



# SOCIAL WORK THEORIES AND METHODS

2ND EDITION

EDITED BY  
**MEL GRAY**  
**STEPHEN A. WEBB**



SOCIAL WORK  
THEORIES AND  
METHODS

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Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed by MPG Books Group, Bodmin, Cornwall



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First edition published 2008. Reprinted twice in 2009

This edition first published 2013

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**Library of Congress Control Number: 2012939781**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

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

ISBN 978-1-4462-0859-5  
ISBN 978-1-4462-0860-1 (pbk)

To Penni and Dave for their patience and love



# CONTENTS

About the editors and contributors	ix
Introduction <i>Mel Gray and Stephen A. Webb</i>	1
<b>PART I THEORISTS</b>	11
1 <b>Jürgen Habermas</b> <i>Stan Houston</i> Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland	13
2 <b>Anthony Giddens</b> <i>Harry Ferguson</i> University of Nottingham, UK	25
3 <b>Pierre Bourdieu</b> <i>Paul Michael Garrett</i> National University of Ireland, Galway	36
4 <b>Michel Foucault</b> <i>Jason L. Powell</i> University of Central Lancashire, UK	46
5 <b>Judith Butler</b> <i>Brid Featherstone and Lorraine Green</i> Open University; Manchester University, UK	63
<b>PART II THEORIES</b>	73
6 <b>Attachment theory</b> <i>David Howe</i> University of East Anglia, UK	75
7 <b>Feminist social work</b> <i>Joan Orme</i> University of Glasgow, UK	87
8 <b>Critical social work</b> <i>Mel Gray and Stephen A. Webb</i> University of Newcastle, Australia	99
9 <b>Structural social work</b> <i>Kate M. Murray and Steven F. Hick</i> University of British Columbia; Carleton University, Canada	110



<b>10 Multiculturalism</b>	126
<i>Purnima Sundar and Mylan Ly</i> Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, Canada	
<b>11 Neoliberalism</b>	137
<i>Sue Penna and Martin O'Brien</i> Lancaster University; University of Central Lancashire, UK	
<b>12 Postmodernism</b>	147
<i>Barbara Fawcett</i> University of Sydney, Australia	
<b>PART III PERSPECTIVES FOR PRACTICE</b>	157
<b>13 Cognitive-behavioural approach</b>	159
<i>Eric L. Garland and Bruce A. Thyer</i> Florida State University, USA	
<b>14 Ecological approach</b>	173
<i>Fred H. Besthorn</i> Wichita State University, USA	
<b>15 Social network analysis</b>	183
<i>Deirdre M. Kirke</i> Formerly of National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Ireland	
<b>16 Ethnography</b>	195
<i>Jerry Floersch, Jeffrey L. Longhofer and Megan Nordquest Schwallie</i> Rutgers School of Social Work; University of Chicago, USA	
<b>17 Ethnomethodology</b>	205
<i>Gerald de Montigny</i> Carleton University, Canada	
<b>18 Discourse and reflexivity</b>	218
<i>Sue White</i> Birmingham University, UK	
<b>19 Evidence-based practice</b>	229
<i>Debbie Plath</i> Debbie Plath Consulting, Newcastle, Australia	
<b>20 Ways of knowing</b>	241
<i>Ian Shaw</i> University of York, UK	
References	253
Index	296

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# INTRODUCTION

MEL GRAY AND STEPHEN A. WEBB

## WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT SOCIAL WORK

One can think about social work in a number of ways. The simplest way to think about it is as a group of practical interventions that try to improve situations in people's lives. In trying to help people improve their situations, social workers are often required to follow legal procedures or policy guidelines that prescribe what they should or should not do under certain circumstances. This way of thinking about social work is based on making positive changes in people's lives that are either prescribed or not. From this perspective, social work is 'the difference that makes a difference' for people.

A second way to think about social work is to consider what makes it necessary or important to have such a thing called 'social work' in modern societies. In important ways, social work draws a line between the needs of people that are made a matter of public concern and those that must be left for the private domain to satisfy. In some important ways, the role of social work is a response to attempts to reconcile individual freedoms with social solidarity. It is located as a *social* agency in which individuals are given what they need so that they are free to choose the 'good' for themselves. In modern social work parlance, this is often referred to as 'empowerment'.

Within modern liberal societies, social work as a welfare bureaucracy in the modern State administers a 'shared good' on behalf of citizens (Ignatieff, 1984). Yet, despite this attempt to balance freedoms with State intervention to satisfy the requirements of needs and protection, there remains a deeply felt need for a sense of belonging and solidarity in modern societies that is not satisfied. Loneliness, isolation, exclusion and depression may be byproducts of this failure to satisfy the human need for belonging.

How might social work contribute to a deeper sense of fraternity in societies characterised by division and fragmentation? While individuals need freedom, liberty and justice, they also need social solidarity. This requires new ways of thinking about social work and even perhaps, a new language. Some of the material in this book draws attention to problems of modern daily life, points to possible solutions and asks how we got ourselves into this situation in the first place. This way of thinking about social work requires an additional push by asking that social workers address the 'difference that makes us different *or* the same' in modern societies.

Another way of thinking about social work is to consider all the books or journal articles that have 'social work' in their titles or contents lists. These books are written by people who describe themselves as social work researchers – that is, are classified as researchers or practitioners who write about social work. Thinking about social work in this way – as a collection

of books or authors – makes one think that social work is a body of knowledge that has accumulated over the many years it has been taught or practised. Knowledge that is accumulated over time is often referred to as a ‘tradition of knowledge’ and so we speak of a ‘social work tradition’ or ‘traditional social work’. This book makes further contributions to this research tradition with its many strands of concepts, ideas and theories.

Social work has been around in most developed countries for over a hundred years, which suggests that it has a well-established tradition of knowledge. That persistence through time and the advances that have been made along the way, which may or may not be a matter of accumulated knowledge, is what the research tradition concept highlights. A tradition includes a number of frameworks that consist of specific theories or theoretical models and perspectives. Their interpenetration with the practice of social work, in terms of conceptual schemes and problems investigated, is what has advanced over time. The integration of theoretical models as explication of and in relation to comprehensive theories is a primary mode of advance of a research tradition. However, such a tradition changes when newcomers arrive and present new ways of thinking about social work. New books are put on the library shelves, new journals appear and students’ reading lists are updated.

So, social work knowledge is in a constant state of flux and might best be described as a continuing activity that is formed and reformed over time. Old wisdom is constantly tested against new ideas and conceptual formulations. Nevertheless, there is a body of knowledge referred to in the literature as ‘social work knowledge’ that is based on an accumulation of concepts, methods and values. Indeed, social work is a field of scholarship with a long tradition of thought that has made a deep impact on the whole of modern thinking about the social dimension as it deals with issues central to people’s everyday concerns. With this type of thinking, social work is ‘the difference that is different’ from other ways of thinking, such as those found in psychology, sociology, history or philosophy.

With regard to the first way of thinking about social work, it is not simply a way of intervening in people’s lives – that is, of developing concrete tasks or even applying commonsense skills to help people improve their lives or trying to empower people to become independent. Social work is much more than this. It is different from common sense in the way that it goes about ‘making sense’ of human reality. Social work tries to understand and explain why this rather than that happened. Most importantly, it tries to explain why something happened in the context of wider events. That wider context is a social dimension which is broader and more complex than the immediate situation in which people find themselves. We speak a language we did not create, we use technology we did not invent and we claim rights we did not establish and so on. Even feelings that appear completely spontaneous, such as the anger expressed at certain types of crime, are, in reality, the product of a social context. All of this might explain why the adjective ‘social’ in social work is so important in highlighting the primacy of the *social* context as it extends into all aspects of human life.

## THE VALUE OF INTERPRETATION IN SOCIAL WORK

When thinking about social work practice, it is apparent that it tries to make sense of *human* situations – in their social context – by analysing commonsense claims and conflicts about

them, while encouraging people to reassess and discover different or more nuanced ways of interpreting them. Interpretation is at the core of social work. The rights of custody over children require interpretation of the law. Communication with others rests on the assumption that social workers can grasp the intended meaning of their speech or writing and thus understand cultural contexts. Similarly, during times of crisis, social workers are often required to reinterpret previous situations or routines. Interpretation seeks to establish a way forward or a way to orientate ourselves within a difficult situation. A crisis that suddenly envelops us can put a question mark against all previous interpretations.

While many aspects of social life appear routine and lend themselves to commonsense understanding, others are more complex and require 'specialist' interpretations. A commonsense interpretation, by its very definition, means that the interpretation is common to most people, but social work interpretations are very often not of this nature.

Interpretation in social work requires the recovery of the meaning or intention of clients' actions. As a client may describe her action retrospectively in ways in which she did not, or could not, describe before it was completed, interpretation has a privileged position in social work. Thus, social work interpretations are often not based on common sense.

A commonsense approach focuses on 'doing the right thing', while an interpretive perspective concentrates on 'doing the thing right'. It is our view that, despite being overlooked in social work skills training, interpretation is constitutive of social work and may specify the distinctive way of *becoming human in our social world*. To understand diversely shaped cultures, experiences, actions and beliefs – and to make their significance apparent in spoken and written forms – is the core of interpretation and it is indispensable to social work. One of the things that this book tries to emphasise is the great importance of the skill of interpretation for social work.

As we have mentioned, for over a century, social work has developed a 'tradition of knowledge' based on enquiries into social and personal relationships, moral values, social structures, social justice and the problems of modern life. Social work thinking questions the conditions of social life and its values as well as the purpose of human and social action. An engagement with such areas of life is often more challenging, difficult and arduous than commonsense thinking suggests and requires more than administration and policy implementation or simply fulfilling a legal mandate. Throughout its history, social work has taken issue with so-called facts and laws and often challenged normative mandates of what is a right, conventional or proper way to live. For many students, that is what makes social work so engaging, compelling and distinctive.

All of the chapters in this book are, in their different ways, acts of interpretation. That means, rather cyclically, your reading and thinking about the material is an interpretation of an interpretation. We think that by reading these kinds of interpretations, your own interpretive skills will improve. To do so can be difficult because some of the ideas, concepts and methods are complex. Theorising can be hard work and does not lend itself easily to the lazy mind. However, wrestling with these kinds of things means that you develop a sensibility for or an attunement to theoretical ideas and concepts. We also believe that it encourages critical scrutiny and promotes the habit of self-analysis and questioning views that claim to be certainties. In developing good skills of interpretation, what we thought we understood fully, based on routine and habit, is questioned once again, opening up a new set of possibilities such that prior conceptions are replaced by new understandings. While the process may never end, we

think that it will enhance your judgements and help you feel more certain about where you stand on important issues in social work and society at large. It will also help you become more aware of the way in which you habitually approach situations. Theories that fit with how you usually look at things will excite you; those which present a very different perspective might annoy you. When thinking about social work, we challenge ourselves to open up to new interpretations and perspectives and embrace complexity.

## THINKING CRITICALLY IN SOCIAL WORK

Good research-minded intervention depends on critical thinking at least as much as on factual knowledge, laws, proof or evidence. Social work is no exception to that rule.

Critical thinking is defined as a type of thinking that is orientated towards changing society for the better. Yet, despite the importance of critical thinking, social work students are not always taught how to think critically about the theories, methods and concepts they must use. This often results in the uncritical acceptance of facts and theories about human behaviour and the social environment. This can lead to bias, distortion or unpredictability when dealing with the complexity of the social world. Even though students are taught social work skills on professional training courses, such as interviewing, listening and communication skills, they are rarely taught about what is a good or bad judgement when dealing with challenging situations or other people's values (Gray and Webb, 2010a). For us, skills in making good judgements or interpretations are at the heart of social work thinking and are based on the evaluative ability to think critically. Critical thinking is a skill that must be developed in order to interpret successfully – and simultaneously – information from a variety of sources, such as interpersonal relationships, family life, government policy and legislation and changes in society.

This book shows students and researchers how to think critically about key topics, such as the relationship between theory and practice, and the way in which theory – and theoretical perspectives – opens up possibilities for change. As one student explained to the editors, 'If social work didn't have theory – and a variety of theories and perspectives – we would only have dogma'.

A central feature of the critical thinking tradition in social work has focused on what is loosely referred to as the 'theory–practice' debate. In more recent times, the emergence of the 'what works' agenda has further highlighted the significance of critical thinking in challenging government policies that extol a narrow, rigid framework for social work interventions. The idea that useful theory is merely 'what works' – that is, it should be judged on its utility and how it can be applied or used in practice contexts – helps to demonstrate the paucity of hard and rigid distinctions between theory and practice.

Critical analysis has demonstrated that theory and practice cannot be separated in any obvious way – the two dimensions are interdependent. Thus, for example, abstract changes in concepts are always embodied in real and particular events. Similarly, every social work practice is the bearer and articulation of more or less theory-laden beliefs and concepts. Even those who try to refute the value of theory by claiming that social work is just 'good common sense' are, in fact, articulating a distilled version of philosophical theories about common sense

that emerged in English Enlightenment thinking (see Himmelfarb, 2004). There is a well-established practice method in social work called critically reflective practice which makes the important link between reflection and action as manifest politically. A long tradition in social work, at least since the 1960s, has focused on the politics of social work (see Gray and Webb, forthcoming). Adopting a critical or radical stance in social work is crucial in confronting and understanding economic inequalities, social injustice and discrimination. It is also vital in helping social workers transform these conditions. This book helps demonstrate two things: (1) the value of theory in terms of its explanatory power and the way that it deepens our understanding of social work; and (2) the value of social work as it progressively contributes to constructing a better world for people to live in.

## CONTESTABLE THINKING IN SOCIAL WORK

Collectively, the material included in this book constitutes distinctive modes of thinking about social work. A ‘mode of thinking’ means considering the domain of relevance that relates to the explanations, beliefs and interpretations suited to the work in which we are involved. A social worker relying on ethnomethodology, for example, would treat social work as an extension of interpersonal experience, while a social worker relying on social networks would organise his or her practice around a set of salient group dependencies and identifications. For a social worker who considers feminist explanations to be important, gender relationships between men and women are likely to have a significant place in the way he or she interprets and makes sense of any interventions and the workings of society at large. A social worker influenced by the writings of Foucault would view relations between people and organisations and their consequences as effects of power relationships, some of which result in forms of social domination and oppression.

Modes of thinking in social work are contestable, however. Just as in other social sciences it is very difficult to find agreement on certain key themes, concepts and methods, so it is in social work, especially in relation to evidence-based (see Chapters 19 and 20) and constructivist (see Chapters 12 and 18) views of social reality. In philosophy, for example, there are several theories about the nature of truth – empiricism or realism, rationalism, relativism, constructivism and so on – each of which is very different from the other and makes different claims. Similarly, in social work there are contestable and debatable phenomena.

One significant debate in social work over the past decade has been about what is called ‘the toolkit approach’. By this is meant an approach that is selective in appropriating bits and pieces of knowledge for particular pieces of work. Here, practitioners who have developed a flexible range of theories or perspectives use the tools that best fit the problem that is presented. What happens, though, if they try to combine bits of knowledge for intervention that come from two contestable or even contradictory perspectives? This has led some to criticise the toolkit approach as being incoherent and fundamentally contradictory or, at least, resting too heavily on individual opinions about what is useful and, therefore, usable. Like a plumber mending a broken pipe, it assumes that good social work simply has to fit the problem to the solution in order to make it work. It has an image of the world as unambiguous and straightforward and implies that every problem has a solution, but perhaps the world is inherently

ambiguous and more fluid than the toolkit approach allows for and suggests. In reality, we have to live with the tensions of irreconcilable forces and insoluble problems. Hence, a crucial question remains for those committed to the toolkit approach: how do they know that their interpretation of the fit between the problem and the solution is a good one? How do they know this is the best, perhaps most effective and right way to go about solving the problem?

Those who are critical of the toolkit approach claim that it is important for social workers to develop what German sociology calls a *Weltanschauung*, or a worldview, based not only on theories but also on a coherent set of strong values. A worldview may be defined as a set of presuppositions associated with one or more frameworks that are built on through time. Having a worldview means taking sides and showing a commitment to a set of beliefs rather than merely regarding theories or perspectives as simply different. It requires us to accept that some types of thinking have more value than others or else have better explanatory force.

## THE VALUE OF THEORY FOR SOCIAL WORK

In 1998, the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESSRC) in the UK funded a research seminar series called 'Theorising Social Work Research' that aimed to raise the profile of social work as a research discipline. It also aimed to identify the specific contributions theorising in social work makes to the social sciences. In the same year, Sage published a book called *Theorising Welfare* (O'Brien and Penna, 1998) that examined seven theoretical perspectives related to social work. These represent two explicit attempts to bring theory to the fore in social work research. However, theory and theorising have long made a significant contribution to social work. We can say that theories embody frameworks of knowledge that have been developed in social work and the theoretical world where researchers validate or refute old knowledge and engage in building new knowledge in the form of new theories and perspectives.

