

# Social Work

Sara Miller McCune founded SAGE Publishing in 1965 to support the dissemination of usable knowledge and educate a global community. SAGE publishes more than 1000 journals and over 800 new books each year, spanning a wide range of subject areas. Our growing selection of library products includes archives, data, case studies and video. SAGE remains majority owned by our founder and after her lifetime will become owned by a charitable trust that secures the company's continued independence.

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi | Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

Fourth Edition

# Social Work

A Critical Approach to Practice

Jan Fook



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

SAGE Publications Ltd  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
B 1/1 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road  
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd  
3 Church Street  
#10-04 Samsung Hub  
Singapore 049483

---

Editor: Kate Keers  
Editorial assistant: Sahar Jamfar  
Production editor: Sarah Sewell  
Copyeditor: Bryan Campbell  
Proofreader: Rosemary Campbell  
Indexer: Elske Janssen  
Marketing manager: Camille Richmond  
Cover design: Sheila Tong  
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in the UK

© Jan Fook 2023

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research, private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may not be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publisher.

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2022935484**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5297-9024-5  
ISBN 978-1-5297-9023-8 (pbk)

At SAGE we take sustainability seriously. Most of our products are printed in the UK using responsibly sourced papers and boards. When we print overseas we ensure sustainable papers are used as measured by the PREPS grading system. We undertake an annual audit to monitor our sustainability.

# CONTENTS

<i>About the Author</i>	vi
<i>Preface</i>	vii
<b>Part 1 Critical Potential and Current Challenges</b>	<b>1</b>
1 The Critical Tradition of Social Work	3
2 Current Contexts of Practice: Challenges and Possibilities	26
<b>Part 2 Rethinking Ideas</b>	<b>45</b>
3 New Ways of Knowing	47
4 Power	64
5 Discourse, Language and Narrative	77
6 Identity and Difference	94
<b>Part 3 Redeveloping Practices</b>	<b>115</b>
7 Critical Deconstruction and Reconstruction	117
8 Empowerment	135
9 Problem Conceptualisation and Assessment	148
10 Narrative Strategies	167
11 Contextual Practice: Strategies for Working in and with Contexts	180
12 Ongoing Learning	197
<i>References</i>	213
<i>Index</i>	226

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jan Fook** has social work degrees from the University of New South Wales and the University of Sydney and a PhD from the University of Southampton, and is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (UK). She was recently awarded University Scholar status at the University of Vermont and holds numerous Visiting Professorships at universities around the world. She has had a long career as a social work educator and a Professor of Education and has also worked in continuing education and the interprofessional field in Australia, the UK, Canada, Norway and the USA. She is currently Professor and Chair of the Department of Social Work at the University of Vermont. She is best known for her work on critical social work, practice research and critical reflection and has published extensively in these areas. She has travelled widely delivering lectures and workshops on critical reflection.

Jan would like to acknowledge the contributions of her colleague, Siddhesh Mukerji, PhD, who read the manuscript for relevance in the USA, made suggestions for updating, and wrote additional pieces. Siddhesh is an Assistant Professor at the University of Vermont and has social work degrees from the University of Chicago and Loyola University Chicago. His scholarship on socially engaged Buddhism explores how Buddhist activists have conceptualised and responded to social-environmental problems. He is also committed to learning, teaching and practising actions that social workers may take in response to the global ecological crisis.

# PREFACE

I write this piece very much aware of who I am, my place in the world and the humbling implications of this. I am one person, with a fairly unique biography, writing about social work at a particular time in history. What gives me the right to speak about social work in a unified and packaged way? I would not have had these sentiments over 20 years ago, when I wrote the first edition of this volume, back in 1999. What has changed for me, and what experiences have led me to express these ideas now?

When I first wrote this book, I was a newish professor. I had, a couple of years earlier, written a whole new innovative social work programme and I was thrilled to finally have the authority and creative space to teach social work in ways which matched my ideas and ideals. It all seemed so clear about what the profession needed, and I was enthusiastically poised to provide it! Since then I have travelled extensively to many different countries providing workshops, and indeed in the last 15 years, after leaving my native Australia where I wrote this book, have lived and worked in the UK, Canada, Norway and now the United States.

Several instances stand out for me from this period of time. First, was when I realised that the child welfare case I had read about in my undergraduate years in Sydney, and which was supposedly formative of the social work I was studying, was actually a British case (Maria Colwell), presumably formative of child welfare practice in that country for some years to come. Mortifyingly, I only realised this well AFTER I had completed my first social work degree. Looking back, I became starkly aware that we did not even have an adequate body of Australian social work literature at the time. So 'naturally' we used existing literature (mostly from the UK and the USA) as if it was the first and last word in social work. I do not recall one of my lecturers noting that this literature came from a different country or context.

Second was when I was invited to teach in a week-long programme in Mongolia. I did all I could to find out about Mongolian social work beforehand, so that I could make my material relevant, only to find that Mongolian social work was not yet established, and that people like myself, seen as international experts, were being imported to impart our 'expert' ideas in order to establish the profession there. The incongruity hit me like a ton of bricks when I found myself teaching about critical reflection whilst standing in a yurt, in front of a tapestry of Ghengis Khan, national hero, but hardly a reflective poster boy (for me).

Third was when I took part in a discussion group of UK social work educators, some newly arrived from other countries. We asked each other to name what we thought was the mainstream type of work or place in which social workers would be found in that country. Obviously enough (I guess but more on this later) the British person said 'child welfare'. I, as the Australian said 'hospital social work'. Guess what the person from India said?... 'In prison'. Why? Because it would be their job to advocate for the poor and disadvantaged. More than

anything which I had experienced before, this answer led me to question how much we could actually generalise about social work between different country contexts.

The latter was reinforced strongly to me when a prominent UK social work academic asserted that social work in the UK was the same as child welfare work. I began to wonder even more worriedly about whether the literature we used interchangeably between countries, or even took as gospel in some settings, was appropriately educating social workers to work effectively in different contexts.

My international experience has also led me to be wary of assertions about universal social work (Gray and Fook, 2004). Sure, we might share the same language and assumptions of a shared value system, but how do these actually play out in different contexts? Does using the same language mean we are actually talking about the same thing? (Lalayants et al., 2015: 13) Does (and can or should) social justice look the same in a radically neo-liberal context now, as it may have looked in less economically fraught times?

In this book you will see various attempts to contextualise points that are being made about social work. Indeed, one of the important principles that the book seeks to put forward is that of contextuality, which applies of course to many other contexts than just national ones.

An important aspect of contextual working is the ability to locate oneself in relation to the ideas being put forward. From that perspective, I am a third generation Australian-born Chinese woman who is a longstanding social work and education academic (and who is also a first generation graduate). I cannot speak or understand Cantonese, the language of my heritage. I was raised in White Australia, the child of 2nd-generation Chinese Australians who held unquestioningly to the migrant values of education for improvement and social mobility. As mentioned earlier, I have lived and worked in several different Western countries after leaving my native Australia over 15 years ago. I believe my experiences have given me a capacity NOT to take for granted the ideas and culture of my surroundings, but to have the courage and audacity to question and to fashion different thinking. At the same time, I am painfully aware that being too different socially (especially racially) always raised a nagging doubt about my own social safety. So I have developed the principle to try to engage carefully, cautiously and appreciatively, with whatever I see as current mainstream thinking. I have learnt that this type of stance helps me craft a way of being from which to make changes in status quo thinking. From this perspective I strive to develop a fundamentally critical approach to social work but to construct it in ways which will enable the mainstream culture to understand and practise it. In some ways, it will help readers if you can appreciate the thinking in this book from these angles. The idea of contextual practice can be seen as arising directly from my own take on the world ... that ideas and actions must always be developed and embodied from the actual experiences that shape the people involved.

A historical perspective is also crucial to a contextual perspective. This is especially the case given the time in which this book is being reworked. We have been experiencing a global pandemic now for some 18 months with complete uncertainty about how long these conditions will continue. Many of us have learnt first hand how to live (or not) with uncertainty; how quickly structural conditions can make or break the economies of households and nations;



how one decision from one person in power can determine the relative fortunes of countless differing people and groups; and also indeed how we can to some extent, with the use of technology, free ourselves from the tyranny of the physical workplace, and connect with each other in different ways. All these instances of course have differential impacts according to your social class, your access to resources, your relative health, where you live, your racial background, and the usual activities you engage in. Social differences are accentuated by the experience of the pandemic. A critical and contextual approach to social work becomes even more applicable in these conditions.

Yet another aspect of our current historical period needs to be pinpointed. This is the global awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement, especially sparked by the 2020 murder of George Floyd in the USA. Race politics should always be a part of social work analysis, and anti-racist practice something which must be continually developed. It is worth trying to understand further though, how these recent developments have shaped the debate and issues in different country contexts as well. In the USA it seems to me that these issues have become more polarised (also fuelled by the January 2021 insurrection on Capitol Hill). For me personally, I face questions of how I can contribute to the debate in this country, not having been grounded or socialised in the culturally appropriate ways to do so in this historical and country context.

