

Example of Annotated Bibliography (Group Assignment)

Strier, R. (2008) Class-competent social work: A preliminary definition. *International Journal of Social Welfare* 18 (3), 237-242.

Strier is a faculty member in the School of Social Work at Haifa University in Israel. This article is an analytic piece.

Strier outlines the conceptual history of social work. (1) The roots of social work lie in class divisions because social work came into existence to address the needs of the poor and underprivileged. In its earliest days, social work was a “moral obligation” of the “more privileged” for the poor. (2) Jane Addams, a founder of the profession, recognized class and the class basis of American society as a root cause of the need for social work. (3) Early 20th century social work was highly influenced by “psychological” approaches, stressing individual failure to assimilate and largely ignoring broader social and cultural roots of poverty. (4) Contemporary social work stresses the importance of gender, race, culture, religion and ethnicity in creating social differences, but largely ignores class.

Strier posits that class remains critically important to effective social work for two primary reasons. First, social work as a profession continues to focus on the poor. Class differences lie at the heart of the profession. Second, neo-liberal ideology and perspectives represent middle-class values and norms. Therefore, social workers cannot address social justice. They become complicit in implementing policies and programs that exacerbate social injustice and poverty. However, she rejects Marx’s original economic definition of class. She recognizes class as a complex phenomenon that is “experienced” by the individual because of both economic condition and factors like race, ethnicity and gender.

She concludes that social workers do not have the knowledge, skills and sensibility to class that they should – that social workers need to be “class-competent.” There are four components to class-competence. (1) The first is class an understanding of the dynamics of class, especially how class interacts with other aspects of diversity like race and gender. (2) Second, social workers must have professional skills that will allow them to help their clients challenge class oppression, such as participatory research and consciousness-raising methodologies. (3) Social workers need a firm understanding of the theories that are essential to understanding the structural nature of social problems. (4) Social workers must learn to be self-critical, and particularly to examine their own class-based biases and assumptions, and understand that their work is “cross-class” in nature.

This article explains how the concepts of class and class-consciousness have evolved since Marx’s work. For example, she cites the contributions of Weber and Bourdieu in developing the concept of class. She emphasizes how individuals experience class and how it affects self-esteem and self-confidence, ideas that Marx never raised. She discusses economic, social, psychological and symbolic dimensions of class, whereas Marx saw class as an economic phenomenon. However, she does not abandon the Marxian idea that class is deeply embedded in the economic structure of society. Her discussions of the different views of the role of social work reflect key issues that Marx addressed. One view is that of “social philanthropy,” the idea that the objective of social work is to “help the poor accommodate” to their class position. She makes a strong contrast between this view of the profession and the alternative that social work should address social inequality and injustice and promote liberation from oppression.