement to incorporate sexuality into our practice. Dodd's book is accessible and thorough, and, most importantly, is steeped in the best aspects of social work practice. I'm so glad it is now available.

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Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. Random House (2020). 446 pages, \$32 (hardcover).

Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* is a fascinating meditation on racism in the United States and a reinterpretation of its underpinnings. Her first book, the highly acclaimed *The Warmth of Other Suns*, is an exemplary work of narrative non-fiction that traced the exodus of Black families out of the Jim Crow South early in the 20th century. In contrast, *Caste* is a unique and impressionistic work that incorporates the author's personal experiences and observations, comparative historical analysis, and evocative metaphors, parables, and allegories, all in the service of an extended argument for the centrality of caste in understanding racism.

Wilkerson refers, of course, to the now-illegal, yet pervasive, Hindu-based system of cultural, economic, and social hierarchy that has existed for millennia in India. In the 1930s and 1940s, Black and White scholars conducted field work in the southern United States, of which Gunnar Myrdal's classic *An American Dilemma* is the best known. One of Wilkerson's most interesting chapters recounts the travails of a Black academic, Allison Davis, and his colleagues, to complete his field research in the midst of such hyper-segregation. These scholars argued that Jim Crow comprised an American version of the Indian caste system. However, other contemporary scholars and activists objected that to view racial oppression through the lens of caste was a grave mistake. First, the seemingly endless persistence of caste in India, they believed, implied that fundamental change was practically impossible. Second, the sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox, for one, argued the concept of caste diverted focus away from the uniquely savage system of racial