This brings me to a more crucial point regarding race relations which I think does need to be aired and which has significant bearing on how this book is read. Ironically I write as a non-White woman, one who has always been acutely aware of this identity (having been raised in White Australia), and one who has had to negotiate a meaningful life and career in White dominated societies. In fact I write for predominantly White audiences (and may of course have been unintentionally socialised into White ways of thinking).

This is in stark contrast to what I perceive as a growing (perhaps polarising trend) to assert that only people of colour, of minority racial background, have the right to write or speak about racist issues and how to combat them in social work with any credibility. I am a woman of colour writing about social work in a White dominated society. The irony I experience is that carrying my racialised identity with me at almost all times in my social work career, has given me, I believe, a consciousness of both my own background, and also holding this in negotiation with the dominant cultures in which I continually engage. I believe, therefore, that I have tried to develop an approach to social work practice which I hope is not irrevocably White, but an approach which is cognisant of different cultural perspectives and experiences which will be adaptable, based on critical and reflexive principles. I am therefore attempting to model a critical and reflexive approach to thinking about social work which is a stance which could be adopted and adapted by anyone, regardless of social background. This is the stance that should allow each of us to communicate, dialogue with and contribute to each other's thinking in inclusive ways.

To aid in this end, I have firstly invited my colleague, Siddhesh Mukerji, to work with me in trying to illustrate some of these points, and also to help make this fourth edition of the book more directly relevant to the USA context. Siddhesh will write a little about himself, so you can

contextualise his comments. After that I include a brief discussion of what is meant by context and what contextual parameters are, reviewing some of the major differences which have been noted about social work in different country contexts. I finish with a return to the question of how much can ideas about social work be truly said to be universal, and some concluding guidelines for a contextual framework in which to understand the social work approach outlined in this book.

### ... from Siddhesh Mukerji

‘What is social work’s role in an era of profound upheaval?’ This is the question that guides my career. A relatively unfledged social work thinker, I feel daunted by the enormity of the struggles that face humanity and, simultaneously, enlivened by opportunities to join many interconnected individuals who serve in hope of a more compassionate reality. I am grateful to contribute to *Social Work: A Critical Approach to Practice* at a time when I feel ever humbled by the unknowability of myself, others, and the world. In this brief introduction, I note a few impressions, based on my experiences in social work education and practice, of current needs and opportunities for the field. The considerations that I raise, which relate to the content of this book, focus on identity and diversity, social work’s role in responding to the ecological crisis, and the need for a more existential social work.

As I reflect on my guiding question, I consider how my own social work education exposed me to a world full of both exciting possibilities and glaring dilemmas. When I began graduate social work studies over a decade ago, I was struck by how little of the curriculum seemed to apply to me. The developmental and practice frameworks that I encountered in the social work curriculum – Eriksonian theory and cognitive behavioral approaches, most prominently – felt strikingly dissonant with my experience as a first-generation South Asian immigrant in the United States and the experiences of the other immigrants whom I knew personally and served professionally in the domain of refugee resettlement. At that time, mainstream social work discourse asserted that the thing to do with immigrants was to become ‘culturally competent’ about them. The basic instruction was, rather than valuing the unique ways of knowing and being that diverse peoples may contribute to our collective growth, social workers should learn about their cultures in order to more skillfully apply Eurocentric norms to them. Hoping to expand my social work vision beyond the sorts of Eurocentric perspectives that had, in so many ways, established my position as a perpetual outsider in the United States, I sought out voices that presented more diverse ways of knowing and practicing. I found these voices all but absent from the field’s body of knowledge.

While the road ahead is endless, there has been forward movement. Frameworks such as intersectionality, critical race theory, indigenous and decolonising perspectives, and non-Eurocentric practice methodologies are increasingly prominent in social work. Mainstream social work discourse, which before framed those like me as subjects to be understood and intervened with in a culturally competent way, now encourages centring voices like mine.

Yet, this shift has come with its own set of dilemmas. In my conversations with colleagues and friends of colour, it often comes to light that our experiences fluctuate between two extremes: feeling discounted and disregarded on the basis of race, or feeling idealised or fetishised by those who, in a well-intentioned attempt to actualise an anti-racist mindset, slip into another form of dehumanising. And these personal experiences unfold against a societal backdrop in which identity lines may seem like widening chasms between people whose collaboration is essential for building a more just society. Perhaps we must concurrently hold two truths as essential: we must recognise identity differences and the resultant oppressions, and we must see humans as whole beings and not only as their identities. To my mind, resolving this dialectic is a burning task for our society and, by extension, the field of social work.

But this is not the only burning task facing our field, for we live in an era of climate emergency. As a climate justice activist, I am keenly aware that the ecological crisis is a justice issue with profound implications for human rights and health. My current social work practice involves supporting the work of justice-oriented environmental organisations in the state of Vermont, and so it is my privilege to have conversations about how the environmental crisis most immediately harms low-income people, people of colour, and indigenous people. And yet, in this era of mass human displacement and climate-related violence and suffering, social work curricula and texts that centre the ecological crisis remain exceptions rather than the norm.

Perhaps our desire to make tangible change diverts our focus from existential issues, such as the ecological crisis. But unless my own experience is uncommon, it does not take social workers long in the field to realise that existential questions undergird all that we do. My early work in the field, both with refugees and adolescents who had attempted suicide, inevitably pointed to existential questions, such as ‘Are there common bonds that unite people?’, ‘What does it mean to be alive?’, and ‘How do we find meaning in suffering?’ The desire to more deeply investigate the existential questions that underlie social work yet receive little attention in the field led me to my doctoral studies. My dissertation research, which explored Zen Buddhist perspectives on social action, is one example of re-envisioning our work from a spiritual-existential worldview grounded in the interconnectedness of all phenomena. Given the enormity of the work ahead of us, I believe that it is paramount for us to seek out perspectives that speak to our deeper questions and need for connection and meaning.

And so, I continue to ask myself, ‘What is social work’s role in an era of profound upheaval?’ My colleague, Jan Fook, questions the notion of a universal social work. Indeed, in a world that is infinitely complex and ever changing, how could such an idea be possible? Perhaps, instead, we may understand social work as a constantly evolving collection of perspectives and methods with which each of us may bring our strengths to bear in service of the world ... leveraging our personal uniqueness towards collective wellness. As social work educators, perhaps the best that we may do is to give students a conceptual and practical foundation, teach them to critique that foundation, and then give them the tools to build from that foundation their own creation, their own unique expression of contributing to the world. I believe that this book, in which I am grateful to have a part, represents exactly this spirit.

## **What is meant by 'context' and what are the major differences indicated by different national contexts?**

From its early inception, social work has been about 'person in situation' which locates the social work profession as working at the focal point of interactions between people and their environments, be they social, physical, economic or political. Yet how we understand what this situational context is, what is the nature of the interaction, and how it actually influences how we see ourselves and conceptualise our practice, is an unhelpfully contested arena. Whilst social theorists and philosophers might wrangle over these details for centuries, it is the challenging lot of social workers to put this understanding to use in ways which not only accommodate differences, but are also effective and responsive in meeting the many social problems and dilemmas faced in many different contexts.

In this book, I attempt to outline an approach to social work which is cognisant of these contextual influences, but nonetheless attempts to conceptualise a way of thinking about and working with social work which can be readily transferred between different settings, and with different social players. This is especially a challenge when cultural and political climates change rapidly. I thought it helpful to begin with what is meant by context so that readers themselves might begin to ask contextual questions when they engage with the ideas put forward in this book.

There are two main aspects of context which should be noted. The first is what is the extent and nature of the influence of context. The second is what are the features of context which need to be taken into account.

The first aspect involves questions of how much context is background only, and to what extent context actually creates people, situations and events. Often it may be difficult to determine either of these, and also the extent to which each influences the other. For example, it is often easier to simply state what background contexts are, than to make direct connections between what it specifically is about the surrounding contexts that have led to specific interpretations, actions and beliefs. How might they be inextricably rooted in past experiences and other influences of which we are largely unaware? I would argue that it is our contexts which have a major role in shaping and creating who we are, the way we see the world, and the actions we take within it. Since it is an ongoing project to appreciate all the myriad ways this is done in detail, this book is based on the premise that readers will be constantly mindful of how the ideas being put forward in the book might vary according to context, perspective and indeed personal background. This is an important first step in practising contextually.

Secondly, there is an absolute plethora of different aspects of context, complicated by the fact that many of them are inextricable. It may only make sense to separate them in an abstract fashion. Yet these aspects need to be noted in order for more complex understandings to develop. Context is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 11. Here, I want to lay a groundwork for thinking about context which will be helpful in taking a critical approach to all the ideas outlined in this book.