Some students and researchers shy away from theory. Indeed, there are people in social work who are downright averse to any kind of theorising. As educators, we often wonder why this occurs. Clearly some students are more comfortable with theory and theorising than others, so that is something worth exploring here. Some in social work believe that we are ill-served by theoreticians, that theory operates in a largely quasi-philosophical domain rather than an empirical one and that *doing* social work is more important than *thinking* about it. This view has been crystallised in recent moves to formalise evidence-based practice and 'what works' in social work by drawing only on scientific methods (see Chapter 19). We may respond to this quickly by paraphrasing Bryant (1989) who notes that: (a) empirical data in the sciences are theoretically informed; (b) scientific findings are not based solely on empirical evidence; and (c) fundamental shifts in scientific knowledge occur when empirical changes are accompanied by the availability of convincing theoretical alternatives. As long ago as 1980, Hesse summarised this position when she wrote (p. 56):

I take it that it has been sufficiently demonstrated that data are not detachable from theory, and that their expression is permeated by theoretical categories.

We take the view that it is impossible, and potentially dangerous, to force dichotomies between theory and practice, value and fact or evidence and interpretation in social work.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

This edited volume of chapters, from leading international authors, aims to make explicit the extent to which social work turns on competing social science theories and philosophical commitments. Each chapter is a short interpretative analysis that outlines the contributions made to social work by contemporary theorists, theories or perspectives. The book outlines key theoretical and methodological ideas that have been formed within social work and shows how these have been adopted and critiqued by social workers. A select bibliography of each thinker or approach is provided at the end of each chapter as a learning aid for students. A glossary that defines key concepts is also given at the end of each chapter, along with study questions to aid student learning.

To ‘think social work’ is to engage with and against contemporary and past theorists and theoretical concepts. This volume sees theorising as essential engagement, to counter the new state of pragmatics in a post-9/11 world that encourages a severing of thought from practice. To this end, the book reflects on ways in which major theorists, theories and perspectives in social work may be brought together to take social work beyond familiar domains and prevent slippage into pragmatic quiescence. Hopefully, it enables social workers to take a stance against austere measures of regulation and control and vast inequalities of wealth.

The joy of ‘thinking social work’ is in creating alternative modes of understanding through critical engagement with competing perspectives. Readers are encouraged to join in the volume’s spirit of debate and be challenged into reflecting on their own commitments. The book explores two distinct dimensions of this theoretical re-engagement: first, the critical excavation of existing theory through recent social sciences as applied to social work and, second, the engagement in critical dialogues between contrasting theoretical positions to show the pleasure of an ‘uncompromising dialogue’ in thinking about social work.

Given its remit, this edited collection is designed to offer critical discussion of a selection of thinkers, theories and perspectives dominating debates about social work. Our selection will, no doubt, prove contentious, in that some readers might be surprised by some of the theorists and topics we have included and others we have left out, such as Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, phenomenology, feminist epistemology and conservatism. This was due entirely to restrictions on the number of pages we were allowed.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

In compiling this collection, we have sought to highlight those who, in our opinion, have contributed significantly to *theoretical* discussions shaping social work in recent years. These include those working in established and fundamentally important intellectual traditions, such as feminism and multiculturalism, as well as those developing newer discourses that relate to social work as they engage with postmodernism, neoliberalism



or the writing of Judith Butler and Jürgen Habermas. Indeed, one of our strategies of selection was to include thinkers and theories and perspectives advocating different conceptions and perspectives in order to highlight the diverse ways in which social work has been theorised.

The book is divided into three parts.

- *Part I: Theorists* This section explores, in a focused way, the relevance to social work of contemporary thinkers who have set out influential and distinctive frameworks for making sense of the complexities of the social, including Habermas, Giddens, Bourdieu, Foucault and Butler.
- *Part II: Theories* Here we focus on the major 'isms' continuing to shape sociopolitical and philosophical thought, including, inter alia, attachment theory, feminism, multiculturalism, postmodernism and neoliberalism, and particular social work theories, such as critical and structural social work.
- *Part III: Perspectives for Practice* This section focuses on the connection between social work and methodologically driven approaches, such as cognitive-behavioural, social network analysis, ecological, ethnomethodology and ethnography, discourse analysis and reflexivity and evidence-based practice. It ends with an overview of epistemology, or ways of knowing, in social work.

The book provides a context for identifying the key ideas of particular thinkers as they have developed into a 'body of knowledge' or 'ism' and that 'ism's' potential application in practice. This kind of approach enables the reader to move across various contributions, either forwards or backwards in the text. For example, it is possible to trace reflexive practice as a perspective back to the ideas of thinkers such as Bourdieu and Giddens and, in so doing, draw out contrasts of relevance and emphasis. Alternatively, our undergraduate readers may thread key concepts from, say, social network analysis or discourse analysis. In this way, the book provides a framework for mapping a set of influences and trajectories, particularly in relation to concepts and perspectives, by running them between or across one another. This helps to establish key links and identify relationships in terms of being for or against different standpoints, such as neoliberalism versus structural social work, and the way in which these have been translated into various fields of practice.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Given the range of material, themes and subject matter, this is a very user-friendly book that allows you to dip into and pick and mix the kinds of reading you prefer in a leisurely way. We have already indicated that thinking about social work is not always an easy task because not only does it require focus, concentration and rereading of the material but it also creates tensions, dilemmas and struggles with key value issues. Approaching the kinds of material in this book may also provoke contradictions in the various positions adopted by authors. Some central claims made in one chapter may be contradicted by different claims made in another. This is partly an effect of what we referred to as the contestable nature of social work knowledge, but is also a feature of wider problems that are called 'epistemological' in the social sciences. This is a branch of knowledge that enquires into the nature and possibility

of knowledge, dealing with its scope and limitations. Our knowledge of truths and our knowledge of practical things may be different. The fact that there may be no correspondence between different types of knowledge or even truth claims means that there are no watertight guarantees about what constitutes true thinking. This leads to a situation where different thinkers make different claims about what is true thinking; inevitably some will contradict each other. Therefore, thinking about social work must be regarded as an accomplishment, like learning to play a musical instrument. Thinking takes practice. As in music the keys must be mastered; in this case, difficult concepts and methods need to be understood in order to make use of them. You will need to remember what the main arguments of a certain thinker or theory are so that you can contrast them with others. An uneasy contradiction that emerges can make us forget what those arguments are.

That is why it might be best to regard this book as an exciting train ride, an adventure that offers many points of departure and a choice of stations at which to alight, rest and refresh yourself before resuming the journey. It will take you along familiar tracks and make you reflect anew on what you already know. It will give you pause to ‘step back’ and ask questions that ‘provoke new ways of thinking’. As Heidegger notes (in Bernstein, 1991: 93):

Our common ways of ‘thinking’ become so familiar and entrenched that they conceal what needs to be unconcealed. It is only by showing how the familiar and the correct appear strange and uncanny . . . that thinking can be called forth.

This book will open up new vistas as you think anew on the familiar and encounter the unfamiliar, enter foreign territory and cover new ground. You can backtrack or forge ahead, skip a few stations and return to some you particularly enjoyed. You will meet new people and be absorbed by their ideas. You might also find fellow passengers with whom to share your enthusiasm and doubts. A truly good journey is one that feeds our imaginations and expands our vision. As Alain de Botton (2002: 57) says in *The Art of Travel*:

Journeys are the midwives of thought. Few places are more conducive to internal conversations than a moving plane, ship or train. There is an almost quaint correlation between what is in front of our eyes and the thoughts we are able to have in our heads: large thoughts at times requiring large views, new thoughts new places. Introspective reflections which are liable to stall are helped along by the flow of the landscape. The mind may be reluctant to think properly when thinking is all it is supposed to do. . . . Of all modes of transport, the train is perhaps the best aid to thought.

Once we begin to enjoy such journeys, there is no telling where they might take us. Let us hope this one gives you an unquenchable thirst for the possibilities that new ideas open up. Ideas capture the imagination, the possibilities then become endless and the destinations uncertain.

## GLOSSARY

Epistemology, or the ‘theory of knowledge’, comes from the Greek word *episteme*, meaning knowledge. It refers to the branch of philosophy that studies the nature, methods (of acquisition),

limitations and validity of different knowledge and belief systems that are often referred to as 'ways of knowing' (see Chapter 20). It concerns the means by which knowledge is produced, the way in which different knowledge claims are made and how particular knowledge systems come to dominate our thinking. It attempts to answer the basic question of what distinguishes true from false knowledge. It addresses questions such as 'What is knowledge?', 'How is knowledge acquired?' and 'How do people come to know?'

**Method** Refers to the way in which we acquire knowledge. We can acquire knowledge by reading, talking to people, archival research, direct observation, experience and so on. In the scholarly tradition of theory development, rigour is highly valued, such that a method is a systematic approach to theory or knowledge development and testing.

**Methodology** Refers to a particular procedure or set of procedures used to acquire knowledge that, within particular disciplines, are based on a range of theories and concepts concerning the best way of going about analysing that knowledge. It is more than the articulation of methods because it includes the reason or rationale and epistemological assumptions that inform the process of enquiry.

**Perspective** A way of seeing the world that is influenced by one's angle or particular point of view. Often our perspectives are shaped by a variety of theories. In other words, we integrate a variety of understandings (theories) about reality – in the case of social work, about human behaviour and the social environment – that come to colour the way in which we see our world and view situations and events.

**Theory** A more or less well-argued *explanation* of reality. Collectively, then, theories are explanations of reality – or human behaviour or particular social phenomena, depending on the theory's central focus – that lead to particular *interpretations* of that reality. In other words, theorists offer particular explanations of reality that influence the ways in which people interpret situations or events.

# PART I

## THEORISTS



# 1

## JÜRGEN HABERMAS

STAN HOUSTON

### INTRODUCTION

Jürgen Habermas was born on 18 June 1929 in Dusseldorf, Germany. His father was an industrialist. As a teenager, Habermas joined the Hitler youth along with many of his peers. However, after the war ended he was shocked and appalled when he learned of the Nazi regime's barbarity. He was also frustrated by Germany's slow progress in moving towards a new, democratic state. That said, the intellectual climate of postwar Germany flourished. Against such a backdrop, Habermas read voraciously. His interests were wide ranging. Books and tracts on political philosophy, psychology and economics were widely available at the time and Habermas soon realised his appetite for discursive enquiry.

In 1949, he began to study philosophy, psychology and German literature in Göttingen, Zurich, and then in Bonn. Developing a taste, early on, for critique, he initiated an excoriating assault on the existentialist Martin Heidegger, whom he believed had given intellectual credence to the Nazi regime. This episode highlights Habermas's enduring concern that Germany has failed to take ownership of its past.

The year 1956 was to see a formative move in his fledgling academic career. By joining the prestigious Institute for Social Research – known colloquially as the 'Frankfurt School' – he came into contact with a number of illustrious social theorists, including Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. However, Habermas subsequently left the school to develop his own ideas. He was particularly concerned about the school's drift into social pessimism and political scepticism following the onslaught of fascism, the debasement of Marxist ideas in Russia and the rampant success of capitalism in the West. Faced with an implacable instrumental rationality in the modern world, his mentors in the school had embraced the enfeebled idea that social redemption lay in the empowering media of art, literature and music. For Habermas, this descent into aesthetics would lead to a philosophical cul-de-sac. Specifically, the adoption of a limited, and ultimately negative, view of rationality and antidote to the ills of the time would fail to bring about

the ideals of the Enlightenment – modernity’s unfinished project. By way of contrast, a more developed notion of rationality was required to expose false ideologies in society. Moreover, he laid claim to the seminal idea that language provided the soil in which the seed of rationality could germinate. By recovering and developing this faculty, humankind could build a better world order, thus realising Marx’s vision of a society free from alienation and material inequities.

## KEY IDEAS

Habermas’s ideas have developed over the course of a long, studious and perhaps febrile career. Yet, in spite of some astringent attacks from modish postmodernists, he has retained a firm belief in the power of reason to expose injustice and oppression and direct our thinking about alternative ways of living. In this chapter, we consider how this challenging, centripetal insight has shaped aspects of his early, middle and later work.

## IDEAS ON LANGUAGE

Habermas, following the philosopher Wittgenstein’s lead, has taken the ‘linguistic turn’. By this I mean that he sees language as the key medium for constructing reality. From this standpoint, he has made a number of very important observations about the way we communicate with one another. Central, here, are speakers’ attempts to *validate* what they say through reasoned argument.

Exploring this idea further, Habermas suggests that there are three kinds of validity claim in *normal* language (we will address Habermas’s views on the abnormal form later on in the chapter). First of all, we can assert that something is the case based on our reading of the evidence. For example, we may say, with some conviction, that all spiders have eight legs because we have undertaken a study of arachnids. Here the speaker is attempting to validate what she or he is saying on the grounds that it is true.

Second, we can validate what we say by being sincere. If I say that I am fond of you and this remark is congruent with my non-verbal presentation and inner disposition, then the statement is likely to be accepted because it comes across as genuine to the hearer.

The final validity claim invokes moral appropriateness. If I make the claim that homophobia is wrong, I might do so on the grounds that discrimination against alternative sexual identities contradicts a fundamental right to self-determination. Thus, there is an ethical dimension to the statement that could be upheld on the basis of reasoned, principled argument.

Habermas believes that this inbuilt tendency to validate what has been said emanates from an ineluctable quest for understanding and agreement in social interaction; or, to put this in Habermasian speak, ‘our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus’ (Habermas, 1968: 308). This ontological thrust for mutuality is the inherent telos of communication, its driving goal.

Habermas provides complex arguments to support his core thesis that speakers are fundamentally attuned to understanding and agreement. He draws on the work of the social behaviourist

George Herbert Mead (1962 [1934]), to substantiate his claims. For Mead, the human subject develops a capacity to ‘role-take’ with others. *Role-taking* is a technical term for the prosaic notion of putting ourselves into another’s shoes, of seeing the world from his or her unique position. This takes us beyond emotional and social development into the domain of moral advancement. To endorse the point, Habermas additionally draws on Lawrence Kohlberg’s (1981) theory of moral development and Robert L. Selman’s (1980) theory of perspective-taking in social life. Within this body of work Habermas finds sustenance for his view that moral maturity is attained when norms are not just accepted but also scrutinised objectively, reflexively and linguistically.

These preliminary comments on validity claims and the reciprocity of perspectives form the supportive pillars for Habermas’s chief construct – *communicative action*. Communicative action occurs when two or more individuals reach a consensual understanding on goals and actions. This form of speech acts as a coordinating mechanism facilitating the expression of all three validity claims and reasoned argument. Because the speakers sign up to the need for mutual understanding and agreement, they put the brakes on the temptation to engage in bumptious diatribe, point-scoring invective or clever sophistry. Quintessentially, communicative action denotes accountability – that is, it invokes my responsibility to you to make claims that are truthful, sincere and morally appropriate and your responsibility to me to do likewise. Importantly, when institutionalised, communicative action strengthens social integration and solidarity in social networks and society at large. For Habermas, social order could not exist without it.

When communicative action occurs in the context of:

- agreement that is forged on the force of the better argument;
- participants, who are capable of speech and action, being allowed to engage in the discussion;
- participants being allowed to call into question any proposal in the discussion;
- participants being allowed to introduce any proposal into the discussion;
- participants being allowed to express their attitudes;

then, according to Habermas, we have achieved the *ideal speech situation*. This is a normative situation and should be used to identify ‘disorders of discourse’, where speech has fallen short of the expressed criteria. Thus, it can be seen that there is a counterfactual dimension to the ideal speech situation. In other words, it can be used as a moral yardstick to signal unfair practices in all their guises and disguises.

The full significance of communicative action in social life, and its extension into the ideal speech situation, only becomes fully apparent when it is absent. Here, Habermas directs our attention to an aberrant derivate of communicative action called *strategic action*. Following John Austin (1962), the latter occurs when speakers move away from mutual understanding, consensus and agreement and become strategic – that is, out for their own desired ends. A goal arises and the strategic communicator is consumed by the most efficient way of realising it.

Strategic action is commonplace in business and professional life. Here, it can be purely functional, in the sense that corporate objectives have to be met and business plans conceived to guide the employee’s actions. However, strategic action can also take the form of one-upmanship, courting favour with the boss and creating alliances when rumours abound of takeover bids and so on – hence the ubiquity of the manufactured compliment



or, perhaps, the sycophantic opening gesture or even the gratuitous retreat from praise in order to feign humility. By way of contrast, backstage behaviour happens when the actor is alone or with trusted companions. Here, cynicism is vented, anger expressed and inner ambivalence revealed.

