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Clinical Sociology: An Agenda for Action

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Clinical Sociology: An Agenda for Action, by John G. Bruhn and Howard M. Rebach. New York: Plenum, 1996. 243 pp. \$39.50. ISBN 0-306-45448-3.
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Those who have regularly read *Clinical Sociology Review* since it first began publication in 1982 probably don't need a definition of "clinical sociology." For those who have not been regular readers, clarification of the definition is important. Bruhn and Rebach define clinical sociology as the "use of sociology for positive social change and development . . . and a basis for active intervention that addresses current social problems" (p. 1). "Active intervention" is the criterion that distinguishes clinical sociology from other "practical applications" of sociology such as "applied sociology" and "sociological practice" (p. 2).

Bruhn and Rebach's book is the first in a new series, *Clinical Sociology: Research and Practice*, edited by Bruhn. As the first book in the series, it is appropriate to try to establish an agenda for action for the field of clinical sociology in the twenty-first century. The authors present four theoretical approaches to problem solving (social system, human ecology, life cycle, clinical), describe problem solving at different levels of social organization (micro, meso, macro), and outline program evaluation and intervention techniques. Then, they set a seven-point agenda for action that includes awareness of and work on issues surrounding ethics, information technology, health promotion, accountability, service integration, the physical environment, and public policy.

The organization and content of the book are similar to an earlier volume edited by the authors (Rebach and Bruhn, 1991). Clinical sociology students, who are the primary audience for the book, will find this more concise and updated overview of the field a helpful resource that contains illustrative clinical cases and annotated reading recommendations. Coverage of theoretical approaches is largely guided by the authors' preferences and experiences with a set of models that share core features and have proved useful in their practice of clinical sociology. The book goes beyond this, however, by emphasizing and demonstrating ways in which other sociological theories can be applied to the solution of practical problems. An additional strength is that consideration of ethical issues, to which too little attention is given in sociology, is integrated in almost all of the topical areas addressed.

Clinical Sociology: An Agenda for Action might be considered the first primer in the field. It moves toward a clearer definition of clinical sociology which will hopefully help to resolve some of the identity issues and lack of cohesion among this group of professionals, as well as bring greater visibility

to other sociologists of the important work done in this area. Although the book is primarily intended for students, clinical sociologists will be challenged by it to “explore new ways to use their sociological skills in solving problems” (p. *xi*).

Liberalism and the Problem of Knowledge, A New Rhetoric for Modern Democracy, by Charles Arthur Willard. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. 344 pp. Cloth. \$55.00. ISBN 0-226-89845; Paper \$17.95.

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Charles Willard is Chair of the Department of Communication at the University of Louisville. And he is troubled by a pandemic of ethnic and nationalist violence, political tyranny, and what he sees as an inherent problem with liberal political philosophy, particularly its hope in the redemptive powers of an educated public. His solution to this problem is a bold argument for the need to replace the traditional rhetoric of liberalism with one he calls epistemics. It almost works.

Willard draws his inspiration from the work of Richard Rorty who questions attempts to “eternalize” powerful discourses as natural, timeless and beyond history. Privileged ways of talking are, like all human experience, historical and institutional; and no one discourse, to paraphrase Lord Acton, is fit to govern. It is Willard’s goal in this book to introduce another, *better*, way of talking about human communities. His idea of better is borrowed from Rorty’s evocative claim that knowledge can be thought of as either a reflection of the nature of the world or as a less momentous but perhaps more useful resource to help us cope with reality. Rorty opts for the latter, more pragmatic, view of knowledge. So does Willard.

Liberalism and the Problem of Knowledge is an argument for the political and philosophical inability of liberalism to accommodate the demands of an increasing number of important public issues that require the interplay of complicated arenas of expert knowledge. Contemporary political issues cross many fields of knowledge, but individual expertise can cross only a few. Thus we often face a knotty tangle of knowledge claims that no one person can straighten into a coherent, acceptable rhetoric for political action. The result is a profound sense of chaos. “Any nation that bequeaths its children a nuclear arsenal and ancient clichés to administer it,” Willard observes wryly, “deserves the rebellion it gets” (p.23).