Finn and Jacobsen (2008) list some of the core components of context: socio-political, cultural, legal, institutional and policy components. I would expand some of these to add global, national and international contexts, as well of course as historical, personal and biographical. However, an appreciation of the different components is not particularly helpful without an understanding of how such components come into play in any one situation. These are often deep and hidden, some of them can only be accessed through personal and critical analysis and reflection, that is, through a deep examination of how and why one's own (or one's own national or cultural) particular thinking and ways of acting have developed and are maintained. The importance of reflection, and ways to do it, are outlined in Chapter 3. Ways of reflecting on one's own cultural assumptions can also be used to analyse the cultural assumptions of a group or nation.

In addition to reflection, knowledge of key factors which we know can account for differences in social work in different contexts is also crucial. Chisala (2006) makes some excellent suggestions regarding what these are. Clearly differences in terms of resources, policies (national and local), social problems, culture and religion come into play (*ibid.*: 2). Another factor is that aspects of social work (ethics, values, practices, theories, knowledge and practitioners themselves) may differ and that these may also contradict each other. I suspect that these contradictions may come about because often different codes and sets of knowledges are lifted from one context to another without due attention to how and why such ideas evolved in a particular context.

What are regarded as the major social problems and how they arose may differ between contexts (Chisala, 2006: 3). For example, the impact of war and of past colonisation may largely determine the poverty levels in some countries. Countries may also differ in terms of their political approach to social work, and the form of social work will be influenced by how the social welfare system is organised in that country. Whether a country's culture is more individualistic or more collectively oriented will make a difference as to how different social work ethics (e.g. self-determination) are regarded. These differences are of course not confined to whole countries or nations, but also regions or groups within countries.

Although the field of international social work can assist us to think through how national country contexts influence differences in social work and the way it is practiced (Lalayants et al., 2015), it has also been strongly criticised. It runs the risk of perpetuating cultural imperialism (Das and Anand, 2012) (as I discovered from my work in Mongolia) unless coupled with a critical framework. Trends regarding the decolonisation of social work are mentioned in Chapter 6. Critical reflection on international placement experiences can enable students to gain a better understanding of how their own practice is influenced by their own country contexts. This helps to challenge the uncritical assumption that social work from their own country is preferable or superior.

Wehbi (2008) offers a very useful guiding framework for studying international social work which can supplement our earlier understanding of context and can help us sustain a more critical analysis of contextual differences. Beginning with the criticism that teaching international social work can reproduce the inequities embodied in North/South relations, she offers

some guiding principles which may help the reader to assess the contextual influence on their own social work.

First in analysing context she notes three crucial aspects: the structural context of the issue being studied; the context of the intervention (i.e. is social work a player in the intervention process and what is the relationship between the state and the social work profession?); and the social location of the social worker and the actual impact on the intervention. I see this as a reflexive aspect, an awareness of positionality (as I discuss further in Chapter 11). For example, what is the social worker's own social location (e.g. class, gender, race, etc.) and how does this impact on their intervention such as access to information, credibility, value differences?

Second, she suggests an analysis of power differences across nations (ibid.: 3–4). This includes a historical analysis of North/South relations; a critical perspective on development and cultural imperialism; and a critical approach towards an essentialised and homogenisation of different cultures. It is also important to include a historical and current analysis of the countries in question including, for example, war, international debt and trade relations, and how these have contributed to specific social and cultural conditions.

The third guiding principle relates to **Power within nations**. In this category, she includes being aware of the trap of homogenisation (ibid.: 4). This relates to not assuming that internal politics are universal and to be aware of the power differences and interest groups which are at play over particular issues.

## A universal social work?

Given all the potential differences in social work, both within and outside of different country contexts, is it accurate to assume there can be such a thing as a universal social work and that the social work practice theory discussed in this book can be transferable across different settings? Given the brief foregoing discussion, I wonder whether if there is a universal social work is the prime question which should be asked? If there is such a thing as universal social work, it may be best conceptualised as important primarily for the purposes of having a universal discourse which allows like-minded people to communicate in the abstract about what they believe to be common values and theories, and to craft a framework for doing this. What I think may be the more important question is, *how is the social work that we know and believe in, influenced by the contexts in which we live and work, and how does an understanding of this help us practice more effectively and responsively?*

With this in mind, I have crafted the following questions to guide the reader in working through the ideas in this book. They are questions which will support the reader in taking a critically reflexive stance, which in turn will sustain an awareness of context, both personal and broader.

These are:

- What is it about what I am reading which resonates for me in terms of my own background and identity?
- How can I adapt what I am reading to my own experiences and cultural contexts?
- What are the assumptions underlying the ideas in the book, and are they ones which are congruent with my own culture and identity?

Chisala (2006: 8) sums up an awareness of context nicely.

Considering these contexts, social workers must always be aware of both international as well as local contexts. They must not only have knowledge about the contexts but also must be creative about how they can effectively apply the theories learnt in a formal class environment into practice, which is composed of these different contexts. Social workers need to change their ways in which they conceptualise their skills. They must broaden their skills for effective translation and communication about what values and goals of social justice mean to different people and groups.

This book attempts to provide a detailed framework for this type of contextual practice.





# PART 1

# CRITICAL POTENTIAL AND CURRENT CHALLENGES



# 1

# THE CRITICAL TRADITION OF SOCIAL WORK

## Does social work have a critical tradition?

There is still a lot of argument about whether social work is essentially a conservative profession, one which primarily serves the interests of the dominant groups in society. There is even debate about whether or not social work is a profession (Dominelli, 2009: 20). I do not think that there is much mileage in debates couched in these terms. A profession comprises many elements: its values; practices and practitioners; theories, knowledge and espoused ideals; institutions and social functions; community perceptions and status; its embedded culture and discourses. More importantly, it has a professional responsibility of service within the society in which it is constituted (Solbrekke and Sugrue, 2011). For this reason, it is also a function of, and a response to, the many different contexts in which it operates. Many of these diverse elements and contexts seem entirely contradictory, including the possibilities of both conservative and politically progressive agendas being met. What is more important, therefore, is what radical potential exists and how and whether these possibilities are played out. Is there, among these elements, the possibility of engaging in social practices which enable people to participate in and create more caring and inclusive social environments? What forms might such practices take and in what contexts? These are the primary issues at stake.

In this first chapter, I focus on the critical potential inherent in social work's tradition. In many ways, the rest of the book will be about the practices which might emanate from such potential.

## Critical origins - the social context

The contemporary profession of social work, from its Western origins (Mary Richmond, 1922, in England, and Jane Addams, 1910, in the USA), always emphasised the social side of human existence, the influence of social context in the lives of individuals. From the beginning, the ethos of the social work version of 'helping people' had something to do with the social environment in which people lived and was never simply focused on personal traits. An experience from the autobiography of Addams (Ker Conway, 1992) illustrates some of the long-lasting and critical principles of the social work tradition.

In 1889, Addams set up Hull House in Chicago, a settlement house to bridge the gap between the middle and the working class, the propertied and the poor, the native born and the immigrants. I find the following passage moving, not the least because I can imagine the well-meaning, perhaps overzealous Jane, humbled by an incident which could have happened to any of us more than a century later:

A ... beginning was then made towards a Bureau of Organised Charities, the main office being put in charge of a young man recently come from Boston, who lived at Hull House. But to employ scientific methods for the first time at such a moment involved difficulties, and the most painful episode of the winter for me came from an attempt on my part to conform to carefully received instructions. A shipping clerk whom I had known for a long time had lost his place, as so many people had that year, and came to the relief station established at Hull House four or five times to secure help for his family. I told him one day of the opportunity for work on the drainage canal and intimated that if any employment were obtainable, he ought to exhaust that possibility before asking for help. The man replied that he had always worked indoors and that he could not endure outside work during winter. I am grateful to remember that I was too uncertain to be severe, although I held to my instructions. He did not come again for relief, but worked for two days digging on the canal, where he contracted pneumonia and died a week later. I have never lost trace of the two little children he left behind him, although I cannot see them without a bitter consciousness that it was at their expense I learned that life cannot be administered by definite rules and regulations; that wisdom to deal with a man's [sic] difficulties comes only through knowledge of his life and habits as a whole; and that to treat an isolated episode is almost sure to invite blundering. (Ker Conway, 1992: 518–19)

This early awareness of individual lives, buffeted by social and economic conditions, invites a more holistic and contextual (as opposed to rule-bound) approach to individual suffering and hardship. Awareness of social context and its importance in understanding individual experience and informing practice is therefore one of the earliest principles which holds

critical potential for social work. The concept which probably best sums it up is Hamilton's 'person-in-situation' (Mailick, 1977: 407).