Whatever form strategic action takes, it is to be viewed as a pathological departure from communicative action. This is not to say that there is no role for strategic action in today's complex world. Clearly, for Habermas, our modern way of life could not be sustained without a means–ends form of rationality. The administration of corporate areas of business, industry and social life would simply crumble without it. However, what worries Habermas is the scale and predominance of strategic action in the modern world. Critically, it has eclipsed its forerunner – communicative action.

## IDEAS ON SOCIETY

In his magnum opus – *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1987) – Habermas identifies two core spheres of social reproduction. In practice, these spheres are joined together, but they are analysed separately by Habermas so that he can identify their discrete effects on social life.

The first sphere is termed the *lifeworld*. Borrowing from Alfred Schütz, it refers to the subterranean or background reservoir of shared, and often taken-for-granted, meanings that, through language, shape our personalities and group identities. It is here that we find daily incidents of communicative action. Hence, people meet and interact on the basis of shared definitions of tasks, duties and expectations. Most of these encounters are unproblematic and approached without conscious deliberation. Family reunions, for example, often start with shared rituals. Greetings may be intimate and conversations might start with a review of what has occurred since the last meeting and so on. Other cultures might follow different scripts, but, whatever happens, events are likely to be predictable for the actors concerned.

The other sphere – the *system* – by way of contrast, refers to areas of life that are organised and controlled by the State. Formative here are the political and economic subsystems that govern important aspects of our lives. Whereas the lifeworld is concerned with cultural integration and socialisation, the system focuses on material reproduction. Consequently, it is dominated by power, money and strategic action. Take the day-to-day activities of a stock market. Here, the pursuit of money and power reaches its apogee as harassed, but ambitious, traders ply their trade. These incumbents revel in strategic action. Making expeditious decisions, outwitting the opposition, beating the market at its own game – all these things add to the allure of this cut-and-thrust role. This is not to say that communicative action is obliterated in this environment as traders must communicate and understand each other if they are to perform their tasks effectively, but the scales will clearly tip towards strategic action.

As capitalism developed, both the lifeworld and system became progressively differentiated and rationalised in markedly different ways. Habermas sees this as a necessary step from an evolutionary point of view. Nevertheless, there was a downside to the progression because the two spheres developed out of kilter with one another.

Let us examine more closely Habermas's ideas on the rationalisation of both spheres. As the lifeworld became more evolved, traditional customs and practices that had been inherited from the past began to recede and lose their influence – particularly when they could not be defended on rational grounds. For example, whereas in the past religion shaped morality, in the modern, pluralistic world, people increasingly have to resort to reason to resolve ethical dilemmas. This presents opportunities for existential growth, but also leads to existential uncertainty. Habermas also sees the formerly homogeneous lifeworld developing into a number of distinct subspheres incorporating aesthetics, ethics and science (the beautiful, the good and the true). Each of these subspheres rests increasingly on communicative action to sustain its validity. No longer at the behest of tradition, they advance through increasing secularisation, reflexivity and social criticism.

As to the system's rationalisation, it is important to point out, first and foremost, that it emerged from the lifeworld in much earlier times. As society evolved, though, it became more autonomous from its progenitor. Put another way, the system *uncoupled* from the lifeworld. In doing so, it spawned three distinct subsystems: the economy, political administration and the judiciary.

Habermas then takes us to a critical stage in society's development. Having uncoupled from the lifeworld, the all-powerful system re-enters it, this time to colonise its functions. This means that instrumentality, rationality, money, bureaucracy and power – the trappings of the system – usurp communicative action as the chief means for resolving issues and problems in the lifeworld. As a consequence, social life becomes increasingly monetarised, commodified and bureaucratised. In short, entropy sets in. An example of colonisation is the bureaucratisation of schools, where league tables and other performance criteria undermine the practice of education as a communicational discipline.

Habermas makes similar points in relation to the welfare state. By offering mainly bureaucratised interventions to those who are in need, it erodes earlier traditions of care, such as are found in neighbourhoods and social networks, and also undermines the informal, communicational mechanisms that coordinate them. More than this, the system uses social welfare as a protective mechanism to ward off discontent in the lifeworld. This occurs mainly when there are legitimisation crises in the economy and the disparities between rich and poor become most acute. To offset the crisis, and mollify discontent, the welfare state provides social assistance and other benefits.

Habermas (1987: 355) goes on to suggest that it is important to protect the autonomy of the lifeworld: 'It is a question of building up restraining barriers for the exchanges between lifeworld and system and of building sensors for the exchanges between lifeworld and system'.

In each of these examples of colonisation, we can find experts or professionals who are trained to carry out the system's functions. Imbued with technocratic consciousness, these representatives of the State find solace in convening meetings, applying procedures, following checklists, adhering to performance indicators and implementing eligibility criteria. Rather than approaching issues from the standpoint of communicative action – the domain of the face-to-face interchange – they favour instrumentalism.

To conclude, what Habermas envisages is not an all-out war between lifeworld and system. Rather, he wants to restore some kind of balance between the two spheres so that they become mutually enriching and enhancing. In restoring the balance, the lifeworld needs to

play a more active role in challenging the system. Pivotal here are the new social movements. Social protest, as activated by gay, green and feminist campaigners, is to be encouraged. What interests Habermas is the organisation of these movements. Critically, they arise from the lifeworld and base their activities on communicative action. Habermas sees hope in these forms of protest because they recreate an active public sphere – a part of the lifeworld that operated in the nineteenth century as a critical voice against the State.

## MAIN CONTRIBUTION TO CRITICAL THEORY

Much like the way iron filings are inextricably drawn towards the poles of a magnet, so critique has attached itself to Habermas's ideas. Let us start with Habermas's pivotal notion of communicative action. If this were found to be wanting then, to a large extent, his wider project would be compromised. To put it bluntly, do people communicate essentially on the basis of validity claims, reasoned argument, understanding and agreement or is it the case that communication often leads nowhere and sometimes ends in disagreement? It could be argued that many people do not yield to the better argument (Layder, 1995). Indeed, some theorists (for example, Turner, 1988) see all communication as distorted. In an abusive talk show, it is argued, we might see a distilled form of modern communication.

Moreover, even if people do strive to understand one another, it is a non sequitur to assume that agreement will arise in every case or that liberating actions will necessarily follow agreement. Leading on from this, first, are the public really interested in deliberating (as per communicative action) on legal and other matters to shape public law and policy and, second, are they sufficiently well informed to carry out this task? Many citizens are not even sufficiently motivated to carry out the simple act of voting every five years, let alone engage in concentrated, rational debate on public issues of importance.

Against these critiques, though, there is still something compelling about the idea of communicative action, particularly when we consider how social order arises and is sustained. For most of us, life is predictable and orderly. Social routines happen more or less within expected parameters. People relate to one another on the basis of organised turn-taking. Ordinary conduct in everyday life proceeds from commonsense, tacit knowledge that is shared. Language appears to be the medium through which this stability is created. Fundamentally, how could we maintain this order without some inherent understanding and agreement in everyday conversation? Social life would simply fall apart without it, resulting in a Hobbesian war of all against all.

However, this critique has not gone away. For some, Habermas's 'talking cure' for the ills of the modern age appears naïve, superficial and irredeemably idealistic. On the geopolitical stage, the USA and Iraq never came anywhere near communicative action. Other examples from history abound. In fact, rather than communicative action, it would seem that conflict, power and the threat of nuclear retaliation are the real stabilising forces in the modern world.

Habermas's enduring response to this nagging polemic goes as follows: if we believe in the importance of the universal need to communicate, we have to believe in reason; and, in according reason such a prominent place in daily living, we can be moderately optimistic that, in the final analysis, sanity will prevail.

Perhaps a more damaging critique comes from feminism (see Fraser, 1989). Here, it is argued that Habermas concentrates inordinately on the masculine notion of reason without giving due attention to emotion and the unconscious. People are not purely rational subjects, so the argument goes; they have feelings, desires, intuitions and impulses. A satisfactory theory of social action would have to account for these aspects of our being.

Any review of Habermas's work would not be complete without examining the Marxist critique. It is important here to reflect on why Habermas departed from Marx. Essentially, it was because Marx had not, in his opinion, addressed social interaction and language sufficiently, preferring to concentrate on labour. Many Marxists, however, may dispute this assertion, arguing that the intersubjective realm was central in many of his ideas, particularly in his early writings on class consciousness. Clearly, for these apologists and Marx himself, it is men – and, we must quickly add, women, too – who make history (by interacting), but not, it seems, in circumstances of their own choosing.

A more stringent Marxist critique centres on Habermas's idealism. Marx had departed from Hegelian idealism early on. What concerned him, first and foremost, was the material realm. Remember, materialism argues that matter is primary and thought, consciousness and ideation secondary. Habermas, in concentrating on how ideas are expressed through language, does not give sufficient attention to this material world. Consequently, his view that change will arise from communicative action may at best be a placebo.

Moreover, what has incensed many Marxists is Habermas's apparent turn in his later work towards social democracy, demonstrating a discernible shift to the centre ground in politics. Here, the system is no longer typified as a colonial master rapaciously subduing a forlorn lifeworld. In fact, his later work seems to exonerate the system to some extent, while suggesting that impediments to critical debate lie within the lifeworld itself. Furthermore, adding insult to injury, he admits to wanting 'to tame the capitalist economic system' (Habermas, 1996: 410) rather than cage it.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

There is a growing interest in Habermas's ideas in Western social work. For some commentators, his work provides a viable alternative to postmodernism, which, because of its perceived, inherent relativism, fails to offer the required justification for ethical practice (see Donovan, 2003; Gray and Lovat, 2006).

Other writers view his analysis of contemporary society as explaining, in a most apposite way, the structural constraints facing the profession, particularly its entanglement with bureaucratic procedures and elephantine, organisational cultures (Blaug, 1995; Houston, 2003). Some find Habermas's stress on ethical discourse as restating the *sine qua non* of social work (Willumsen and Skivenes, 2005).

Let us review some of this work in more detail. Kamshing Yip (2006), Mary Henkel (1995) and Debbie Skerrett (2000) have applied Habermas's early thinking on epistemology (see Chapter 20) to different dimensions of social work.

Yip (2006) analyses levels of reflectivity in students' social work practice with clients with mental illness, drawing on Habermas's critical and emancipatory ideas on knowledge. For

him, developing students' practical reflectivity requires multifaceted strategies of learning and development. Much of this is congruent with Habermas's plea for enhanced moral awareness of the dynamic interface between the 'self' and the 'other'.

Henkel (1995), charting a different course, applies Habermas's ideas to critique what she sees as an atomistic scientism in social work education and practice. The hermeneutic approach outlined by Hans-Georg Gadamer and developed by Habermas, with its stress on meaning, language and interpretation, provides, for Henkel, a means of understanding the 'multiple marginalities' and 'ambivalences' facing social work. That said, she sees Habermas's stress on consensus as opening up the potential for a new totalitarianism because of its neglect of difference. This critique is perhaps consonant with Seyla Benhabib's (1986) insistence that egalitarian and democratic discourse must take account of a situated, concrete and different 'other'.

In a parallel paper, Skerrett (2000) critiques the prevailing model of care management in social work, with its emphasis on performance indicators, budgets, care plans and a 'tick box' approach to assessment. She locates this model within Habermas's first category of knowledge: the empirical-analytical sciences that have a technical interest at their heart. For Skerrett, though, it is the critical-emancipatory sciences that should provide the foundation for ethical social work practice.

Various contributors have sought to apply Habermas's ideas on society and its differentiated systems to social work practice in the (late) modern world. For example, Stan Houston (2002b) critiques the theory base underpinning the Department of Health's (England and Wales) guidance for child protection social workers. He sees it as problematic because it fails to explain how power operates at the systemic level. Habermas's critical systems theory is then explored as a way of remedying the deficit.

Staying with Habermas's systemic analysis, Trevor Spratt and Stan Houston (1999) react against the preponderance of instrumentalist ideologies in the child protection system. Tom Sinclair (2005), in a similar vein, explores how ideology impinges on child protection practice, leading to distorted communication. Such themes resonate with Samantha Ashenden's (2004) conclusion that the system colonises the private lifeworld of family relations in relation to the management of child sexual abuse. However, for her, we need to problematise the system-lifeworld distinction as power lies in both domains.

Finally, in an arresting presentation, Frank Früchtel (2009) formulates Habermas's ideas into a model of social work practice typified by the acronym 'SONI'. This is set out in Figure 1.1.

System (the political, economic, administrative and legal system of society)	S Society	O Organisation
Lifeworld (people, relationships and communication)	N Network	I Individual

**Figure 1.1** The SONI model of Habermasian casework

According to this conception, social work can be viewed in the context of four interrelated and overlapping domains mapped onto Habermas's bifurcation of 'system' and 'lifeworld', namely: (1) *society* with its structures and processes, (2) the *organisation* as defined by a particular service-delivery model, (3) the *network* typified by relationships, social groups and social capital and (4) the *individual* as characterised in terms of a person's behaviour, attitudes, emotions and thought processes. The societal and organisational domains reflect the presence of the 'system' in shaping social welfare whereas the network and individual domains capture the service user's lifeworld – her or his symbolic and communicational spheres of existence.

Früchtel (2009) deftly explores each domain, giving it a discernible Habermasian stamp. Hence, at the individual level, social work should operate according to a strengths perspective, one focusing on declared 'wants' not just externally defined 'needs'. From this platform, social workers seek to establish service users' motivations rather than purely attempting to motivate them to follow some externally sanctioned action (see Saleebey, 2002). Critically, social workers should create 'home games' (as distinct from 'away games'). The former are characterised by: (1) meetings that take place in safe, local venues, (2) respect for service users' cultural values and rituals, (3) the presence of 'lifeworld' supporters and (4) space for service users to deliberate on their needs, wants, choices and motivations.

The network as a part of social work practice can be viewed in terms of methods such as self-directed group work, family group conferences and community social work. Such activity devolves responsibility to service users to plan and take action, to self-advocate for their needs and wants. It encourages service users to communicate, plan, problem-solve and to listen to alternative perspectives on how to protect and nurture vulnerable members of the lifeworld. Here, social workers use skills of negotiation, mediation and reflective communication to understand and agree on a way forward that meets the requirements not only of the organisation but also the family. Gaps in social support are identified as part of this process and attempts made to build social capital.

Social work within the organisation is attentive to legislative and policy imperatives stipulating requirements for promoting and safeguarding the welfare of vulnerable service users. However, as Früchtel (2009) sees it, the organisational response should be flexible, and avoid 'one-size-fits-all' solutions, or predetermined approaches to casework. Lifeworld solutions must be tailor made. Social work organisations should be user focused instead of pursuing targets informed by bureaucratic rationality. This is to say that organisations need a change in operational culture where standardised professional responses are reviewed against more flexible service user plans.

Lastly, social work within society denotes a commitment to social justice, human rights and anti-oppressive practice. It takes seriously the challenges emanating from structural social work and focuses on modern forms of oppression including the rise of surveillance, social control and the discipline of so-called errant subjects. Social work cannot escape being a politicised activity as it is thrust into a domain of contesting and contested political ideologies. Its situated activity with service users is saturated in a nexus of power and ideology as it attempts to translate organisational imperatives to local settings. In all of this, says Früchtel, social work must cut through the ideological fog of neoliberal doctrines and magnify the resonance of the lifeworld.

To conclude this section, it is important to review some of the academy's interest in Habermas's ideas on ethical communication. In this connection, Vishanthie Sewpaul (2004) applies his

theory of communicative action and discourse ethics to issues such as HIV and AIDS, class, race and gender, while Houston (2002b) develops and extends Habermas's discourse ethics to decision-making in fostering and adoption.

Another connection is made by Mary Donovan (2003). In discussing the ethical orientation of contemporary family therapy practice, she suggests there has been a worrying marginalisation of ethics in this field, brought about by the influence of postmodernism and hermeneutics. For her, Habermas's ideas provide a route to re-establishing ethical communication and reflective processes within systemic therapies.

Many of these ideas are encapsulated in Ricardo Blaug's pioneering (1995) reflection on Habermas's contribution to social work (his paper is a 'moral must' that never ceases to inspire). He concludes that the:

solutions being offered to the profession by social policy and management initiatives are based on an overly instrumental conception of human reason. This results in a colonization of our communicative practices and a distortion of the face-to-face interaction which lies at the heart of human caring. (1995: 429)

Blaug (1995) concludes that Habermas's Critical theory, with its emphasis on communicative action, provides the antidote to these tendencies. He further opines that practices such as increasing user involvement, networking, action learning and peer supervision, are just some of the ways in which communicative action can be embedded within social work practice. In the next section, this theme is explored more fully.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

There is one aspect of social work practice that is ubiquitous: communication. No matter what the setting or who is involved, social work encounters depend on a clear interchange between the parties involved. For many social workers, communication is about a set of skills. We need to be proficient in asking open questions, clarifying, reflecting what has been said and so on. This is surely right, but to what extent have social workers considered communication as a moral enterprise (as captured in the notion of communicative action), one that is fundamental to human development, regardless of culture? More specifically, have we stopped to think deeply about the goal of daily exchanges between ourselves and welfare recipients?