As social work developed as a profession, with the elements of social legitimation that this entailed (Solbrette and Sugrue, 2011), professional knowledge was developed in ways which allowed it to be taught, and appear acceptable, in traditional contexts (the university). Thus, we can argue that it was the need to scientise our knowledge, so that it was acceptable in essentially masculinist environments, which motivated social workers to adopt models and ways of conceptualising our practical knowledge from more masculinist (Hearn, 1987) traditions, such as psychoanalysis and psychology. We can also argue that in this masculinising process, we lost our way as a caring women's profession. These models focused so squarely on the individual and intrapsychic explanations for behaviour and personal problems, that the idea of social context was either abandoned or, at worst, undeveloped. However, in the 1960s, the emergence of radical critique put the issue of social context back on the agenda and broadened it to include understandings of how the socio-economic structure and historical conditions also influenced individual experience (Fook, 1993).

## Radical critique - the social structure

Radical and structural approaches to social work practice were developed between the 1960s and 1980s in Britain by Bailey and Brake (1975, 1980) and Corrigan and Leonard (1978); in the USA by Galper (1980); and in Australia by Throssell (1975), de Maria (1993) and Fook (1993). Radical critiques initially criticised traditional social work (casework) for the emphasis on individualised forms of helping and, by implication, individualised notions of personal problems (Fook, 2003). Coming at the same issue from a different angle, structural social work emphasised the structural nature of individual and social problems. The Canadians Maurice Moreau (1979) and Bob Mullaly (2007) are generally credited with the development of the structural approach.

In broad terms, feminists (Brook and Davis, 1985; Dominelli and McLeod, 1989; Marchant and Wearing, 1986) agreed with the analysis of both radicals and structuralists, but added the dimension of gender as a structural concern in influencing individual lives. Feminist social work models, in particular, focused more on developing the links between analysis and practice and personal and political experience, both of which dimensions were largely ignored (or poorly developed) in earlier radical formulations.

This main concern with social structure, and with not 'blaming' the individual 'victim' for problems is a cornerstone of these radical, structural and feminist approaches. This principle entails some related ideas which include a critique of existing social arrangements and social work's complicity, and a corresponding emphasis on emancipation and social change.

## Summary

We can therefore summarise the basic elements of a critical approach as embodied in radical, feminist and structural writings as follows:

- a commitment to a structural analysis of social and personally experienced problems, i.e. an understanding of how personal problems might be traced to socio-economic structures, and that the 'personal' and 'political' realms are inextricably linked;
- a commitment to emancipatory forms of analysis and action (incorporating both anti-oppressive and anti-exploitative stances);
- a stance of social critique (including an acknowledgement and critique of the social control functions of the social work profession and the welfare system);
- a commitment to social change.

## Disquiet about structural theories

The social justice goals and mission of social work, from its earliest times, seem clearly reaffirmed by these more recent critiques and reformulations of social work to include a structural dimension in the understanding of social context and its influence in human experience. Yet, many people noticed problems with the ways in which these structural approaches were practised and experienced. A few years ago, I began to reflect on my own experience as these doubts emerged. What follows are several extracts from a talk I delivered some years ago:

I trained as a young social worker in the mid-1970s. I began the four-year course with a firm commitment to practise as a caseworker. In fact, I was not really aware there was a choice. However, by my final year, my class of students had split into two distinct groups – radicals and conservatives, or community workers and caseworkers – the latter group being somewhat patronised by the former. I still belonged firmly to the latter group. I remember being somewhat chagrined, after the first day at my community development placement, at being told to go home and change my only respectable dress for a pair of jeans. Even then I felt there was something vaguely limited about an ideology which had to be so clearly marked by the way one dressed.

I actually did well at the placement, which became a project to set up, among other things, a community garden in Darlinghurst, inner city Sydney. I recall, somewhat incongruously it felt, planting tomatoes with an 'alky', and door knocking sex workers for the garden roster. (Incidentally, the garden is still there, some twenty years later, but with a high wall and locked gate.) I came away with a healthy respect for community work, but wondered why it felt like it had to be at the expense of casework.

Luckily, my first job was 'generic' – I counselled, caseworked and community developed people with intellectual disabilities and their families. In my work I found that there was a desperate need for many methods and approaches. Indeed, it was often the clientele themselves who demanded one-to-one sessions, thereby feeling that they were worth the personal attention. In some of my community development projects, parents worked with me effectively as activists and volunteers, yet at the same time needed sensitive counselling to see them through some of the more traumatic experiences they encountered in their work and personal lives. Was I being 'conservative' because I indulged in some micro work?

This issue took on a larger significance for me when I took up my next job, in 1981, teaching introductory welfare to social welfare students. On the one hand, I was teaching about the welfare state, and I became firmly committed to the many sociological critiques of social work's appalling role in social control. Yet at the same time I felt that much of what I had done as a social worker had actually felt like helping people, and that as well, the people I had worked with felt they'd been helped. I didn't think, even then, that I was a particularly special social worker. It just seemed that there was this huge disparity between macro critiques and individual people's perceptions of their experience. Surely it must be possible to continue to help individual people, yet not automatically act as an agent of social control, I reasoned. If one held a firm critical analysis of social work's function in society, then surely this must affect the way in which one assisted individual people?

What to do?

Enrol in a postgraduate degree. Research the problem.

Needless to say, there was not much written on the problem, except to acknowledge that there was this problem. Sure, we still need people to provide the casework, put on the bandages, wipe the tears from the eyes, and sweep up the broken glass. (Very noble, I thought.) But, so the argument ran, if you want to do the real work, it is in collective and structural action. Don't just sweep up the glass and replace the window so it can be broken again. Get a whole new building!

Unfortunately, in the course on which I enrolled there were a number of youngish and enthusiastic (male) sociologists teaching. We class of slightly older (female) social workers sat there taking serious notes, on Althusser I think it was, whilst I kept thinking (as I later discovered so did others) but what does it all mean for practice? The social and experiential contrasts between the teachers and the taught, the sociologists and the social workers, the male academics and the female practitioner-students seemed ludicrously stark. I remember the class was jubilant when someone provided a copy of Stanley Cohen's famous 1975 'It's Alright for you to Talk' article. It acknowledged the difficulties of practice, and the sometimes patronising attitudes assumed by sociological critics towards practising social workers.

It was clear to me that whilst radical approaches to social work big-heartedly acknowledged the need for individual work, and personal care, the development of detailed models and strategies for practice remained token. There was an implicit devaluing of personalised aspects of radical social work, and to me, this also constituted an implicit devaluing of much of social work, in particular much of women's work within social work. (Fook, 1995: 2–4)

Let me stop at this point and summarise some of these early doubts about social work radicalism. First, there was the quite clear and distinctive split between social work student radicals and conservatives, apparently able to be identified by the methods one practised (community work or casework) and possibly also in the way one dressed. Second, this almost simplistic valuing of collective approaches seemed to me to deny, overlook and devalue the personal experiences of myself as a social worker, and the people I worked to assist. Third, this was borne out in my subsequent experience as a postgraduate student, when it seemed that academic sociological answers were only peddled (by people who seemed to share little of the social work experience) in order to bring our conversion to a higher order of thinking, rather than to assist in transforming our practice. I got the message early on that most academic theory, including radical, sometimes termed structural social work perspectives, also denied and devalued some of the experiences of workers.

---

### Exercise

---

It might be useful at this point to stop and reflect on some of your own experiences in encountering radical, feminist and structural approaches in social work:

- Who taught these and how were they taught to you?
  - What 'hidden' messages did you pick up about these theories?
  - Compare your experiences with mine. Are they similar or different?
  - What reasons might there be for this?
- 

---

### Summary

---

My experience thus points to three major criticisms of the way in which structural theory was enacted and taught, in that it actually functioned in contradictory ways to the ideals it claimed to uphold:

1. Structural perspectives implied a status differential between men and women. The men were the sociologist theorists and teachers, the women were the social worker practitioners and students. It seemed that radical approaches to social work reinforced gender status differences, rather than making them more egalitarian.



2. Structural theory also implied a gendered nature of the value differences between 'macro' and 'micro' work, implied by the radical perspective - 'micro' work, the traditional area of work for women, was relatively devalued in a radical perspective.
  3. Structural thinking supports a relative devaluing of social work practice experience as against radical and sociological theory.
- 

Now, let me continue with some of my reminiscences as I tried to address some of these implied imbalances:

It was against this background of thinking that I developed and later published my ideas about how radical social work could be practised at the individual level (Fook, 1993). This practice model was based on the assumption that theory could be applied, in a direct and deductive manner, to practice. Although this nice little framework proved useful and meaningful for some time, I wondered about some of the reasons people put forward for liking it. Many students like it for its clarity, and practitioners like it because it reaffirms what they already do. I'm not sure I feel these are necessarily good reasons to like a work. I suppose I had hoped, like my sociological teachers of postgraduate days, that students and workers would become converted to radicalism, but I had to acknowledge that it appeared to be meeting some expressed need, which might be just as important. I have had to recognise that unless a work is meaningful to a person's experience, it is unlikely to be used. And at least I am constantly reminded that our work is probably never used in the way we intended!

I have found that in the course of teaching radical casework and working with like-minded colleagues many other doubts and queries have arisen for me about the limiting ways in which radical approaches to practice are conceptualised.

For instance, although much radical and feminist literature states otherwise, many of my student, academic and professional colleagues still seem to assume that politically correct work is macro work, and that only the unenlightened still willingly practise at micro level. This uncritical equation of collective work with political practice bespeaks another intellectual oversimplification, present in some radical thought, which is the notion that a radical analysis or theory necessitates new and specific radical skills, techniques or strategies. In other words, one's radicalism can be defined solely through one's actions. The popularity of empowerment techniques and the empowerment approach is one which concerns me a little in relation to this point. Instead of just asking how we empower, I still think we need to ask and address the harder questions like empowerment for what and for whom?

Related to this type of thinking are limitations in the way we have conceptualised the relationship between theory and practice. My own work is guilty of perpetuating the

dominance of the deductive relationship between theory and practice – the idea that generalised theory can be applied in a linear fashion to deduce specific practices. This view is implicit in the idea that for every radical idea there is an equivalent radical practice. This can lead to the assumption, which I have seen many students make, that there has to be a new radical practice skill waiting out there somewhere in the ether. This often leads to noble *inaction*, because they reject many quite serviceable strategies simply because they already know about them so, by definition, they must be conservative!

Focusing ultimately on identifying the ‘radicalness’ of our practice strategies can also lead us to devalue the unintended outcomes which might occur in the process of engaging in our work. For instance, I have seen my own postgraduate students talk of some marvellous piece of practice, only to end by belittling it because they thought it was not ‘radical’ enough! I wonder sometimes whether we have constructed some unattainable ideal of radical practice, which only serves to devalue the change efforts that we do make.

Another question my students often ask is what to do if the person/people they are helping doesn’t want ‘radicalism’ or ‘feminism’ dished up to them, as if these ways of seeing the world are some sort of treatment package. They speak about theories, our ways of seeing the world, as if they are some type of objective mantle which can simply be thrown on or off as the occasion warrants.

This relates to one of the big questions my teaching of the deductive application of radical theory has raised. This is about what I have termed the ‘commodification’ of theory, as if theory, radical in particular, consists of a material set of ideas which can easily be transferred from one person to another. Although I think it is true to say that radical social work has wholeheartedly adopted Freirian educational principles (that it is not objective knowledge which is learnt or ‘banked’, but rather an empowering way of engaging with the world of ideas), I do think ‘banking’ models of education underpin some of our conceptualisations of radical theory, in that we do assume or hope that people will be ‘converted’ to our way of thinking. We hope that they will cross the great divide, become conscientised and empowered, politically aware and active, and that in the course of this process they will agree with and become like us. They will have arrived. They have the keys to the bank.

This ‘commodification’ concept also applies to the way in which power is often perceived in a radical social work perspective, as if there is some finite pool of power from which the radical worker draws to distribute to the disadvantaged. The danger is that if the worker draws some for her or himself, there is automatically less left for the disadvantaged person, thereby effectively disempowering them. So any empowering

of workers automatically becomes a disempowering of the disadvantaged people with whom they work. This type of thinking can function to potentially disempower workers. Another *disempowering* aspect of this type of thinking is that disadvantaged groups are characterised *by definition* as disempowered, thus denying any power they might have. Much attention has been drawn of late to the potential such views have of constructing a passive 'victim' identity amongst the disadvantaged. It is hard to act in one's personal world, when all the causes of your problem are located well outside and beyond your reach.

Such 'Black and White' views hold an inherent potential for determinism which may not allow room for people to have complex, changing and conflicting identities when operating with a framework which persists in categorising people in terms of binary opposites – disadvantaged or advantaged, oppressed or non-oppressed and so on. These potentially deterministic views also fail to allow for the contradictions of people participating in their own oppression – the feminist in public who does all the ironing at home, the meek-seeming woman who rules the household in private, the dominant male executive who is still mother's boy. This is almost a common sense view to which it is easy to become blinded – people's identities and behaviour differ in different situations and contexts.

I am worried by what I see as a type of moral and technical absolutism fostered in myself, students and colleagues by the culture of radicalism and structural perspectives, which flies in the face of the intended traditional social work values of flexibility, tolerance, non-judgementalism and acceptance. Radical ideals of the 60s and 70s and feminist ideals of the 80s were clear. We sought a changed world of social equity and justice, welfare for all, and structured opportunities so that all classes, cultures, races, genders and sexualities, ages and abilities could attain personal and social fulfilment. Whilst I would still wholeheartedly subscribe to these ideals, I am concerned that if our present-day notions of how this is to be achieved rest on past-day notions of what sort of people and society we are, then the potential to achieve this might be limited.

This can be applied to some of the more epistemological questions. The way in which our past notions of radical theorising and practice have been conceptualised can be dangerously positivistic and scientific in the ways in which theories and practices have been distinguished and oppositionally characterised. Such views automatically value the knowledge created by 'scientific', often male, academic researchers, and discount the learning which arises from practical experience, the reflective process in which ideas are created, as well as developed. They also function to discount the learning and experience of ordinary practitioners and service users. (Fook, 1995: 5–8)

---

### Exercise

---

- Why do radical, feminist or structural approaches appeal to you? (Try to think of all kinds of reasons, both personal and professional.)
  - What does your understanding of these theories and the way they are practised imply about yourself and the people you work with?
  - How do you think the people you worked with would have perceived you, and how would they have experienced your use of such theories?
- 

I wrote my reminiscences nearly twenty years ago, yet in the meantime have found that many students, workers and other colleagues still agree with me. These experiences cover a lot of ground, so it is worthwhile summarising the main points again. The aspects of the experience of teaching and developing radical and structural theory for practice created disquiet in me for a number of reasons:

1. The assumption that workers could or should 'be radical' solely through their actions, and that new practices should be the sole defining feature of radical social work, often led to a stultifying inaction.
2. The seemingly oversimplified, one-way, deductive view of how 'theory' relates to 'practice'.
3. The idea that to be an effective 'radical practitioner' you had to undergo a type of 'conversion' seemed a little too much like a type of ideological oppression of another kind.
4. Related to the above, the implicit assumption that if any client were to be effectively helped, they too had to undergo a conversion and take on board the new radical theory.
5. Radical perspectives seemed to have very limited and oversimplified conceptions of 'power' and 'identity', which did not seem to cover the multitude of situations in which both clients and workers operate, and indeed may lock disadvantaged people into disempowered identities.
6. Radical theories seemed to imply a very deterministic view of people and the possibilities for change and transformation. They almost seemed to have an 'alienating' rather than an empowering effect, denying people personal agency, rather than creating the power to effect change.

---

### Exercise

---

Using your responses to the last two exercises, construct your own list of advantages and disadvantages of radical, feminist and structural approaches.

---

These were some of the issues with which I struggled when applying and teaching radical social work, but they also reflect some of my social experiences from mixing with colleagues who were both sympathetic and unsympathetic to radical approaches. In short, I experienced some discomfort over the ways in which radical social work manifested itself culturally. There seemed to be a rather big disparity between the expressed empowering ideals of the radical tradition, and how people lived and experienced it. Is there a better way?

## Postmodern and poststructural social work possibilities

I found postmodern thinking initially attractive in addressing these problems because of its critique of theories or views which claim to be universal and total, and therefore its allowance of multiple perspectives. Yet more than a way of thinking, it is also a way of labelling this particular period in global history (Fawcett and Featherstone, 2000: 8). It is therefore helpful to understand the phenomenon of 'postmodernism' in relation to the period of 'modernism' which it is said to have succeeded.

The characterising feature of the modernist world is the belief that conditions can be progressively improved through the establishment of reliable, universal and generalisable knowledge, developed through the use of reason and scientific methods. Knowledge in this sense is cumulatively developed, in a linear sequence, and disciplinary knowledge is clearly bounded and controlled. Strict hierarchies, structures and rules govern the ways in which knowledge is legitimated and enacted. The nation-state and professional institutions are two examples of modernist organisations believed to be the appropriate structures to maintain such modernist ideals.

Postmodernism, in its simplest sense, involves a critique of totalising theories and the structures, boundaries and hierarchies which maintain and enact them. It represents both (in a theoretical sense) a critique of these structures and (in a pragmatic sense) an actual fragmentation of them. Postmodernism is both a theory and a descriptive framework. Postmodernism (in theory and practice) represents a recognition that the traditional (modernist) organising frameworks are no longer valued or relevant, and that we must now acknowledge the existence of diverse and multiple frameworks or discourses. Our meaning (and therefore our reality) is constructed out of the language of our (multiple) discourses about it. In this way, there is no one universal truth or reality, but instead 'reality' is constructed out of a multiplicity of diverse and fragmented stories. In this sense, the 'grand narratives' like Science or Reason, which sought to provide a universal explanation and basis for human action and inquiry, are now deconstructed and seen to be a mass of conflicting ways of making sense of different experiences from different perspectives.