If we were to take Habermas's lead idea of communicative action seriously, then communication would become the focal point of all social work activity. Let me unpack this by taking a Socratic turn and asking some awkward questions. Do we consciously strive to validate our statements according to reason alone? When justifying our ideas and actions, is our speech always truthful, sincere and morally appropriate? Do we continuously strive to understand another person's perspective, difficult as that may be? Do we build on that understanding to achieve consensus with points of view that differ from our own?

In considering these questions, we must also query our propensity to engage in strategic action. Again, more questions need to be asked here. To what extent do we enter exchanges with others with prefigured ends in mind? Are these 'ends' necessarily ones that service users would accept? Do we ever deceive ourselves that we are being cooperative when, with the

benefit of hindsight, we realise that we have been self-interested all along? Do we consciously manipulate conversations to achieve our own ends?

Painful as the foregoing questions may be, they are crucial because, as Habermas reminds us, it is through communication that we construct reality. In a world where instrumentalism rages much like a behemoth, social work must stand firm as an ethical leviathan by committing fully to communicational practices that are egalitarian, participative and democratic. It must battle against the hegemony of technical rationality to continuously reaffirm Habermas's leading idea of the primacy of the face-to-face, for it is here that human identity flourishes.

## Study questions

- 1 Think of an important meeting you attended recently involving a service user. Use the criteria established within the ideal speech situation as a yardstick to assess the content and form of the discussion. Note any breaches of the criteria and consider how the meeting could have been planned and executed more fairly.
- 2 Habermas's theory rests on the communicative competence of participants in dialogue. How might the perspectives of those lacking in such competence (such as young children) be taken into account to ensure fairness and equality?
- 3 Using the SONI model as a point of reference:
  - In what ways does the 'system' shape social work practice in your area?
  - In what ways does social work respond to the 'lifeworld' in your area?
  - How do social workers manage the contradictions, tensions and opportunities thrown up by the interaction between the 'system' and 'lifeworld' imperatives?
  - What implications do Habermas's ideas have for social work education at the qualifying and post-qualifying levels?

## GLOSSARY

**Colonisation** This refers to the social process whereby the system intrudes into the lifeworld so that everyday consciousness is tainted and fragmented by expert subcultures and strategic action.

**Communicative action** This occurs when people communicate together using reasoned arguments to support the validity of what they are saying to reach mutual understanding, agreement and consensus.

**Ideal speech situation** This sets the conditions for moral decision-making, insofar as all the affected parties are allowed to speak, to be listened to and to question others.

**Lifeworld** This is the everyday context or repository of common, shared meanings in which validity claims are put forward to coordinate action.



**Strategic action** This occurs when people communicate on the basis of wanting to achieve particular ends for themselves. This form of action is shaped by the use of influence, force, sanctions or money.

**System** This is the part of society comprising the legal, political and economic domains. Here, the ‘steering mechanisms’ of money, administration and power operate to achieve desired ends.

## FURTHER READING

As well as entries for Habermas’s work in the References section at the end of the book, his major works include:

- (1976 [1973]) *Legitimation Crisis*. London: Heinemann.
- (1984 [1981]) *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volumes 1 and 2. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- (1988 [1963]) *Theory and Practice*. London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Polity Press.
- (1989 [1962]) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: Inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- (1990 [1983]) *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- (2003 [1999]) *Truth and Justification: Philosophical essays*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas’s writings can present formidable challenges to the novice reader. This is mainly because he writes as a philosopher trained in the German tradition. Consequently, his style is abstract and conceptual and often involves convoluted grammar pockmarked by clauses of varying complexity. That said, there are some excellent translations of his work into English capturing the rich detail and nuances of his thought. It is worth persevering with the challenge and the reader will soon find Habermas’s systematic approach to be of great benefit. More than that, his work is morally invigorating. Helpful commentaries include:

Thomassen (2010) offers a comprehensive yet accessible introduction to Habermas’s work covering his early, middle and late periods of work. Chapter 4 on discourse ethics is particularly helpful for social workers seeking to understand Habermas’s ethical ideas.

Fultner’s (2011) edited book provides an accessible and comprehensive conceptual map of Habermas’s theories of communicative action, discourse ethics and his sociopolitical ideas as applied to contemporary society. The book is helpful for both the novice reader and those more versed in his theoretical outpourings. Chapter 4 on the system and lifeworld provides a more in-depth consideration of these key areas compared with this chapter.

Finlayson’s (2005) pocket size introduction to Habermas’s work shows in clear language how Habermas’s theory answers important questions concerning the nature of modern society and how it can shape people’s views on contemporary events in civil life, business, industry and social welfare.

Honneth and Joas (1991) offer more of a formal, academic exegesis and critical commentary of Habermas’s theories about communication. The authors are well-respected academics in the field of social philosophy.

# 2

## ANTHONY GIDDENS

HARRY FERGUSON

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the work of Anthony Giddens to a social work audience. The influence of Giddens in sociology, political science and economics has been very significant and more recently a recognition of the contribution his ideas can make to social work has been acknowledged. Over two decades, Giddens was responsible for conceiving a most distinctive theory of the social dimension in what later came to be called ‘structuration theory’. His most recent work concentrates on issues of modernity, globalisation and politics, especially the impact of modernity on social and personal life. This has led to the development of a number of core concepts, especially in his later work, that have direct relevance to social work. The chapter explores the way social work can benefit from concepts such as self-identity, the transformation of intimacy, life planning and the value of personal and family security.

Anthony Giddens was born into a lower-middle-class family in north London in 1938. Following his education at a local grammar school, he studied sociology and psychology at Hull, graduating in 1959. He was the first in his family to attend university. He completed an MA in sociology at the London School of Economics (LSE) and began lecturing at Leicester University in 1961 – then a leading intellectual seedbed of British sociology. In 1969, he moved to a lectureship and fellowship at King’s College, Cambridge, where he was promoted to Chair in Sociology and Head of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences in 1986. In 1996, challenged by the desire to make the social sciences more relevant to policy and public life, Giddens became the Director of the London School of Economics. Up until then, he had been purely a social theorist whose politics were little known, but he now began taking his ideas about the nature of modern societies and the renewal of social democracy beyond academia to a wider audience through the media. His BBC Radio 4 Reith Lectures entitled *Runaway World* (Giddens, 1999) effectively cast him as a public intellectual – a move that, as we shall see, literally embodied key components of his sociological perspective.

From the outset, Giddens was a gifted, charismatic teacher and remained committed to engaging with students until his retirement in 2003. At the LSE he initiated a weekly ‘Director’s Lecture’, which was attended by up to a thousand people. When working towards my own PhD in Giddens’s faculty between 1987 and 1990, I experienced first hand his passion for developing a sociology fit to do justice to the complexity of personal and global life in the advanced modern world, his enormous work rate and productivity, his accessibility and his remarkable capacity to teach complex social theory and hold an audience’s attention without ever using a note (never mind PowerPoint). Following his retirement, he was given a life peerage in June 2004 – Baron Giddens of Southgate in the London Borough of Enfield – and sits in the House of Lords for Labour. He continues to write books and is very active as a public intellectual, increasingly, in politics.

## GIDDENS’S MAJOR PUBLICATIONS

Giddens has had a massive influence on social science and public life in Britain and throughout the Western world. He has written at least 34 books, well over 200 articles and reviews and has been published in some 40 languages. He is co-founder and director of one of the most successful social science publishing houses in the world – Polity Press – and has, since the late 1990s, been a key intellectual mentor for Western governments, being an advisor for, among others, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.

Giddens established himself as a scholar of significance with his first major book, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (1971), in which he outlined and critically appraised the work of classical sociologists Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. It continues to be a core text on social theory courses and alone has sold well over 100,000 copies.

From the mid-1970s, he began to rework the classical tradition and fashion his own social theory for the modern age, especially in *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976) and *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979). This momentum culminated in the publication in 1984 of *The Constitution of Society*, in which he outlined his famous *theory of structuration* – an ambitious attempt to revise how sociology can explain human action, social systems and society.

*The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) continued to deal with some of the core concerns of structuration theory, but marked the beginning of an important new phase in his work. He moved into a concern with not just local but also global processes. Thus, for example, he continued to think through issues to do with the capacities of human beings to act and reflect on their lives and social structures and to influence the shape of both – what he called ‘reflexivity’. Thus, he showed how personal lives and institutions were shaped by globalisation and changing environments of trust and risk in social relationships.

He developed and deepened this work on personal lives and what he called ‘reflexive modernisation’ in *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age* (1991), *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), *Beyond Left and Right: The future of radical politics* (1994a) and ‘Living in a post-traditional society’ in *Reflexive Modernization* (1994b), coauthored with Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash. The hallmarks of this phase of his work were a concern with emotions, democratic relationships, expertise and how personal lives and institutions are changing through knowledge being ‘reflexively’ ploughed back into

how people and organisations define themselves and act in what he now called ‘high’ or ‘late modernity’.

In what began in the 1970s and 1980s as a project that was related to but separate from the development of structuration theory, Giddens was concerned with developing an historical and sociological theory of the nature of the State and welfare. His initial focus was on a reappraisal of Marxism in *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, volume 1 (1981), moving to a broader scholarly analysis of power, citizenship and the welfare/nation state in *The Nation-State and Violence: Volume 2 of A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (1985). This theoretical project culminated in *Beyond Left and Right: The future of radical politics* (1994a). I emphasise ‘theoretical’ because, while essentially a book on theory, *Beyond Left and Right* contained, for the first time, some indication of what would become for Giddens a political stance.

This ideology ‘beyond’ the politics of Left and Right became known as *The Third Way* and, in 1998, Giddens published a book with that title, subtitled *The renewal of social democracy*. It was the political project of the Third Way that was, to some degree, taken up by Bill Clinton in the USA and Tony Blair in Britain. Giddens was now an avowed social democrat, making sophisticated (but, for politicians, accessible) arguments about key contemporary issues, such as individualism, risk and its management, and the role of the State in advanced capitalism.

Giddens’s intellectual ideas have had many supporters and a huge impact, but there have been many critics, whom Giddens replied to in *The Third Way and its Critics* (2000; see also Giddens, 2001). He has been developing his views on social democracy and good government ever since (Giddens, 2003, 2005, 2007a). In 2007, for instance, one of the (two) books he published, *Over to You Mr Brown: How Labour can win again* (2007b), was launched to coincide with Gordon Brown succeeding Tony Blair as Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party, setting out what he believed Brown needed to do to renew a weary Labour government and social democracy. Giddens is both a critic and loyal supporter of New Labour.

As Giddens chose in the 2000s to devote much of his energies to politics (as a member of the House of Lords), political science and being a public intellectual, he published less and less sociology. The notable exception is the work he continues to update – namely, his classic academic textbook, *Sociology*. First published in 1993 and now in its fifth edition, it is recognised across the Western world as the standard introductory textbook on the subject.

## KEY IDEAS

With a career spanning almost 40 years and a publishing output of almost as many books, Giddens’s work defies easy summation. Yet, as I have begun to indicate above, his theoretical work can be summarised into three broad phases, which approximate to key themes:

- his reworking of classical sociology and the development of what he called ‘structuration theory’;
- globalisation, risk, the reflexive self and intimacy in late modernity;
- Giddens the public intellectual, political scientist and social democrat.

While I shall have something to say on the last of these themes, my main focus here will be on the first two themes, given they cover his theoretical work and are most relevant to social work.

## STRUCTURATION THEORY

At the centre of Giddens's work in the 1970s and 1980s and his notion of *structuration theory* was an attempt to overcome the classic problem in sociology of the relationship between social structures and individuals in shaping institutions and everyday life. Giddens argued social science had created a false 'dualism' of 'structure' and human 'agency' in which they had been split off from one another. He was particularly concerned about how sociology had created a view of human beings as always being constrained by social structures (Giddens, 1984). It is necessary, he suggests, to examine what these so-called 'structures' are and how they are made up. Social structures are not something that simply bear down on individuals in menacing, controlling ways, but are themselves made up of human actions, within which people draw on what Giddens calls 'rules' and 'resources'. This notion and how it has been applied in sociological research can perhaps best be illustrated with an example from health and social care.

Beringer et al. (2006) apply this theoretical framework to nursing and show how the practices shaping interprofessional work in hospitals are governed by certain rules and resources, but they only come to have meaning in how practice itself and the service delivered to patients have to be recreated every moment of every day. The 'structure', therefore, is not simply pre-given and constraining, but comprises the actions of professionals and patients that go into making nursing what it is.

Through this kind of thinking, Giddens (1984) argued that the traditional dualism – the split between structure and agency – needs to be recast as 'the duality of structure'. Crucially for Giddens, 'structures' are both enabling and constraining. They make actions possible as well as stop or control them. The same, as I shall show below, can be said about social work.

## REFLEXIVE SELF, GLOBALISATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF INTIMACY

Giddens placed the capacities of human beings to reflect on their lives and adjust their actions accordingly – what he called the 'reflexive monitoring' of conduct – at the heart of structuration theory. In the 1990s, he took this further in his theory of *reflexive modernisation* and the *reflexive project of the self*.

*The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) is a brilliant analysis of the trials and tribulations of what happens to expert knowledge in conditions where the trustworthiness of professionals is routinely questioned by laypeople, the media and other experts.

Along with Ulrich Beck, Giddens helped to place risk on the sociological agenda, introducing the concept of 'manufactured uncertainty', which refers to the way in which risks are, today,

created by expert systems themselves. As I have shown elsewhere, social work and child protection fit Giddens's analysis very well as, following the disclosure that children have died in cases where social workers were involved, attempt after attempt has been made to make the system safer and less risky (Ferguson, 1997, 2004). A key dimension of this concerns changes in the nature of risk, which means professionals have to live with the knowledge that, despite itself, no expert system can guarantee safety and that it won't fail to protect children and adults (Giddens, 1990).

Risk in late modernity is about 'colonising the future' (Giddens, 1991) and, since the 1970s, welfare states have attempted to manage manufactured risk through the development of new procedures and rules that professionals are expected to implement in their practice to address the emergence of 'knowledge gaps' shown up by inquiries into how they have failed (Ferguson, 1997).

Giddens refers to this process of constant reflection on, and change of, institutional structures and rules as 'reflexive modernisation'. It is the dynamic nature of the experiences of security and danger, chaos and control that reflexive modernisation introduces and this creates a dynamic, anxious, risk-laden sensibility in modern citizens where it feels like we all must ride the juggernaut of late modernity (Giddens, 1990).

Reflexive modernisation, Giddens argues, is accompanied by the increasing ability of people to reflect on structures and the rules governing their lives and everyday practices. This creates new obligations and opportunities for people to choose which rules to follow and which to change and what kinds of lives they wish to lead. The self becomes what Giddens (1991, 1992) calls 'a reflexive project'. People are now compelled to plan their own lives, which faces them with new choices about how to be and how to live (Giddens, 1992). Helping professionals, such as psychotherapists, are increasingly drawn on to provide 'methodologies of life-planning' (Giddens, 1992: 180).

Giddens (1991) refers to this new domain of choice and personhood as 'life politics'. As I have shown elsewhere, social workers are increasingly involved in working with the 'life politics' of service users (Ferguson, 2001, 2003b). They are being used even by the most marginal members of society to assist them with their 'life-planning', particularly in situations where abused and vulnerable children and adults have acquired new rights to protection and healing from the trauma of violence (Ferguson, 2003a, 2004, 2008; Ferguson et al., 2008).

Social work steps in when what Giddens (1991) calls 'fateful moments' occur in people's lives, such as when older people become vulnerable in their own homes, children need to be accommodated in care and intimate abuse has to be stopped. Social workers help people with their life-planning and the decisions they have to make as well as the courses of action they have to initiate (Webb, 2006).

The net result is what Giddens (1992) calls the 'transformation of intimacy'. While homophobia remains a painful reality, individuals still have new freedoms to choose their sexuality. In heterosexual or family relationships, men and women no longer crudely tied to traditional assumptions about gender roles are required to negotiate about whether or not to live together, have children, stay together and decide on who will mind the children, do the housework, be the breadwinner and so on. Also, as they get older, their children enter these negotiations, too.

Giddens (1998) argues that this change in intimate relationships has given rise to what he calls the 'democratic family'. He does not mean by this that equality is practised in all families but that a key shift has occurred in the way personal lives are lived. Relationships based

on trust, openness and negotiation cannot survive today without there being a 'discursive space' at their core. If relationships no longer bring satisfaction, they now can, and regularly do, end.

This is quite an optimistic view of the impact of change on social life. For Giddens, in conditions of reflexive modernity, trust, risk and expertise have become radicalised in ways that do not lead to a uniformly pessimistic scenario for the future – unlike that painted by some theorists of postmodernity (see Chapter 12). The same individuals who are increasingly subject to and the subjects of globalisation and social regulation have simultaneously become increasingly critical and reflexive with reference to them (see Deacon and Mann, 1999; Lash and Urry, 1994).

Considerable debate surrounds all Giddens's ideas. For instance, the degree to which democratic relations within families are becoming the societal norm is disputed. Lynn Jamieson (1998) suggests there is weak empirical evidence for such a change, while Carol Smart (2007) draws on a wealth of research to show negotiation is a core value and practice in personal relationships today. These debates have also moved to the centre of social work theorising.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

Despite the enormity of his profile and influence on the social sciences over almost four decades, explicit use of Giddens's work in social work has, until recently, been remarkably limited. There are no books explicitly dedicated to applying his ideas to social work, as there are for other leading social theorists – notably Michel Foucault (see Chapter 4). However, some social work theorists have drawn heavily on his ideas (Featherstone, 2004; Ferguson, 2001, 2004; Smith, 2001; Webb, 2006), while others have rejected them (Garrett, 2003b, 2004a, 2008b) and a growing interest in and debate about the relevance of his work to social work is occurring (Ferguson, 2003b; Garrett, 2004a; Gray, 2008; Houston, 2004; Smith and White, 1997; Webb, 2006).

A full 'structurationist' approach to social work remains to be written. While Giddens does not give an example drawn from social work, his work has sensitised research to examine how 'structures', in the sense of rules and resources, enable social work to go on. In a study of social work and child protection in an environment that had become increasingly structured and bureaucratised in response to system failures to protect children, I found social workers were broadly in favour of the increasing rules and procedures governing their practices because they lent some predictability to work pervaded by uncertainty. How those rules and procedures were interpreted and put into practice by individuals and teams varied considerably. The structures both enabled the work to go on in ways regarded as good practice and were often brought into being differently from case to case, worker to worker and team to team (Ferguson and O'Reilly, 2001). One can, following Giddens, say this is the 'duality of structure' in social work in action. What constituted social work was a product of the relationship between the structures and the actions taken by professionals and service users.

Giddens's work provides resources for the study of the ways in which professionals work knowledgeably with and within structures to carve out actions to make a (positive) difference

to service users and their lives. This does not mean simply accepting structures for what they are, but having an understanding of them as providing rules and resources that are given meaning through human action and how they are mobilised by the creative practices of laypeople, service users and professionals who, together, co-construct what social work is (H. Ferguson, 2008).

Giddens had many things to say about the role of the welfare state and expertise in people's everyday lives that are deeply relevant to social work. Indirectly, Giddens's work has contributed greatly by helping to create the conditions within which reflexivity (see Chapter 18) and critical reflection are now central to the social sciences and social work (see D'Cruz et al., 2007; Fook, 2002, 2004; Taylor and White, 2000). Carole Smith (2001), Stephen Webb (2006) and Harry Ferguson (2004) have drawn on Giddens in developing understandings of the nature of trust and risk in late modern social work, as has Mel Gray (2008) with respect to spirituality.

Giddens's work has been subject to a huge amount of commentary and critique. Structuration theory has been and continues to be both developed (Stones, 2005) and rejected as a basis for sociology. Many critics have pointed out that the notion of 'structuration' is problematic since it implies an equal relationship of power and influence between social structures and actors. Thinking of social work, just what scope is there today for service users to create their own lives and, indeed, for social workers to create their own practice?

A number of critics of how social work has developed over the past 20 years argue that the discretion social workers once had has diminished because of the rise of bureaucracy, managerialism and targets. Thus, Webb (2006) is critical of Giddens because he gives too much scope to individuals to create their own lives and simplifies notions of power and social regulation. This is a common criticism of the theory of reflexive modernisation, that its model of the self-reflexive individual relates primarily to people who are socially and economically privileged, those who have the cultural and material resources to engage in self-inspection (Lash, 1994).

Another strand of criticism comes from those influenced by psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies who suggest Giddens is too optimistic in his view of the positive capacity of individuals to understand their lives and always know why they act as they do. This is because Giddens's view undermines the impact of the unconscious and people's capacity for sabotaging themselves and others – something familiar to a lot of social workers (Hoggett, 2001).

There is some substance to these criticisms. Because of how he tried to reorient sociology away from its pervasive 'structure as constraint' position, Giddens's work tends to point to the enabling, creative features of human beings and systems and underplays the significance of constraints on how people can live. However, what these critics overlook is how social work goes on not only in circumstances of struggle where there is poverty but also where there are problems such as abuse, addiction and trauma. Help with life-planning is a crucial dimension of what people need and desire from social workers and other professionals (Ferguson, 2004).

It is in the area of intimacy and personal life that Giddens's ideas are having the most impact and prompting debate in social work. Paul Garrett (2003b, 2004a) rejects Giddens's (1991, 1994a) notion of 'life politics' and its application to social work (Ferguson, 2001) and argues that the evidence for more democratic relationships both within families and between service users and social workers does not exist. The dominant pattern, he suggests, is for mothers to continue to be oppressed by social workers who regulate them according to traditional



expectations of motherhood so they continue to carry an unequal share of domestic responsibilities (a broadly similar view of the 'social control' role of social work is taken by Scourfield and Welsh, 2003). Like Webb (2006), this leaves under-analysed just what social workers actually do in their practices.

Giddens's work forces us to examine the creative ways in which social workers use knowledge and create their own practice and the possibilities for them to help to shape and change the systems in which they work.

Brid Featherstone (2004), drawing on feminist perspectives and a range of research, shows how the aim of trying to make families more democratic is hugely relevant as a goal in social work and family support work. Crucial to this, she argues, is the need to disaggregate the 'family' in terms of power, gender and age relations if the meanings of child welfare interventions and the possibilities for promoting democratic relationships in households are to be understood (Featherstone, 2004; see also Smart and Neale, 1999; Smart and Shipman, 2004). This requires recognition of the diversity of 'family' forms typified in social work and family support work and the importance of using power constructively to work with such fluid relationships in creative, skilful ways (see also Gordon, 1989, and Chapter 6).

Dorothy Scott (1989) made good use of Giddens's concept of reflexivity to explore the way social workers in a hospital setting make use of interpretation to understand clients' problems. More recently, Chris Clark (2012) adopted Giddens's concept of interpretation to show how ethical decision-making in social work should be considered as a hermeneutic process requiring a repeated and progressive reconciliation of the detailed particularities of the case with complex, competing and evolving moral imperatives. Andy Pithouse (2012) used Giddens to frame his analysis of how an erosion of trust in professional social work and consequent shift towards new information technologies are intended to generate system confidence, such as the Integrated Children's System (ICS). Ultimately, these information technology systems fail to generate public or professional confidence.

Holland et al. (2005) skilfully test the validity of Giddens's notion of democratic families through a qualitative study of family group conferences (FGCs). These are large group meetings at which the family (defined widely in terms of any relatives and significant others they wish to include) and professionals discuss and assess family problems and negotiate ways forward. Conscious efforts are made to give the family time to decide what their difficulties are and what they need.

Holland et al.'s (2005) careful analysis of how all family members experienced FGCs shows such interventions can enable children and adults and other significant people in the family's life to be heard and for negotiation around rights and needs to occur. In following up the research subjects six months after the conference, they found significant changes had occurred for many children and family members (see also Dalrymple and Horan's [2007] sensitive analysis of the use of advocacy at FGCs and case conferences).

Yet, for Holland et al. (2005) (and, to a much larger extent, Garrett, 2003a, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d and Scourfield and Welsh, 2003), where child welfare and issues of State power are at stake, promoting democracy in any absolute sense is difficult. This is because what they call 'imposed empowerment' – the imposition of power in telling parents and carers and sometimes children what to do, irrespective of what they wish and say – is so central to the work.

Harry Ferguson (2001, 2003a, 2004, 2008) argues that community-based child protection and family support interventions can and do promote democratic families. Even statutory

social workers can use their powers to enable all family members to have the kinds of relationships within which children, women and men can live safe, satisfying lives, enabling people to shape a 'life of their own' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

A Giddensian perspective helps us appreciate how this means enabling service users to practise the 'new intimacy' in terms of emotional communication and negotiation in the context of equal relationships (Giddens, 1992). This involves assisting people to move beyond traditional hierarchical forms of patriarchal relationships towards the creation of 'democratic' forms of relationships to promote equality for all in terms of the distinct needs and life plans of women, men and children, where the children are heard as well as seen and feel safe; women as well as men are treated with respect and given rights to protection and an identity; and men as well as women are enabled to have expressive emotional lives and relationships (Featherstone, 2004; H. Ferguson, 2008).

Research into the work involved when engaging with fathers also shows that such interventions focus on improving men's parenting skills and their emotional capacities and ability to communicate and be in equal relationships with their loved ones (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). This is precisely what 'democracy of the emotions' is, enabling men as well as women to become 'good enough carers' (Giddens, 1992).

Jane Donoghue (2008) uses Giddensian theories of reflexive modernisation and life politics to argue that the social control orientation dominant in the theorisation of youth justice work and ASBOs is one-dimensional as it fails to analyse how service users and professionals can work together creatively to achieve greater self-actualisation and life-planning for vulnerable people.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

I have sought to set out Giddens's ideas and establish their relevance to social work practice. It is vital in doing this to distinguish Giddens's role as a public intellectual and the impact of his thinking on political philosophies and practices from his theories and concepts (Deacon and Mann, 1999; Mouzelis, 2001). Giddens's concepts and rich theoretical work have a real relevance to social work practice, irrespective of the political position he has increasingly adopted in his career. Social workers need to assess the extent to which they assist in making sense of society and people's experiences. The role of sociology in Giddens's hands is to increase understandings of society, not to – in any ideologically driven way – change it. He does, however, have real faith in the capacity of human beings to be moral agents and critically reflect on and change their lives and society in democratically advantageous ways. People will obviously accept or reject his more political later work on the basis of their own politics, but this should not be the basis for rejecting the validity of his concepts. When this distinction is made, what becomes evident is the absence by his critics in social work of any real interrogation of the lived experiences of service users and the meanings of social work practices in the reflexive conditions of late modernity.

Giddens's ideas enable us to see that, in a context where we all have new choices about how to live and who to be, 'helping' practices like social work play an increasingly important role in enabling vulnerable people to choose well and gain control of their lives, which involves

learning about and changing the self and one's emotional life. Promoting life-planning and 'mastery' for service users is central to best practice in late modern social work. This does not mean there are no limits and controls on what people can do and be. Poverty, racism, sexism, 'disablism' and other social divisions continue to create inequalities that severely limit people's life chances. Yet, Giddens's ideas do have much in common with critical social work's traditional concern with issues of equality and the development of democratic relations with service users. It provides the basis for developing critical social work to include significant areas that it has tended to ignore, including the 'self', life-planning, the emotions and democratic relations and families.

### Study questions

- 1 What does Giddens mean by 'structuration' in accounting for the nature of the individual and society?
- 2 According to Giddens, a 'transformation of intimacy' has occurred and personal relationships and families have become more 'democratic'. What does this mean and how does it apply to social work?
- 3 How can social workers help people with their 'life-planning'?

## GLOSSARY

**Democratic family** A household in which relationships between adults and between adults and children are based on values and practices of equality, negotiation and shared decision-making.

**Duality of structure** Refers to the way in which the structural properties of social life and systems are not separate from the actions of human beings, but inherently linked – what people do in their day-to-day lives produces and reproduces what social structures are.

**Fateful moments** These occur when consequential events happen in people's lives and decisions have to be made or courses of action initiated. Social work often intervenes in such moments, such as when older people become vulnerable in their own homes, children need to be accommodated in care and abusive relationships have to end.

**Late (or high) modernity** The current phase of development of modern institutions, marked by the globalising and radicalising of the basic traits of modernity.

**Life-planning** The process in which individuals engage when faced with choices about how to live and who to be. It is also the work that professionals such as social workers engage in with service users in helping or directing them to make (healthy) decisions.

**Life politics** The politics of choice in a late modern context where people have new choices to make about how to make the most of their life chances. Life-planning is the practical application of life politics and is how social workers enable service users to reflect critically on their choices, emotions and change.

**Reflexive modernisation** The routine incorporation of new knowledge or information into cultures, organisations and individuals' actions that reconstitutes what those cultures, organisations and lives are.

**Reflexive project of the self** The process whereby self-identity is constituted and reconstituted by people reflecting on their lives and the rules they live by, which leads to their changing their lives and, in some instances, the rules.

**Structuration** The structuring of social relations through the interaction between powerful institutions – such as the State – and the actions of human beings. It refers to how social structures are made up of rules and resources that enable as well as constrain what people can do and how they act.

## FURTHER READING

The best place for students to begin when reading Giddens is *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) and his essay 'Living in a post-traditional society' (1994b), both of which provide accessible overviews of many of his key ideas. The best overview of the development of Giddens's work, critiques and key debates it has provoked is by Bryant and Jary (2001).

In social work, the most rigorous application of Giddens's ideas is to be found in Ferguson's (2004) *Protecting Children in Time: Child abuse, child protection and the consequences of modernity* and Webb's (2006) *Social Work in a Risk Society*. For an introduction to Giddens's ideas for social work, see Ferguson (2001) and for a debate about the value of Giddens's ideas for social work see Ferguson (2003b), Garrett (2003b, 2004a, 2008b) and Houston (2004).

# 3

## PIERRE BOURDIEU

PAUL MICHAEL GARRETT

### INTRODUCTION

Pierre Bourdieu, ‘a philosopher turned anthropologist (and, later, sociologist)’, was born the ‘son of a postman in a remote peasant village in southern France’ (Callinicos, 1999: 288; Noble and Watkins, 2003: 521). He was drafted in 1955 and sent to Algeria where he served as a conscript during the Algerian war of independence that had begun the previous year. He remained in Algeria, as the war continued, working at Algiers University and carrying out the fieldwork he was to draw on constantly throughout the rest of his career. On his return to France, he went on to occupy a prestigious position within the higher education field, as Chair at the Collège de France, and wrote more than 40 books and over 400 articles. For Bridget Fowler (2003: 486) his ‘magnum opus’ was *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 2004), originally published in 1979 – the same year that Jean-François Lyotard’s immensely influential *The Postmodern Condition* (1994) appeared in France. Bourdieu’s book, *The Weight of the World: Social suffering in contemporary society* (Bourdieu et al., 2002), a collaborative work with more than 20 sociologists, had an impact unmatched by any social science book in recent memory in France: it sold over a 100,000 copies in three months and remained at the top of the bestseller list for months. The book was also extensively discussed in political circles and popular magazines, even going on to be adapted for the stage (see Wacquant, 1998).

### KEY IDEAS

Bourdieu’s ‘leading theoretical claim is that his work transcends the dualism between explanations that attribute social change and social reproduction to certain overarching structures and theorizations that privilege individual subjective intentions or experience’ (Bridge, 2004: 59). Similarly, his closest academic colleague has argued that Bourdieu’s

thought and work lies at the ‘confluence of intellectual streams and academic traditions that have typically [been] construed as discordant or incompatible’ (Wacquant, 1998: 218). Moreover, Bourdieu ‘forges an original conceptual arsenal’ (p. 218) anchored by the notions of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*.

Habitus, therefore, as ‘social life incorporated, and thus individuated’, was meant to ‘transcend’ the opposition between the individual and society that has tended to dominate social theory (Bourdieu, 1994). It is the ‘constraint of social conditions and conditionings, *right in the very heart* of the “subject”’ (Bourdieu, 1994: 15, emphasis added). According to Bourdieu, it is a person’s ‘whole manner of being’ (in Bourdieu et al., 2002: 510; see also Bourdieu, 1994, 2002a, 2002b).

The fullest characterisation of habitus is found in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, published in 1977 (Bourdieu, 2003a). This book draws on his fieldwork in Algeria and – in what Charles Lemert (2000: 101) describes as ‘one of the most beautifully composed passages in the whole of sociological literature’ – Bourdieu states that habitus is a ‘system of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures’.

In truth, Bourdieu was, perhaps, seeking to reformulate an idea that already had currency within philosophical and sociological literature and discourse. Roy Nash (1999: 180), for example, maintains that habitus ‘derives from *habere*, to have, which was the Latin translation given to the Greek *hexis*’. Jeremy Lane (2000) also draws attention to the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas and his use of habitus. Similarly, Loïc Wacquant (1998: 322) acknowledges that habitus is ‘an old philosophical concept, used intermittently by Aristotle (under the term *hexis*), Hegel, Weber, Durkheim, Mauss and Husserl, among others’.