Poststructural thinking is related to postmodernism and is most easily understood as referring more particularly to the language and discourse elements of postmodernism. Poststructuralism is associated with French social theorists such as Derrida, Lacan and Foucault. Poststructural

thinking challenges broad structural thinking (for example, Marx, Freud) which essentially assumed that observable phenomena could be best explained by underlying structures or relations. Whereas structuralists might view meaning as fixed, poststructuralists would argue that meaning, because it is produced within a language or discourse, is therefore multiple, unstable and open to interpretation (Weedon, 1987). Language (and therefore meaning) must be interpreted in relation to specific contexts (social, historical, political). Discourses are therefore situated (socially, historically, politically).

### Summary

Sands and Nuccio (1992) summarise the six main themes of poststructuralism as follows:

1. A critique of logocentrism (the belief that there is a fixed, singular and logical order): there are no essentialist qualities, since these vary in relation to context and are mediated through our use of language (discourses).
2. Dichotomous thinking: also involved in logocentrism. The way we represent our 'reality' through language is based on the tendency to order our world (make meaning) by categorising phenomena into polar or binary opposites. These are mutually exclusive, oppositional and hierarchical, and not seen as interdependent. The categories we create have only two subsets which are mutually exclusive of each other, cast in opposing terms, with one set valued over the other and not believed to be dependent on each other for definition (e.g. 'male vs. female').
3. The idea of difference: because logocentric thinking supports the use of binary opposites, the way differences are defined is problematic. Binary opposites do not allow for a wealth of diverse meanings, experiences and identities to be represented in our discourse. Instead, the experiences of the marginal are often defined (and lumped together) in relation to the mainstream, thus perpetuating dominant discourses. In this process, marginal people are often 'othered' or perhaps even silenced or ignored in relation to some ideal of mainstream experience. Derrida (1978) used the term 'difference' to refer to meanings which do not fit into this dichotomous way of categorising - meanings may be 'neither' or 'both-and' or something else entirely.
4. Deconstruction: because logocentric thinking dominates our language, it is important to deconstruct discourses in order to uncover hidden, contextual or marginalised and multiple other meanings. In this way, deconstruction decentres (i.e. upsets) dominant thinking, giving prominence to formerly suppressed perspectives.
5. Multiple discourses: since it is possible, by deconstruction, to uncover the many other possible voices which may be implicit or missing from the text (or discourse), it is important to recognise that any one reading or interpretation of a text may only uncover a partial narrative. It is therefore important to be aware of multiple (and diverse) discourses which could be crucial in understanding any one text.

6. Situated subjectivity: since meanings and discourses are context-dependent, a person's idea of her or himself, or subjectivity, is also socially constructed. It is therefore 'precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think and speak' (Weedon, 1987: 33). It may also be multifaceted, depending on the changing contexts.

---

### Exercise

Compare these characteristics of postmodern thinking with the concerns regarding structural social work which we noted earlier.

---

### Summary

There are therefore many possibilities for postmodern and poststructural thinking to address some of the concerns about structural approaches in social work. I shall outline them in point form, since there are quite a few:

1. The emphasis on social context and the constant connection of this with individual experience (e.g. situated subjectivity) provides a more detailed theoretical understanding of the individual in the social context, and also considerably develops our understanding of how the social structure is part of every day experience. It provides a stronger theoretical basis for practice at the point of intersection between 'person-in-situation'.
2. The analysis of dichotomous thinking provides an excellent basis for a critique of gender-biased thinking and related practices.
3. The recognition of multiple discourses adds a complexity of understanding to the multifaceted situations in which social workers find themselves. This should allow for more effective practice.
4. The recognition of how 'difference' is constructed provides an alternative way of conceptualising marginality and redefining it in empowering ways.
5. The allowance for changing subjectivities and identities represents a little more of the complexity of human life, and the ways in which living is mediated continuously by context. This may allow us to match our understanding of people's lives more closely with their own perceptions and experiences.
6. The understanding of how knowledge is produced and 'hierarchised' provides an alternative way to reconceptualise and value the 'marginal' voices of service users and practitioners.
7. The upending of the 'theory/practice' binary leads to the revaluing of practice and lived experience as ways of knowing. This also potentially empowers previously marginal people,

*(Continued)*

because it acknowledges and legitimises their experiences and identities. It also allows for more complex forms of theory which incorporate new perspectives to be developed.

8. The possibilities for knowledge and theory to be generated and used in multiple ways make for potentially more flexible practice.
9. The critique (deconstruction) of mainstream practices potentially upends taken-for-granted hierarchies and power differences, and allows for the possibility of new forms of empowerment.

---

These are some of the major ways in which postmodern perspectives can potentially enrich our thinking and practice so that it is more complex, flexible and empowering. I have found the adoption of postmodern perspectives to be empowering in my own work, particularly in relation to my relationship with theory. I am much more aware of using theory consciously in different kinds of ways and of developing a process of creating my own theory. In my more 'radical' days, I felt more of a 'slave' to theory, that I had to 'get it right', before applying it accurately, and that therefore there could only be limited ways that it could be applied. For me, now, the crucial question is not whether a theory or practice is 'radical' (or structural or critical) but whether and how it can embody and enact critical possibilities. I participate as an active player in a much more creative process in which I use ideas to develop critical possibilities, and thereby develop practice theories. This is the process which I hope to demonstrate in this book.

## Doubts about postmodernism

Although I argue that postmodern and poststructural thinking can be practised and experienced in potentially more empowering ways than structural theories, I also believe these types of thinking need to be examined to ensure that multiple perspectives are taken into account in formulating a sound and complex approach to critical practice. What then, are some of the doubts about postmodernism? These doubts have been developed more fully in recent times, particularly in the UK context. Indeed Garrett, a foremost UK social work author, argues for the resilience of modernity, and commented that British social work theorists only briefly engaged with postmodernism (2013: 23). This does raise issues about the importance of different country contexts in influencing the relevance of theories. I will develop this point further on.

Many social workers are concerned that postmodern thinking supports a moral relativism which potentially undermines the strong social justice, indeed the critical ideals, of social work (Ife, 1999: 215). In this sense, while it provides an attractive framework for the incorporation of multiple and marginal perspectives, it is argued that there still needs to be a privileging of a single perspective in order to make decisions about how (and why) to act. Having a guide for action implies a moral framework which justifies that action. Many people feel that postmodern thinking fragments this framework, and therefore provides no clear basis for action.



As well, such a 'moral vacuum' can easily leave the door open for actions and ideologies to be co-opted by more sinister political interests, or can at the very least provide an excuse for moral *inaction*. So, one of the potential strengths of postmodernism, its openness to diverse perspectives, is also a potential weakness, in that it leaves the door open to perspectives which may work against a critical agenda. Political neutrality may not, in fact, be possible.

Amy Rossiter (2001) raises this question very pertinently in relation to social work education, when she questions whether there is any such thing as 'innocent' knowledge. How can social work educators hope to help students learn in an open way when we, as social workers, are already implicated by the very fact that we make choices about which knowledge (perspectives) to present and how we present it? These choices are necessarily made from our own subjective position and so, in this sense, our knowledge can never be 'pure', but is in fact unavoidably 'tainted' by the position from which we see and speak. Since everyone speaks from a particular position, no knowledge is ever innocent or free of perspective. So, the very advantage of postmodern thinking is also its weakness. Pointing up that every perspective is 'positioned' in fact removes the privilege of any position. Therefore, postmodern analysis does not provide guidance about appropriate or desirable knowledge and ways to act.

So, while postmodernism might embody a relativistic stance and appear politically neutral, in fact it points up that there can never be pure political neutrality, since all positions (including a postmodern one) and actions embody a moral perspective. Ironically, however, postmodernism, with its emphasis on fragmentation, multiplicity, diversity and contextuality, does not supply this clear perspective.

Yet, at the same time, it would seem desirable, within the traditions on which social work was founded, that we value the principles which postmodernism emphasises – certainly the ideas of multiplicity, diversity and contextuality sit perfectly within a social work frame of reference. So, is there a way out of the maze?

Foucault provides a starting point for the way out: 'My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous' (1984: 343). The issue at stake is to focus on the potential ('dangerousness') of practices and situations, rather than starting with the assumption that they are inherently 'good' or 'bad'. The way I like to understand the contribution of postmodernism is that the value of ideas is in how they are enacted or expressed in a given situation or context, rather than in any inherent value in the ideas themselves, regardless of context. Of course, the expression of an idea (discourse surrounding an idea) may carry certain associations of 'badness' or 'goodness', which may produce particular effects; in which case, it may be important to focus on these associated functions and how they are managed. Postmodernism provides a beginning for an understanding of how certain discourses might carry and enact particular effects.