For Bourdieu (1994: 10) none of this is to be disputed. The key point is that he ‘completely rethought’ the concept, which ‘can be understood as a way of escaping from the choice between a structuralism without subject and the philosophy of the subject’. Indeed, as Jim Wolfreys (2000) argues, in a sense, the whole of Bourdieu’s sociology was constructed as a reaction to the two major intellectual currents of this period (the 1960s and 1970s), existentialism and structuralism. His intellectual project, therefore, was to overcome the opposition between the subjectivist emphasis on individual consciousness and the objectivist preoccupation with social structures.

Bourdieu (1994: 4–5) saw structuralism, and the ‘structuralist generation’, as a response to the ‘need to react against what existentialism had represented for them: the flabby “humanism” that was in the air, the complacent appeal to “lived experience”’. His habitus formulation, therefore, while being equally opposed to existentialism and other subjectivist visions, was seeking to ‘reintroduce agents that Levi Strauss and the structuralists, among others Althusser, tended to abolish, making them into simple epiphenomena of structure. . . . Social agents, in archaic societies as well as in ours, are not automata regulated like clocks, in accordance with laws which they do not understand’ (Bourdieu, 1994: 9). The problem, as he saw it, was that structuralists, such as Louis Althusser, were producing a ‘grand theory without agents’, without ever seeing ‘a worker, or a peasant, or anything’ (Bourdieu, in Karakayali, 2004: 359). In short, they left ‘no scope for human agency’ (Bourdieu, in Ovenden, 2000).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his theorisation, childhood is particularly important. That is because habitus is ‘laid down in each agent’ in their ‘earliest upbringing’ and from then on it continues to reverberate throughout a person’s lifetime (Bourdieu, 2003a: 81). Moreover, Bourdieu was to maintain an interest in the function and role of education, in its broadest sense, but also

specifically within the institutionalised domain, or field, of education with a capital 'E'. Indeed, despite their different theoretical orientations, for both Althusser and Bourdieu, school was 'the major modern ideological base' (Fowler, 1997: 22).

Indeed, in the conversations reported in *The Weight of the World: Social suffering in contemporary society*, school was frequently at the 'core of the suffering of the interviewees' (Bourdieu et al., 2002: 507). Also relevant in this context, for Bourdieu, is how 'materially secure children' with their 'casual ease' within Education are able to glide through this particular field, whereas working-class children and children of the unemployed are likely to encounter obstacles and difficulties (Fowler, 1997). This is not to dismiss those miraculous exceptions – *des miracles* – the educationally highly successful children of the working class and unemployed who 'make it', thus allowing us to 'believe that the system is egalitarian and meritocratic after all' (Moi, 1991: 1026). It is, however, to recognise, along with Bourdieu, that 'the education system is one of the principal agents of *symbolic violence* in modern democracies' (Moi, 1991: 1023, emphasis added): that is to say, it is a form of ideological violence that is apt to stigmatise or devalue, but to be viewed as legitimate by those subjected to it because of previous patterns of socialisation.

According to Bourdieu, the relationship between habitus and what he terms *fields* is also crucial, with neither the former nor the latter having the 'capacity to determine social action' (Wacquant, 1998: 222). In brief terms, a field is 'a structured social space, a field of forces' (Bourdieu, 1998: 40) with agents and groups of agents being defined by their relative positions in that space.

Fields can be interpreted as having at least three key characteristics that are important within Bourdieu's conceptual paradigm. First, the field (or particular fields) is crucial in terms of the evolution of the habitus of those located or positioned there. Second, a field seeks to maintain its autonomy. So, crucially for Bourdieu, maintaining the autonomy of the fields of cultural and scientific production becomes increasingly important, indeed urgent, as the forces of neoliberalism attempt to penetrate them, undermining this (relative) autonomy. Related to this is a third characteristic of fields, which is the competition that takes place within them. As Bourdieu states, in 'most fields, we may observe what we characterize as competition for accumulation of different forms of *capital*' (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1994: 271). In a lecture in 1989 (Bourdieu, 2002a: 233–4) he maintained:

According to my empirical investigations [there is] economic capital (in its different forms), cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital. . . . Thus agents are distributed in the overall social space, in the first dimension, according to the overall volume of capital they possess and, in the second dimension, according to the structure of their capital, that is the relative weight of the different species of capital, economic and cultural, in the total volume of their assets.

## MAIN CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL THEORY

Aside from seeking to evolve and promote a conceptual paradigm pivoting on the interplay of habitus, field(s) and capital(s), Bourdieu's intellectual project is also significant on account of his preoccupation with the role of intellectuals during a period of neoliberal incursion into

all areas of life (see Penna and O'Brien, 2006, and Chapter 11). This chapter, therefore, now turns to briefly examine this dimension.

In comments made with reference to France, but equally applicable elsewhere, Bourdieu (in Bourdieu et al., 2002: 182–3) was scathing about the role that some notable intellectuals fulfilled in promoting a so-called 'modernisation':

[B]y associating efficiency and modernity with private enterprise, and archaism and inefficiency with the public sector, they seek to substitute the relationship with the customer, supposedly more egalitarian and more effective, for the relation to the user; finally, they identify 'modernization' with the transfer into the private sector of the public services with the profit potential and with eliminating or bringing into line subordinate staff in the public services, held responsible for inefficiency and every 'rigidity'.

It is probably comments such as this that have led a number of writers to argue that in Bourdieu's later contributions there is something of a 'political turn'. Wolfreys (2000, 2002), for example, appears to think that there was such a 'turn' with the abandonment of reformism by French social democracy, leading Bourdieu to adopt a more radical stance. This interpretation is reflected by a number of other commentators who, similarly, detect a 'refocusing' in Bourdieu's later work. However, Willem Schinkel (2003: 69) is more likely to be correct in concluding that there is 'no real "turn" of this kind in his work'. Indeed, some of Bourdieu's earliest contributions – a number of which are, unfortunately, unavailable in English – were already critical and political pieces (see Lane, 2000). Perhaps what 'changed in the later years was the directness with which the critique was put forward' (Schinkel, 2003: 69).

Which particular social and political issues and causes, therefore, did Bourdieu support? Not surprisingly, given his remarks above, the key struggle was to be waged against the 'scourge of neoliberalism', which has come to 'be seen as an inevitability' (Bourdieu, 2001: vii, 30). On occasions, because of political 'spin', the true intent of the neoliberal project was disguised, perhaps even appearing, 'new', 'modern' and 'radical' (Bourdieu, 2001: 35, emphasis in original):

It is characteristic of *conservative revolutions* . . . that they present restorations as revolutions . . . [This new form of conservative revolution] ratifies and glorifies the reign of what are called the financial markets, in other words the return of the kind of radical capitalism, with no other law than the return of maximum profit, an unfettered capitalism without any disguise, but rationalized, pushed to the limits of its economic efficacy.

Given this was so, what was to be done? Essentially, Bourdieu called for a return to a more 'Keynesian state-regulated market' (Schinkel, 2003: 71). Important, in this context, was the need to restore a human dimension to economic planning (Bourdieu, 2001: 39):

All the critical forces in society need to insist on the inclusion of the social costs of economic decisions in economic calculations. What will this or that policy cost in the long term in lost jobs, suffering, sickness, suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, etc. all things which cost a great deal, in money, but also in misery?



Moreover, we are now witnessing the ‘destruction of the economic and social bases of the most precious gains of humanity’ (Bourdieu, 2001: 37). It is vital, therefore, that the ‘critical efforts of intellectuals [and] trade unions . . . should be applied as a matter of priority against the withering away of the State’ (Bourdieu, 2001: 40). Unlike vogueish social theorists, such as Ulrich Beck (2000), for whom trade unions are to be derided and ridiculed as ‘zombie categories’, Bourdieu recognised the vital role that they fulfil within social democracies. Furthermore, during the wave of public sector strikes that took place in France in December 1995, Bourdieu intervened in various ways and spoke, for example, at a meeting of striking railway workers (Wolfreys, 2000). More broadly, Wolfreys (2000: 13) argues that Bourdieu presents a ‘vigorous optimistic antidote to the pessimism which has gripped sections of the Left’. Indeed, shortly before his death in early 2002, Bourdieu claimed that he was ‘more optimistic about the future than at any time in the last three decades, despite the seeming triumph of global capital’ (in Stabile and Morooka, 2003: 338).

Indeed, he viewed it as crucial to combat the ‘myth of globalisation’ (see, particularly, Bourdieu, 2001: 28–9) – a ‘myth’ that is, of course, central to the faltering New Labour ‘project’ in the UK. A further dimension relating to Bourdieu’s role as a critical intellectual pivots on his analysis and critique of the ‘cultural imperialism’ of the United States. For Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999: 41; see also Garrett, 2007a) this:

rests on the power to universalize particularisms linked to a singular historical tradition by causing them to be recognized as such . . . [T]oday numerous topics directly issuing from the intellectual confrontations relating to the social particularity of the American society and its universities have been imposed, in apparently dehistoricized form, upon the whole planet.

This process – often masquerading within the social sciences as benign and simply indicative of ‘policy transfer’ (Dolowitz et al., 2000) – could, however, be viewed as a form of ‘symbolic violence’. In this context, one of the key points Bourdieu was alert to – indeed, horrified by – in his later work was the way in which capitalism is continuing to transform the United States and he was fearful that Europe risked being transformed in a similar way. This specifically relates to his, and Wacquant’s, concern with the impact of neoliberalism on those in contact with social workers – the social and economically marginalised. The ghettos of the USA he saw as ‘abandoned sites that are fundamentally defined by an absence – basically that of the state and of everything that comes with it, police, schools, healthcare institutions, associations, etc.’ (Bourdieu et al., 2002: 123). Indeed, in some cities in the USA ‘public authority has turned into a war machine against the poor’, with social workers only able to see ‘clients’ in their offices (Wacquant, in Bourdieu et al., 2002: 137–8).

There remain, however, major conceptual problems with some of Bourdieu’s formulations. For example, it can be suggested that his lack of engagement, even flawed contributions, relating to issues pivoting on multiculturalism, race and ethnicity is important. Furthermore, Bourdieu’s ‘conceptual arsenal’ (Wacquant, 1998: 220) possibly lays too great an emphasis on the dulled passivity of social actors, particularly the working class and the dominated. Perhaps his ideas on the function of the State can also be viewed as problematic. These are substantial areas that lie outside the scope of this short chapter to explore (see, however, Garrett, 2007a, 2007b).

Initially more irritating for readers new to Bourdieu will be an assortment of obstacles that can ‘get in the way’ of comprehending him. Here we might, for example, include his prose style,

the sheer scale of his ‘output’ and related matters, the fact that most readers (perhaps especially those situated outside the French intellectual field and its associated cultural milieu) might fail to recognise key contextual factors only hinted at in his work, and the misleading labels frequently attached to Bourdieu, such as ‘Marxist’ or ‘postmodernist’ (see Garrett, 2007a).

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

At the heart of this chapter is the understanding that Bourdieu is of significance for social work theory and practice, irrespective of his neglect in these spheres (see also Garrett, 2007a). Indeed, beyond France, and specifically in terms of social work, Bourdieu’s theorising and his critical engagement with key contemporary political issues have been insufficiently recognised with, for example, Lena Dominelli’s (1997a) *Sociology for Social Work* failing to even find a place for him in the index to the volume. However, and perhaps paradoxically, Bourdieu frequently revealed his interest in social work and attempted to comprehend the situation of social workers confronted by the impact of neoliberalism (see particularly, Bourdieu et al., 2002: 181–255). This concern with the trajectory of social work is unusual in a high-profile social theorist, with only Zygmunt Bauman (2000) – a sociologist of a very different theoretical orientation – appearing to have a similar interest.

Related to his conceptualisation of the State, Bourdieu viewed social workers as ‘agents of the state’ who are ‘shot through with the contradictions of the state’ (Bourdieu et al., 2002: 184). There are, moreover, a number of examples, particularly in *The Weight of the World*, of his trying to highlight the ‘real institutional dilemmas haunting “street-level” bureaucrats’ (Stabile and Morooka, 2003: 337). He also recognised the fact that many social workers, and those undertaking similar work, should ‘feel abandoned, if not disowned outright, in their efforts to deal with the material and moral suffering that is the only certain consequence’ (Bourdieu et al., 2002: 183) of rampant neoliberalism. One of the chief problems is that social workers (Bourdieu et al., 2002: 190)

must unceasingly fight on two fronts: against those they want to help and who are often too demoralized to take a hand in their own interests, let alone the interests of the collectivity; on the other hand, against administrations and bureaucrats divided and enclosed in separate universes.

Indeed, it can be argued that there is a need, if not for a Bourdieusian social work, then for a social work *informed* by Bourdieu’s theoretical insights and his opposition to neoliberalism. Indeed, the definition of social work appears to orientate the profession in the direction of Bourdieu. More specifically, the International Federation of Social Workers’ definition of social work connects to a range of Bourdieu’s preoccupations (Hare, 2004). Thus, the references to the relation between people and their environments and more expansive ideas associated with the championing of liberation, human rights and social justice are all *core* themes for Bourdieu. Furthermore, there are at least two significant ways in which he might aid in the construction of a reconfigured critical and ‘radical’ social work in the early twenty-first century.

First, Bourdieu’s theorisation – what has been described as his ‘conceptual arsenal’ – might assist social workers in evolving better forms of practice. In the welfare field, the concept

of habitus becomes particularly relevant at the point of contact between the social professions and the users of services. His theoretical contribution might, in this context, enable social workers working with children and families to gain greater insight into doxic ideas on ‘good enough parenting’ (Polansky et al., 1983). What, moreover, might be the forms of capital deployed in the formulation and promotion of constructs such as that preoccupied with the ‘social presentation’ of young people in public care (Garrett, 2003a)? Furthermore, how is capital being implicitly marshalled in the context of child adoption? More specifically, how might the differential access to capital(s) impact on, and help determine, the outcomes for the ‘birth parents’ and those seeking to adopt children? Are the differing positions that they frequently occupy in social space a crucial and insufficiently examined factor?

Specifically in terms of social work activity, an awareness of habitus, fields and capital(s) might, for example, enrich social work assessments. Indeed, it might be argued that a more Bourdieusian reading of the Laming Report (which investigated the circumstances related to the death of Victoria Climbié and was subsequently to influence the Children Act 2004) is a potentially rich area for future investigation given the ‘complex field of differentiated economic and social statuses, ethnicities, identities, rights and entitlements’ in which Victoria and her aunt moved (see also Lewis and Neal, 2005: 426). The pair covered a range of physical sites (intercountry, intracountry, intercity, intracity and so on), but they also moved through social space. Indeed, key Bourdieusian concepts, such as habitus, capital and fields, could be deployed to try and better comprehend how these two black African females – one a child and the other an adult – were perceived and engaged with in their many encounters with child welfare professionals in France and England.

Clearly social workers themselves operate ‘in a field with a political capital, and the exercise of their power’ can produce ‘stigma, negative symbolic capital for their clients’ (Peillon, 1998: 223). However, Bourdieu’s work can also serve to emphasise the profession’s more benign characteristics and help map its future direction.

Important in this respect is Bourdieu’s recognition of the centrality of ‘talk’ for social work (see also Parton and O’Byrne, 2000). Thus, his theorising might assist in combating the damage rendered to the ‘work’ in social work on account of the increasing use of centrally devised schedules, tick lists and electronic templates that have been introduced into practice since the 1990s (see also Garrett, 2005).

In contrast to this development, Bourdieu’s approach is pluralistic and open to hearing many ‘voices’. As he states, following the lead of novelists such as James Joyce, ‘we must relinquish the single, central, dominant, in a word, quasidivine, point of view. . . . We must work instead with the multiple perspectives that correspond to the multiplicity of coexisting, and sometimes directly competing points of view’ (Bourdieu et al., 2002: 3). These and many similar remarks are connected to the process of research in the social sciences, but they could have a resonance for social workers and others in the welfare field.

Related to this is his commitment to ‘active and methodical listening’, as opposed to ‘half understanding’ based on a ‘distracted and routinized attention’ (Bourdieu et al., 2002: 609, 614). Furthermore, this notion (perhaps formerly so central to social work and reflecting ‘traditional’ values rooted, in part, in ‘respect for persons’) is oddly subversive when social workers are now increasingly subjected to a new ‘time discipline’ (Garrett, 2005) and, along with others in the public sector, are working under pressure inside nervous and

edgy neoliberal regimes that demand fast thinking and tangible outcomes (Bourdieu, 1998: 28–30; see also Harvey, 2005).

Second, Bourdieu's work could help social work to reflexively *fold inwards*, with social workers and 'social work academics' scrutinising their own personal and collective habitus. Certainly there is an urgent requirement to interrogate more closely these destabilised and evolving professional fields. More fundamentally, of course, this could relate to an aspiration to be 'critical intellectuals'. For example, how might a critical orientation interpret the changing habitus of social workers (Garrett, 2005, 2008a, 2008b)?

Still connected to social workers' need to interrogate their habitus and the field(s) they occupy, Bourdieu encourages us, of course, to see the social totality, the 'bigger picture' (see also Bourdieu, 2003b). Importantly in this regard, for him (and, perhaps, for social work), 'the main issue . . . is neoliberalism and . . . the retreat of the State' (in Ovenden, 2000: 1). Bourdieu emphasises how this is a more than abstract consideration because, on a daily basis, neoliberalism *bites into* practice in social work and related fields (see also Harlow, 2004). It is, therefore, particularly important in this context for social workers to defend the autonomy of the field and champion a form of democratic professionalism (see also Davis and Garrett, 2004). As Mary Pileggi and Cindy Patton (2003: 318) maintain, when working in a neoliberal context, 'practitioners of a field become liable to two masters: the practices and norms of the discipline and the practices and norms of the market'. Given this tension, individual workers are, therefore, confronted with a choice as to which 'master' to follow.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Bourdieu's disruptive, insistent interrogation of established 'truths' and his 'refusal to compromise with institutions' (Bourdieu, 1994: 4) that are increasingly steered, directed and shaped by the needs and demands of economic capital can serve as a guiding light for a renewed 'radical' social work practice as it attempts to 'pick up the pieces' in the early twenty-first century. His work frustrates, confuses, annoys and enlightens. Like the best of social theorists, he unsettles. Moreover, he compels his readers to return, to read him again and again, and take away different or refined understandings of his mammoth contribution. Most importantly, Bourdieu's theorisation and his nagging insistence on the relevance – and sheer *stickiness* – of social structure provide a useful counterweight, within the discourse of social work, to those contributions, often somewhat shallow and lacking in substance, that are apt to unduly inflate the role of individual agency within neoliberal modernity (Garrett, 2003b).

When Bourdieu died in January 2002, the world lost one of that rare and 'perhaps most endangered species: a prominent university intellectual who was also . . . coolly and passionately and scientifically and politically engaged with the world around him' (Stabile and Morooka, 2003: 326). Bourdieu's early work 'focused on how class is *lived*, on how social differences inhabit the grain of everyday life' (Callinicos, 2000: 118–19), making him 'especially sensitive to the scale of socially unnecessary suffering – what he . . . called *la misère du monde*'. Indeed, by the time of his death, Bourdieu had come to be seen as arguably 'the unofficial ideologue of the antiglobalization movement(s)' (Schinkel, 2003: 81).

## Study questions

- 1 Why is Bourdieu mostly absent from the social work literature?
- 2 How can his writings and political activism aid social workers' understanding of neoliberalism?
- 3 What might be some of the problems with Bourdieu's theorisation?

## GLOSSARY

**Capital** Different 'kinds of capital, like trumps in a game of cards, are powers which define the chances of profit in a given field' (Bourdieu, 1991: 230). Bourdieu refers to three main forms of capital:

- *economic capital*, which refers to material and financial assets, ownership of stocks and shares and so on;
- *cultural capital*, which can be viewed as 'scarce symbolic goods, skills and titles' (Wacquant, 1998: 221);
- *social capital*, which can be understood as resources or contacts 'accrued by virtue of membership of a particular group' (Wacquant, 1998: 221) or network.

Symbolic capital is best viewed as different from the three other forms of capital insofar as it can be *any* of these forms. As expressed by Bourdieu (1991: 230), 'symbolic capital, commonly called prestige, reputation, fame, etc. . . . is the form assumed by these different kinds of capital when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate'. In the 'symbolic struggle for the production of common sense or, more precisely, for the monopoly of legitimate naming as the official – i.e. explicit and public – imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world, agents bring into play' symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991: 239).

**Field A** 'structured social space, a field of forces' (Bourdieu, 1998: 40), with agents and groups of agents being defined by their relative positions in this space. In 'most fields, we may observe what we characterize as competition for accumulation of different forms of capital' (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1994: 271).

**Habitus** A 'system of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules . . . collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor' (Bourdieu, 2003a: 72).

**Symbolic violence** A form of ideological violence that is apt to stigmatise or devalue, but is also apt to be viewed as legitimate by those subjected to it because of previous patterns of socialisation.

## FURTHER READING

For readers new to the work of Bourdieu, the best starting point is probably his overtly political journalism (Bourdieu, 2001, 2003b; see also Bourdieu, 1998). The mammoth *The Weight of the World: Social suffering in contemporary society* (Bourdieu et al., 2002) is also easy to read, dip into and may particularly interest social workers. His, and Wacquant's, polemical and controversial work on the 'cultural imperialism' of the United States can also be read by those with little acquaintance with French social theory (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999, 2001).

Bourdieu's more challenging sociological work is most accessible in the interviews that he gave and some of these are collected in Bourdieu (1994). His exchanges with Eagleton, Grass and Wacquant are also interesting, with his core sociological and political preoccupations being lucidly presented (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1994; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2004; Grass and Bourdieu, 2002). Bourdieu's formulation of habitus and related concepts is outlined in the volume edited by Hillier and Rooksby (Bourdieu, 2002b). A more detailed mapping of his conceptual arsenal features in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu, 2003a; see also Bourdieu, 2004). *Pascalian Meditations*, one of Bourdieu's later works, is difficult, but will, perhaps, come to be regarded as one of his most substantial and rewarding books (Bourdieu, 2003c).

Illuminating articles on Bourdieu's work are, of course, available (see, for example, Garrett, 2007a; Houston, 2002a; Moi, 1991; Wacquant, 1998). However, the best introduction to his life and work remains Jeremy Lane's lively and informative *Pierre Bourdieu: A critical introduction* (2000).

# 4

## MICHEL FOUCAULT

JASON L. POWELL

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault and examines its implications for critical social work, which characterises social work as an essentially political activity (Gregory and Holloway, 2005), constantly having to respond to challenges produced by the shifting dynamics and priorities of government (Gilbert and Powell, 2005). Despite this, there has been very little Foucauldian analysis of social work and its relationship to power (Chambon et al., 1999; Fook, 2002; Garrity, 2010). The chapter discusses the relationship between Foucault's conceptual tools of 'knowledge and power', the emergence of 'the modern subject', the bio-politics of populations and the important concept of 'governmentality' as they apply to social work.

Michel Foucault was born on 15 October 1926 in Poitiers, France and died in June 1984. He was a French philosopher or more specifically a 'historian of systems of thought', a self-made title created when he was promoted to a new professorship at the prestigious Collège de France in 1970. Foucault is generally accepted as having been the most influential social theorist of the twentieth century. He was also a French critical historian and became one of the most influential and controversial scholars of the post-World War II period. Foucault's project was always to deconstruct powerful discourses, which are in official social policies 'empowering' of individuals. But, Foucault argues, such discourses legitimise the power of disciplines and professions but do not liberate people in wider society. His best known works are *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and the multi-volume, but incomplete *The History of Sexuality* (1978). Foucault died of AIDS-related septicaemia in June 1984. He has left a huge legacy for his insights on power/knowledge, surveillance and governmentality, which have impacted on every single humanity and social science subject.

## KEY IDEAS

Foucault's key ideas revolve around 'knowledge and power' as conceptual tools to understand the emergence of 'the modern subject' and what he calls 'governmentality', biopower and resistance; these are the techniques by which modern subjects are made to govern themselves. Hence a Foucauldian analysis of power relations explores the forms of governmentality that regulate and manage the everyday lives of citizens.

## KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

Most of Michel Foucault's theoretical schemas are posed in oppositional terms. He urges individuals to 'refuse what we are' (Foucault, 1982: 216), meaning that we should refuse to remain tied to the fixed identities to which people are subjected (Osborne, 1997). He linked his own project with all those who struggle against the ways in which they are individualised, particularised and objectified by controlling discourses. It is important, at this stage, to map out a number of key Foucauldian concepts that will later be used to address the relationship between identity and changing welfare policies. These key concepts include genealogy and discourse, power/knowledge and technologies of self. The point of Foucault's analysis, called a genealogy because of its emphasis on tracing historical pathways that have contributed to contemporary circumstances, was to identify discourses.

Foucault's concept of 'discourse' is a key term for understanding his work and applying his ideas to explain facets of social welfare. Foucault identified discourses as historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth, which function as sets of rules, and the exercise of these rules and discourses in programmes that specify what is or is not the case – what constitutes 'old age', for example. Those who are labelled 'old' are in the grip of power. This power would include that operated by professional social workers through institutions and face-to-face interactions with their patients and clients. Power is constituted in discourses, and it is in discourses such as those of 'social work' that power lies.

Genealogy is concerned, then, with the historical limits and conditions of socially determined discourses, which then direct and distort the personal and institutional narratives that can subsist within them. When a discourse has stabilised historically, it can be referred to as a 'discursive formation', which can come to characterise a particular period of welfare development and the associated possibilities for identity performance that it contains. Foucault (1967) was particularly interested in the limits and possibilities of discourses from 'human sciences' because of their attempts to define human subjectivity. His attention shifts to the power of professionals because Foucault found that the conditions of possibility for 'true' discourses about human subjects include complex relations between knowledge about people and systems of power. Here Foucault (1977: 185) focuses on the techniques of power/knowledge that operate within an institution and that simultaneously create 'a whole domain of knowledge and a whole type of power'. These domains effectively destroy the legitimacy of other, competing, discourses, just as a professional medical opinion might delegitimise voices arising from folk medicine or informal care. The genealogical work of unclinking these power relations



is characterised, by Foucault, as setting out the ‘political regime of the production of truth’ (Davidson, 1986: 224). The effects of the reflexive relationship between power and knowledge that is implied here would include the tendency for professional power to be reinforced by the sorts of questions professionals ask and the data they collect. This knowledge then progresses to a certain definition of a problem area that then feeds back to stabilise the original formulation of the ‘problem’ itself. By the same token, different policy positions point professionals to seek out certain forms of knowledge that tend to reinforce the ideological position of that policy and its associated discourses.

As part of this process, certain powerful voices increase their legitimacy, while other, often dissenting, voices become delegitimised. An effect of the mutually reinforcing relationship between power and knowledge that emerges from Foucault’s analysis is to construct individuals simultaneously as subjects and as objects. First, people are seen as objects by someone else, through control and restraint. Second, people are deemed actively to subject their own identity to personal direction through processes such as conscience and mediated self-knowledge. Foucault (1988) refers to this second process as ‘technologies of self’. His formulation of ‘technologies of self’ claims that individual lives are never quite complete and finished – that in order to function socially individuals must somehow work on themselves to turn themselves into subjects. For example, Powell and Chamberlain (2012) show how the notion of ‘technologies’ offers the scope for an analysis of the sites whereby certain effects of old age are brought about. As Foucault (1988: 175) put it, ‘both meanings [of control and self-conscience] suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to’.

An analysis of power, which follows the Foucauldian pathway as outlined above, must examine at least three aspects of how such power is created and maintained. First, the analysis must examine the genealogy of existing relations, how they have emerged, and the discourses they reflect and reinforce. Second, attention must be given to the distribution of power and knowledge that these relations imply. Finally, technologies of welfare such as psychosocial casework and case management will need to be critically assessed as approaches to the self that hold certain webs of power in place. Each will contribute to the ways in which subjects enmeshed in certain relations apply techniques of identity control to themselves.

For Foucault (1977) power is a concept often discussed as fundamental to the relationship between professionals and the society in which they operate but one rarely conceptualised as the product and producer of such relationships. For example, his analysis of power offers a set of strategies (Foucault, 1977, 1978) for understanding how discourse produced within a network of disciplinary activities and embedded in social policy constructs social workers’ experiences and their identities, as well as the experiences and identities of those with whom they interact. At the same time, the dynamics of these relationships reinforce and modify the discourse that made such meaning possible in the first place.

Bryan Turner (1997) argues that Foucault’s contribution to the analysis of power is important in three ways, as it provides: (1) analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge, (2) the emergence of the modern self through disciplinary technologies and (3) analysis of governmentality. Central to Foucauldian analysis is discourse, inseparable combinations of knowledge and power that along with their respective technologies – specific techniques and associated practices, i.e., assessment and care planning – operate to subjugate individuals in specific circulations or ‘regimes of power’.

Foucault proposes that since the seventeenth century a particularly modern form of power has developed, 'bio-politics', a politics of the population that operates through two modalities, 'totalising' and 'individualising', producing a two-way process between the subject as a private individual and the subject as a public citizen (Miller, 1993). Foucault rejects claims that any particular group or class has a monopoly over power; rather, power circulates via a myriad of social networks penetrating deep into the far corners of social life, playing out its effects through the everyday interactions of autonomous individuals. Power and knowledge combine in disciplinary processes that act on the body to produce the modern subject as docile, productive and willing to participate in its own management (Foucault, 1977). Through these processes, power operates to differentiate groups of people and individuals from other individuals, finally producing the components of individual subjectivity.

Foucault uses the idea of 'resistance' to describe how the effects of power may be only partially successful in specific social contexts, enabling challenges to and changes in existing power relations (Nettleton, 1997). This occurs in a number of ways but is located within two forms of possibility. First, the re-emergence of 'popular knowledges', the historical contents of conflict and struggle that have become submerged under a veneer of functionalist coherence and order; and second, 'insurrections of subjugated knowledges', knowledges disqualified as inadequate, unscientific or lacking sophistication. In both these, we can see the possibility of a range of accounts, that is, professionals alienated from practice, oppressed communities and the disadvantaged and disenfranchised.

In this formulation, Foucault (1977) departs from many conceptualisations of power by suggesting that power in itself is 'relational' (Parton, 1994b). Therefore, while one social actor may exercise power interacting with other individuals, we also need to be aware that all other individuals also exercise 'power' in their social relationships, often expressed through 'resistance' in its dance with surveillance. The outcome is to produce a dialectical relationship between knowledge, power and action that is productive in the sense of creating particular possibilities but which also maintains a level of uncertainty and unpredictability in terms of actions, providing opportunity for the exercise of discretion.

In relation to the modern self, Foucault (1977) identifies three key processes in the objectification of individuals. The first is hierarchical observation, which is the development of ever more sophisticated processes of surveillance (often discussed as the 'panopticon' or 'gaze') that are constantly but unobtrusively maintained, engulfing all in a web of watching. His second is normalising judgements, or the production of classification systems that enable the identification of 'norms' of social functioning that allow ongoing comparison of individuals and small transgressions to become the focus of disciplinary attention and examination. The last brings together the two former elements linking specific knowledges with particular practices in the exercise of power, while engaging experts – professionals – in a network of writing and documentary accumulation that identifies individuals as deserving or risky, noting individual features, specifying appropriate interventions and recording progress. Documentation fixes the objectification of individuals in writing codifying, calculating difference and drawing comparison and embedding this in discourse, i.e., 'evidence-based practice', which, in turn, disciplines and regulates professional activity.

However, rather than the objectifying processes discussed above, Foucault's (1977) concept of 'subjectification' involves a range of 'technologies of the self' where individuals engage with

processes Foucault likens to the confessional. Individuals, incited by discourse, engage in reflective processes where they speak the truth about themselves, gain self-knowledge, and then act on that self-knowledge in an ethic of self-formation producing the self-managing individual central to neoliberal rule (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982; Miller, 1993; Turner, 1997).

## GOVERNMENTALITY

Foucault's concept of governmentality enables analysis of the processes, techniques and procedures that produce the moral regulation of the choices of autonomous individuals (Miller, 1993; Osborne, 1997; Rose, 1993, 1996). Since this is a feature of the very core of contemporary social policy, it enables us to identify ways in which discourse constitutes categories of identity, regulating morals and directing life choices. Such processes of ethical self-formation give rise to a core feature of neoliberal forms of government, the government of the self by the self. Discourse operates through a myriad of statutory and non-statutory social institutions, such as citizen associations, charities, trade unions, families, schools, hospitals and workplaces that have no direct political affiliations and diverse histories. Foucault's (1978) conceptual tool of 'governmentality' is the means through which neoliberal modes of government afford expertise a key role and function in the management of individual and collective conduct. However, this role differs markedly from that afforded professionals under former regimes, as neoliberal government 'seeks to detach the substantive authority of expertise from the apparatus of political rule, relocating experts within a market governed by the rationalities of competition, accountability and consumer demand' (Rose, 1993: 285). Rather than being the territory of direct interventions, government instead becomes the structuring and regulation of potential choices of autonomous individuals with expertise operating in a semi-autonomous relationship with the state (Miller, 1993). This has had an impact on the professional changes in social work.