In this sense, postmodernism is more particularly a theory about ways of knowing, rather than a theory about what sort of society we should have and how people should behave within it. It is an epistemological theory, rather than a moral theory. Radical, structural and feminist theories would fit into this latter moral category. Of course, this is a reasonably simplistic categorisation, but it does provide the beginnings for us to see how it may be possible to couple

ideas about how we know with ideas about what we should be. It provides a simple starting point to picture how we might combine postmodern thinking with a structural theory.

If we take this idea as a starting point, it is meaningless to compare postmodernism and, say, for example, Marxism, because they are theories about different types of things. Indeed, Marxism is characterised as a *structural* (and in this sense a *modernist*) theory in that it is about trying to find particular underlying causes or explanations (or structures). Postmodern (or poststructural) perspectives are about focusing on the fact that we do search for underlying explanations. In this sense, postmodernism holds much more critical potential, since it opens up all realms of thinking for scrutiny as to how they are constructed, enacted and expressed in any given situation. Presumably, we need to combine both types of theorising in order to begin to understand our complex world and the plethora of experiences within it.

Since we have established a basis for the possibility of combining postmodern thinking with critical perspectives, let us now turn our attention to critical theory and how it might be applicable in social work.

## A critical approach to social work

A critical approach to social work has only been explicitly talked about in social work literature in the last few decades (e.g. Healy, 2000; Rossiter, 1996). It is therefore useful to revisit the idea, and its meaning in the broader social sciences, before we develop our ideas about what it means in social work.

### Summary

Below is a summary of the main thinking in critical social theory, as outlined by Agger (1991, 1998: 4-5):

1. 'Domination' is structural, yet also personally experienced. It is achieved by ruling groups through a mixture of external exploitation *plus* an internal self-discipline or self-deception. This is the idea that people also participate in their own oppression. As some feminists might term it, people hold and perpetuate 'self-defeating' beliefs and customs.
2. Thus, the notion of 'false consciousness' is important. There is a recognition that a process of false consciousness operates within capitalist societies so that members of the society cannot recognise that social relations are in fact historically constructed, and therefore transformable.
3. A critique of positivism as a major ideology, since a positivistic stance encourages attitudes of passivity and fatalism. Social members see themselves as removed from, disengaged or alienated from the power to act on and in their situation. Therefore, there is a need to develop a consciousness that is able to view 'facts' as pieces of history which can be changed. 'This emphasises the power of agency, both personal and collective, to transform society' (Agger, 1998: 5).

4. The possibility for progress is inherent in critical social theory. It is political in that it sees a role for critical social theory in raising awareness about domination and the possibilities for social change. Because it links this awareness of structural domination with everyday experience, critical social theory is *voluntaristic* rather than *deterministic*.
  5. As part of the critique of positivism, there is a recognition that knowledge is not simply a reflection of 'empirical reality', but is also actively constructed by those studying it. There is therefore a need to distinguish between knowledge which comes from causal analysis and that which comes from self-reflection and interaction. This means that there needs to be a reliance on communication as a major transformative process.
- 

There are clearly many points of similarity between postmodern thinking and a critical approach:

- the recognition of interactive and reflective ways of knowing;
- the recognition of the connections between structural domination and personal self-limitations;
- the recognition of possibilities for both personal and social change.

Such an approach might incorporate an understanding of how social realities are constructed both externally and internally. The emancipatory possibilities are opened up through a critical analysis of the interactions between individuals and society which situates the interest group and power relations operating in both external structures and constructed ways of thinking (discourses). Resistance and change therefore lie in challenging power relations and structures that are constructed in these ways. Furthermore, it is through a process of dialogue and interaction, self-reflection and analysis, in conjunction with knowledge obtained empirically, that an understanding of how power relations are specifically expressed and used in a particular situation will be achieved.

How then might we characterise a postmodern and critical approach to social work? A post-modern and critical social work practice is primarily concerned with practising in ways which further a society without domination, exploitation and oppression. It will focus both on how structures dominate, but also on how people construct and are constructed by changing social structures and relations, recognising that there may be multiple and diverse constructions of ostensibly similar situations. Such an understanding of social relations and structures can be used to disrupt dominant understandings and structures, and as a basis for changing these so that they are more inclusive of different interest groups.

Knowledge to inform this understanding is derived in different ways. Empirical knowledge is needed in order to understand how material structures shape lives. Processes of self-reflection are crucial in ensuring that dominant structures and relations are challenged in the way they are implicitly enacted in everyday life. Communication and dialogue are necessary in order to ensure that diverse perspectives are included in forging new and inclusive ways. Thus, in

postmodern and critical social work both the kinds of social changes that are sought, and the ways in which they are enacted, are important. Outcome and process are integral to each other.

## Contextualising other more recent perspectives

In the last few years, perspectives on critical social work have developed further. These developments have taken on slightly different dimensions, in different national contexts. In the UK, for instance (where I worked between 2006 and 2013), anti-oppressive (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Dominelli, 2002a, 2002b) and anti-discriminatory practice (Thompson, 2006) are more commonly spoken about. Interestingly, Malcolm Payne, in his landmark text on social work theories, divides the range of approaches which might otherwise be collectively characterised as 'critical' into four groupings: empowerment and advocacy; critical practice; feminist practice; and anti-oppressive and multicultural sensitivity (2014). The term 'critical' social work is also used in another way in the UK and is used to refer to work which is significant or crucial in some way (Adams et al., 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). The book by Jones et al. (2008) attempts to contribute to the critical social work tradition by illustrating examples of best practice. More recently in the UK, through the use of the work of Foucault, other authors have sought to further develop anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive theories for social work. Very interestingly, they avoid use of the term 'postmodernism' to describe this particular theoretical framework, but their approach to social work is structured around the key concepts central to postmodern thinking (power, discourse, subjectivity and deconstruction) (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). Alternatively, there has been a relatively recent resurgence of neo-Marxist traditions in UK social work, exemplified by the work of Iain Ferguson (2008), who calls for a re-establishment of structural analysis in approaching social problems. Indeed, it may be fair to say, as mentioned earlier, that postmodern approaches to social work are not predominant in the UK. In fact, there appears to be little open peddling of postmodernism in UK social work literature. Social constructionism (e.g. Parton and O'Byrne, 2000) seems more commonly preferred. I have found it interesting to observe, since the time of moving to the UK from Australia, how the 'modernising agenda' of New Labour policies in the UK is perhaps associated with this preference for more structural approaches. Despite the ostensible goals to make bureaucracy more flexible and efficient, modernisation appears to have been experienced in a top-down and inflexible way (Parton, 2004), ironically tending towards greater control and privileging managerialist agendas (Payne, 2009). In such an environment, 'anti-' approaches may seem more effective in resisting this more centralised control of professional services.

In the USA there is markedly less writing that can be identified with a critical tradition. Indeed, critical social work is seen as marginal in the USA (Reisch, 2019). There is however an expressed interest in social constructionism (Witkin, 2012) which at least challenges the status quo epistemologically (and thereby politically). Social constructionism, with its emphasis on how people actively construct their social worlds and therefore everyday life, might be said to fit broadly under a postmodern umbrella (Witkin, 2012: 14). As I discussed earlier, the idea that

knowledge is constructed according to context, is also part of a critical tradition. Therefore, social constructionism may be said to be critical in its orientation to the contingency of knowledge. The power dimensions of this are perhaps less well developed in a constructionist approach, but certainly the basis for challenging power on the grounds of knowledge claims exists within a social constructionist framework.

The term 'transformative social work' has also been used to a small extent in some social work literature, some emanating from the USA. In some ways this term avoids explicitly political connotations, but does place emphasis on the need for drastic changes, both personal and social. In this sense, it does share some basic principles with critical approaches.

Another new approach to left-leaning social work has been coined the 'new politics of social work' (Gray and Webb, 2013). This approach seeks to revitalise the political agenda of social work, particularly in relation to challenging the exploitative regimes supported by capitalism and neo-liberalism. It incorporates a strong basis of social justice, bolstered by a new politics evident in new political movements, which have arisen in a climate of financial austerity. In this sense, it sees itself as freeing social work from the problems associated with postmodern and poststructural perspectives, but doing this by also aligning with new political forms of redress.

From first living and working in Australia, then in the UK (and Canada), I have also gained a greater appreciation of how anti-oppressive approaches to practice may be differently embedded in the political identity of the social work profession in different country contexts. Anti-oppressive value positions, for instance, give a greater profile for the distinctiveness of social work (from other professions), and stake a claim for distinctive knowledge and practices based on those values. This perhaps has been of particular importance in the UK context.

In Australia, and perhaps to a lesser extent in Canada, there has been more of a mix of different approaches. Allan et al. (2009) attest to the variety of perspectives covered under the rubric of 'critical' in the Australian literature. Human rights perspectives (Nipperness and Briskman, 2009) are included in this overview. Morley et al. (2014) provide a more recent perspective. In Canada, anti-oppressive approaches incorporate both structural and critical perspectives (Baines, 2007; Carniol, 2010).

The use of postmodern (and social constructionist) perspectives has also continued to be criticised from several countries, and several writers have put forward different types of theories to bridge the gap between the relativist thinking of postmodern perspectives and the fundamental value position of more critical perspectives. Examples of these are de Montigny (2005) who proposes a 'reflexive materialist' position, and Stan Houston (2001) who introduces critical realism as an alternative framework.

## More recent developments in critical social work

Critical approaches to social work have continued to be developed (Webb, 2019). Most prominent among these are:

- **Post-anthropocentric social work** (Bozalek and Pease, 2021). This approach questions the fundamental underlying presupposition that ‘man’ is at the centre of the universe, and the principles and assumptions that flow from this. In this approach, dualisms (for example, ‘human/animal’), which are socially constructed in a modernist age of thinking, are problematic, as they provide grounds for hierarchy and therefore oppression. This thinking is shared by the move to **decolonise social work** (Clarke and Yellow Bird, 2021) in which fundamental beliefs about epistemology and ontology, inherited by White settlers, are questioned. In this way, indigenous ways of being and knowing may form a framework for healing and for integration of whole human beings with their whole environment.
- **Environmental social work** is related to the above concerns. This will be discussed further in Chapter 2
- **Anti-racist social work** is of course not new but more recent developments include the use of critical race theory (CRT) (Aldana and Vazquez, 2020; Odera et al., 2021) In simple terms, critical race theorists argue that racism is endemic to the cultures and social systems in which we exist. Odera et al. (2021: 802–3) note that as long ago as 2002, Razack and Jeffrey recorded eight CRT inspired principles for social work: (1) racism as the norm, (2) value of storytelling, (3) critique of liberalism, (4) recognising power and privilege, (5) critique of Whiteness, (6) integrating anti-racist discourse, (7) legitimising race scholarship, (8) globalised understandings of race (Razack and Jeffery, 2002).

All these more recent developments add greatly to our more nuanced and fundamental understandings of how social work approaches can be critical. Although they can be encompassed by our original vision of critical perspective on social work, they expand our horizons so that we can delve deeper, and indeed more critically, into the unexamined assumptions which frame our thinking and practice.

---

### Exercise

---

Think about your own country context and which type of ‘critical’ approach you have some sympathy with. What is it about your own experience and your own context that might have influenced this sympathy? What aspects of different theories do you feel more comfortable with, and why?

Now read Anna’s story and note how her own background and country context might have influenced her orientation to social work.

#### Anna Gupta’s story

Who am I? I am of mixed parentage. My father was Indian and my mother is English. Both were professionals and we lived a comfortable middle-class life in Bombay. My family emigrated to Australia when I was 11, and I now live in London. I was raised in a political household, where left-wing beliefs and social justice ideals were the values promoted.

Being a mixed-parentage person, multiple and contingent identities, involving being inside and outside, have framed my life experiences. As a child growing up first in India, 'race' was not a feature of my life, I was Indian. Although in subtle ways not evident to a child, my White maternal heritage privileged me. In Australia, it was different and for the first time I witnessed racism. However, being able to 'pass as White' or at least in an Australian context of immigration, Southern European, the racism was more 'by proxy'. I observed the micro aggressions towards my beloved father with his dark skin. Often he was deemed 'alright' because he was not Aboriginal and was a doctor, but I knew 'it was not alright'. However, my most shocking exposure to racism in Australia came not as a result of my own identity but witnessing the treatment of indigenous people when I became a social worker in inner Melbourne. It was one factor in my decision to move to live in London, where racism certainly exists, but at least is talked about more, meaning it can also be addressed better.

Other social divisions have also framed my life. In the context of being brought up in a position of privilege in a deeply unequal society by socialist parents, especially my politically active father, class and poverty also figured prominently in my childhood and subsequent life. A 'family script' was that we had to use the power gained by our privileged structural position to challenge social injustice. It is why I came into social work, what informs the type of social work that I still believe in, and why I am now talking about it. Being able to contribute to the debate on poverty and inequality and its impact on families is not only a privilege, but feels like 'coming home' for me.

I work now as a social work academic and also on an independent basis in the Family Courts. In the last few years, I have felt like a human rights activist. I came into social work to change the world, and soon realised how misguided I was. However, I strive in my academic work to continue this endeavour, through teaching and writing about the role of the state and social work with marginalised people. My direct practice provides opportunities to exercise my power as a social worker to directly influence individual people's lives in ways that I believe are socially just and humane. This does on occasions involve recommending the removal of children from their parents' care. I must grapple with the complexities of care and control and how to use my power to make the process as fair and respectful as possible in inherently oppressive contexts.

My work in the Family Courts is mainly on cases where family members or the children's guardian have challenged a local authority decision and the court wants an independent view. I therefore see a very biased sample of frequently poor-quality social work, including punitive practices, assumption-led decision-making and the blaming of individuals for the impact of socio-environmental circumstance beyond their control. My work as a practitioner and academic enables me to be both an insider and outsider. The influence of my academic work on practice is clear and informs my decision-making, however, my learning from practice, and especially my witnessing of the lived experiences of families living in poverty who are involved in the child protection and Family Court systems, is also important. I have used my Family Court experiences to try to increase my understanding of the material reality of poverty and its impact on parenting; the psychological effects of poverty and inequality; and the responses of social workers.

In the UK, over the past seven years, since the 'Baby P' inquiry, and then escalated by the coalition government (2010-15), there has been an increasingly narrow focus on child protection, alongside increasing levels of poverty and inequality. I have witnessed huge and disturbing changes in the way families are treated when the state intervenes compulsorily in their lives. We have become a much harsher, less caring and more judgemental society, and tragically this will continue for at least the next five years. Social work is increasingly being defined as being synonymous with this narrow and authoritarian construction of how the state should intervene in the lives of the most vulnerable in our society.

*(Continued)*

However, there are challenges to the government's direction of travel, including by senior members of the judiciary. There have been a number of Supreme Court and Court of Appeal judgments that challenge the dominant discourse and policy direction, stressing the importance of supporting family ties and relationships and that adoption should only be used as a last resort. These judgments have helped me in my work in the Family Courts and led to many children across the country being able to grow up in their birth families. The current policy context has led me to see my role as a social worker (particularly in my academic role) as being more explicitly political, and I have begun also to explore the possible spaces for collaboration and resistance. Recently to explore the possibilities offered by the Capability Approach to the development of critical social work within a social justice framework. Which takes me back to my beginnings. The Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen, author of the capability approach, is a relative and was close to my father when they were growing up.

I continue to be inspired by Krumer-Nevo's (2009) article, 'Four Scenes and an Epilogue: Autoethnography of a Critical Social Work Agenda Regarding Poverty'. She argues that:

Social work needs politicised, historical research and practice that is grounded in the lived experiences of people in poverty and in the lived experiences, dilemmas and challenges of practitioners and activists; research and practise that are not afraid of being 'counter', committed and personal; research and practise grounded in an equilibrium of structure and agency, that tell the stories of men and women, youth and adults who live in poverty as tales of pain on the one hand and of struggle and power, on the other, as tales of structure - limiting and damaging - on the one hand, and of subjectivity and agency - rich and human - on the other. (Krumer-Nevo, 2009: 318)

---

## Chapter summary

In this chapter, we began with the long-standing social justice ideals of social work and its commitment to understanding and helping people in their social contexts. We traced how these ideals have changed and developed, with the introduction of Marxist and structuralist then feminist frameworks. We also discussed how the essential ideals of social work might have been seen to be compromised to some extent through the need to politically legitimate social work as a woman's profession in a man's world. We also traced how the search for a relevant theoretical framework for critical social work continues with the application of postmodern ideas, and how there is continuing criticism and development of this perspective, which differs somewhat depending on the country context. Clearly the task of developing a critical approach to social work will continue to change in relation to evolving contexts.

---

## Further reading

Allan, J., Briskman, L. and Pease, B. (eds) (2009) *Critical Social Work: Theories and Practices for a Socially Just World*, 2nd edn. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

A very comprehensive (Australian) collection of up-to-date chapters on all aspects of critical social work.



Morley C., MacFarlane, S. and Ablett, P. (2014) *Engaging with Social Work*. Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press. Ch 1.

Up-to-date overview and analysis of critical social work theories.

Pease, B. (2013) 'A history of critical and radical social work', in M. Gray and S.A. Webb (eds), *The New Politics of Social Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 21–43.

A good concise history of these ideas updated with reference to the politics of redistribution and recognition.

Witkin, S.L. (2012) 'An introduction to social constructions', in S.L. Witkin (ed.), *Social Construction and Social Work Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 1–12.

A clear introduction to social constructionism in social work.