## BIO-POLITICS

Foucault (1977: 87) outlines how the modern state enhanced its power by intervening in the very life of the 'bio-politics of the population'. Bio-politics leads to his overall perspective of politics or 'governmentality', 'the art of government' (Foucault, 1991: 90). In this process power has two poles. First, a pole of transformation and, second, the human body as an object of control and manipulation. The first revolves around the notion of 'scientific categorisation', for example, 'species' and 'population'. It is these categories that become the object of systematic and sustained political intervention. The other pole is not 'human species' but the human body: not in its biological sense, but as an object of control and manipulation. Collectively, Foucault (1977: 198) calls these procedures 'technologies' which centre round the 'objectification' of the body. The overall aim is to forge 'a docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved'. Beginning with the inception of modernity, Western administrators rationalised their management of social problems with technically efficient means of population control: statistics, police, health regulations and centralised welfare. Such means constituted governmentality: an assemblage of ruling practices, knowledge authorities and moral

imperatives that converged on the population in order to extend the reach of the state. The controversial point is that governmentality is more complex than state power. Custodial institutions and health programmes configured individuals into substrata of the population. For example, pension policies explicate ‘the elderly’ as a particular group of people, while statistics elaborate their status as a demographic entity (an ‘ageing population’). Thus, the disciplinary formation of subjects as a population makes possible the government of subjectification.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

Despite ongoing pressures, professional power persists as a foundational element in the management of the population. On the one hand, professional surveillance restricts practice while, on the other, complexity opens the space for resistance and new formulations of power relations. This has important implications for how vulnerable groups are at risk. Foucault’s ideas have been used to understand the construction of social welfare, particularly through the lens of governmentality seen to be at work in the intense process of rationalisation of modern social work over the past 20 years in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and North America. In the UK, most pressing have been concerns identified with the degeneration of the social democratic accord (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Harris, 2002), as it gave way to new priorities produced by the neoliberal consensus that has emerged since the 1980s. This has seen ‘New Labour’ governments – between 1997 and 2010 – extend the project of restructuring the relationship between the state and its citizens initiated by New Right Conservatives (Jordan, 2005). Social services, once envisaged as the province of a universal citizenship, are now mere supports for the irresponsible (Butler and Drakeford, 2001; Harris, 2002). The state, once the principal focus for analysis, now appears as merely one among a range of contextually and historically specific elements within multiple circuits of power (Rose, 1999). A Foucauldian analysis identifies the assemblage of ruling practices, knowledge authorities and moral imperatives which converge on social work in order to govern the conduct of social workers and those they aim to support (Parton, 1994a, 1994b; Rose, 1996, 1999; Rose and Miller, 1992). In this formulation, differences between the government of populations and the management of conduct in specific localised spaces are technical rather than ontological. Social policy, enacted via a range of institutions, such as schools, universities, hospitals and workplaces, aims to act on the ‘well-being’ of the population as a whole, promoting social cohesion while simultaneously influencing the innumerable decisions taken by individuals in their everyday lives – thus managing their conduct (Rose, 1999). This section considers the changing context of contemporary social work in England before moving on to an application of Foucault’s ideas to professional practice focusing on two areas: surveillance and social work, and discretion and power.

## MODERN SOCIAL WORK IN ENGLAND

Over the past five years, new policy frameworks covering children and adults have emerged in England, including *Every Child Matters* (UK Department of Health, 2003), *Choosing Health*

(UK Department of Health, 2005a), *Independence, Well-being and Choice* (UK Department of Health, 2005b), *Our Health, Our Care, Our Say* (UK Department of Health, 2006) and *Putting People First* (HM Government, 2007). These policies have profoundly restructured the terrain of social work, social care, education and health management in England. At the macro-level, this framework – bio-politics – targets the population with notions of ‘well-being’ articulated with discourses of social inclusion, participation and responsibility. At the micro-level its effects work by managing individual conduct inciting individuals to seek ‘well-being’ by balancing choices between the often-contradictory imperatives of the ‘market’ and those of individual and collective obligation (Rose, 1999), thus establishing the basis for moral self-regulation mirrored in a myriad of formal and informal social contexts (Miller, 1993).

This formula is not merely rhetorical. Organisational structures across a range of social institutions, including personal social services, reflect a similar logic. The introduction of quasi-markets in social services separated functions previously held within unified departments, dividing assessment of need from the provision of support; the latter devolved to an increasing range of semi-autonomous organisations in the third sector (Clarke and Newman, 1997). In conjunction, government acts indirectly on these autonomous organisations identifying budgets, setting targets and regulating activity. In return, those individual organisations that enter into government contracts act reflexively and demonstrate effective self-management (Rose, 1999). As part of this, the role of social workers within these contracted organisations is shaped by increasing managerialist demands for information, particularly in response to audit and risk assessment (Parrot and Madoc-Jones, 2008), leading to claims of increased paperwork and a corresponding demise of face-to-face work (Jones, 2001; Lewis and Glennerster, 1996; Pithouse, 1998; Postle, 2001; Sheppard, 1995).

This new policy framework added another dimension to the increasingly dispersed context of social care by effectively dividing provision for children and families from provision for adults. This has been compounded more recently by demands for specialisation in prequalifying social work training (Laming, 2009), leaving some to comment that these developments represent the final nail in the coffin of the unified social work department envisaged by Seebohm (Garrett, 2002). In addition, lead roles, once clearly the province of social services, are now set within a complex array of relationships between statutory and non-statutory organisations, including a range of service user and consumer groups. Such relations often reflect power relationships at a more local level, highlighting Foucault’s emphasis on the importance of micro-politics (Gordon, 1980), which, in the process, produce an increasingly diverse range of roles for social workers operating in the different segments of welfare or social care. In addition, a whole plethora of new roles has emerged, for example, personal advisors in the Connexions service, which have chipped away at the traditional base of the social work role. At the same time, information and communication technologies have provided novel spaces for organising meaning (Salvo, 2004), effectively structuring activities like assessment and establishing modern opportunities for the surveillance of workers and service users (Garrett, 2002, 2005), while also providing innovative possibilities for representing the disadvantaged.

Notwithstanding clear differences in the power and prestige of so-called ‘caring professions’ (Hugman, 1991), traditional professions, such as medicine, as well as newer and less established ‘quasi-professions’, such as social work, have been considered more resistant to,

or even immune from, broader economic and political power (Leonard, 1997). Reasons for this assumption have differed, but in general the profession's reliance upon knowledge and technical skill for practice, as well as internally restricted access and an extensive period of academic training, has allowed employee discretion and control to prevail (Johnson, 1972). However, critics have challenged this orthodox view, noting the extent to which professions have always tended to adapt readily to forces of change, as well as conform to organisational policies and procedures (Brint, 1994; Johnson, 2001). For example, the expansion of managerialism has significantly reduced professional discretion (Baines, 2004; Jones, 2001). Despite this, it is questionable the extent to which professional practice has been seriously challenged by resistance arising from a resurgence of popular or subjugated service user knowledges (Chambon, 1999).

Hence, a Foucauldian approach to the social work profession (Biggs and Powell, 2001; Fournier, 1999, 2000, 2001) attempts to integrate the micro-political tactics of professionalisation within a broader network of power relations through the analysis of discourse and regimes of power/knowledge. For Foucault, professionalism in itself is 'a disciplinary mechanism', which associates specific practices with particular worker identities, professional knowledge and rules of conduct, thus legitimising professional authority and activity. In turn, these norms act as a form of *discipline* over otherwise autonomous professional power-regulating behaviour through self-management (Fournier, 1999). Thus induction into professions, in terms of *both* knowledge *and* conduct, serves to construct a specifically governable subjectivity rooted in self-disciplinary mechanisms, such as reflective practice and models of supervision (Gilbert, 2001; Grey, 1998). Therefore, the political proximity of welfare professions to the apparatus of government can be described as follows: 'professionals are both the instrument and the subject of government, the governor and the governed' (Fournier, 1999: 285).

Paradoxically, professional autonomy, particularly in areas such as social work, is the reason why the professions remain necessary, due to their ability to manage complex and unpredictable situations, *and* the focus for the deployment of a range of disciplinary technologies that produce patterns of accountability targeting, limiting and controlling the exercise of autonomy (Rose, 1999). Indeed, Biggs and Powell (2001: 99) warn:

In terms of social welfare, itself a discourse, both clients and social workers would need not simply to follow the rules that legitimise what they can say and do, but also to work on themselves in order to become the sort of person who can be seen and heard within that discourse. If they are not careful, both professionals and users of health and welfare systems become trapped in a dance of mutually maintained positions that serves to sustain a particular view of the world and the remedies, the technologies, that can be brought to bear on it.

This view of welfare professions as modes of disciplinary control also provides a useful counterbalance to critical perspectives which reinforce stereotypes of pampered and privileged professionalism. In recasting professionalism as a source of influence and status concomitant with self-discipline and controlled performance, the Foucauldian position also links professionals with a wider range of control strategies (Dyer and Keller-Cohen, 2000; Fleming, 2005; Hochschild, 1983; Whitehead, 1998). This places professional expertise at the heart of disciplinary technologies designed for the management of populations.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

### SOCIAL WORK AND SURVEILLANCE

This section extends this Foucauldian analysis by focusing on two contemporary issues faced by social work practitioners, both of which involve different technologies of surveillance. The first concerns systems of knowledge provided by information and communication technologies (ICT) which shape social work activity, while the second considers that archetypal proviso for professional autonomy, the exercise of discretion. Together these two pillars of contemporary practice demonstrate all three elements of what Foucault (1977) describes as discipline: hierarchical observation, normalising judgements and the examination. For example, the clients of social work practice and social workers themselves are seen as both object and subject subjugated to ever more sophisticated modes of surveillance while paradoxically creating spaces for innovation and resistance. In the case of the former, the objectifying effect of audit exploits electronic capabilities for surveillance (Garrett, 2005; Rose, 1999), while the latter retains the familiar professional technologies of supervision promoting self-reflexive surveillance (Gilbert, 2001; Rose, 1996, 1999).

Indeed, one of the key issues in health and social care, where a Foucauldian approach illuminates its micro-physics of power, can be situated within an exemplar of ICT. Salvo (2004: 43) describes ‘communication and information systems’ as the art, science and business of organising information so that it makes sense to people who use it while also highlighting its democratising potential theoretically promoted by participation. However, in practice, data protection and freedom of information legislation circumscribe these technologies, promoting a potentially contradictory position that simultaneously enables and restricts access to information. In UK health and social services, this tension demands adherence to the ‘Caldicott standard’ (Richardson and Asthana, 2006; UK Department of Health, 2002). Salvo (2004) also highlights the potential of such technologies as ‘professional space’ promoting what he describes as ‘critical action’, which also opens up the possibility for innovation and resistance as workers exploit the totalising effects of such processes. Similarly, Parrot and Madoc-Jones (2008) explore the potential of ICT for resistance, the exercise of discretion and the development of new forms of social work practice.

Nevertheless, information and communications technologies increasingly order the practice of a range of professionals, including social workers, subsuming in the process older chapter-based standardised assessment and associated needs-focused processes. Garrett (2002, 2005) notes the pervasiveness of such technologies across the public sector, thus ensuring that it is impossible to avoid engaging with these technologies at some level, the implication being that to adopt a stance of ‘refusing to participate’ is not a serious option (Freenberg, 1991), although resistance and subversion are always possibilities (Fleming, 2005).

Information and communication technology is a core element of policy and central to strategies for governing social welfare, often located within the rhetoric of ‘joined up government’ and influenced by the private sector (Garrett, 2005; Hudson, 2000a, 2000b; Selwyn, 2002). The parallel rhetoric of ‘shared assessment processes’ recruits both the service user and a range of professionals in statutory and non-statutory agencies to ‘data sharing’ supported by such technologies. At the same time, a variety of management information systems

enable the passing of performance data between localised and centralised levels of government, linking the two poles of bio-politics.

The significance of these systems from a Foucauldian perspective is twofold. First, they engulf all in an architectural labyrinth of information, a form of panopticon establishing a level of surveillance of social workers and service users, constantly monitored through electronic forms of audit. Second, they institutionalise particular discourses in the very operation of the system through the nature and types of questions asked. Garrett (2005: 543, emphasis in original) notes the '*narrow, normative and prescriptive view*' embedded in a range of assessment tools promoted by government agencies, observing that:

Social work is increasingly being ordered, devised and structured by academics, policy makers and e-technicians far removed from the day-to-day encounters, which practitioners have with the users of services. This is reflected in the emerging software architecture and in the greater use of centrally devised e-assessment templates which attempt to map contours of social work engagements and which construct new 'workflows'. (Garrett, 2005: 545)

In England, guidelines related to community care policy (UK Department of Health and Social Security, 1990; UK Department of Health, 2005b, 2006) provide familiar strategies of identification, assessment, care planning, care packages, monitoring and review. However, subtle changes in the rationalised deployment of this technology have shifted its focus away from support for clients towards surveillance and monitoring. A new language of audit concerned with 'outcomes' and 'risk' has shaped social work activity in child care and community care producing particular expectations (D'Cruz et al., 2009; Rose, 1999). Munro (2004) notes positive and negative consequences of this development but, in a similar vein to Garrett (2005), observes the involvement of external inspectorates, such as the Audit Commission and the Social Services Inspectorate, alongside senior managers in setting goals and an absence of practising social workers. Positive developments include increased accountability and standardisation of social work practice. However, this may be at the cost of producing a punitive environment and reducing social work to a simplistic description of practice that operates within a culture of blame and protocolisation.

Furthermore, in the context of child welfare, Tilbury (2004) notes how the values implicit in performance indicators provide a narrow conception of child welfare that overstates regulatory concerns while underplaying the importance of supporting families to provide safe care at home. Likewise, Garrett (2003c: 443) observes that the:

Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (DH/DfEE/HO, 2000), contains a preoccupation with the ecological approach and the use of questionnaires and scales that produces social work as a reactive activity narrowly focused on child abuse at the expense of proactive family support services.

This 'narrow, normative and prescriptive view' has particular consequences for some targets of policy due to what Booth et al. (2006) describe as 'temporal discrimination'. Discussing the experience of child protection procedures by parents with intellectual disabilities, they note how the prevailing wisdom in policy and practice over avoiding delays and the tendency for time-limited interventions work against people with poor conceptions of time and related skills.



They argue that ‘tick box’ social work reliant on systems and procedures has replaced analysis and judgement to the detriment of some of the most vulnerable of social workers’ clients. This provides a new tactic for the surveillance of contemporary social work that can best be described as ‘time discipline’ (Garrett, 2003c), reflecting Jones’s (2001) observation that tactics first used to constrain the autonomy of radical social workers now target mainstream practitioners. Processes of protocolisation, the time spent on activities like paperwork – or electronic form filling – has particular relevance for a Foucauldian analysis of social work, as power relations embedded in routinisation can ‘define a certain pattern of “normalization”’ (Gilbert and Powell, 2010: 13). Foucault (1977: 304) put it thus: ‘The carceral network, in its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing power’.

Keenan (2001) observes similar phenomena in the USA related to compulsory documentation and recording for users of mental health services. She describes the constricted, objectifying image of service users provided by the assessment and monitoring processes informed by the normalising and medicalising discourses of mental health embedded in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), which defines healthy behaviours in relation to particular norms and in opposition to unhealthy or forbidden behaviours. At the same time, she uses Foucauldian insights to identify how the ‘gaze’ of diagnosis makes the service user visible while shading the powerful and privileged.

In a similar vein, Scheyett (2006) argues that discourses of evidence-based practice effectively silence the service user and the practitioner. This occurs as the dialogue between service users and practitioners over experiences and knowledge of the ‘real world’ becomes subjugated to disciplinary knowledge external to this dialogue, which, through its status as truth, discredits alternative conceptions of events and their meanings (Foucault, 1978) as tactics of government and information technologies objectify and render visible but in the same movement silence the targets of policy. As Heffernan (2006) notes, the language of user involvement dispersed throughout social policy has enabled government to narrow the range of options available.

Social work clients are not the only targets of the discourses carried by this information infrastructure. The rights of carers to have their needs assessed has valorised caring and carers in a way that ‘may squeeze out the last remnants of the right not to care’ (Harris, 2002: 272) thus reinforcing a particular ethical gaze within objectified and electronic formats. Greater visibility of carers is a consequence of their increasing status within tactics of government that have also brought greater levels of surveillance (Heaton, 1999; Henderson and Forbat, 2002) cementing forms of obligation distilled from this ‘ethic’ of care. Together these shifts contribute to the downgrading of holistic and ethical caring practice (Gregory and Holloway, 2005).

Foucault (1977) views surveillance as a central technique that renders an individual the object of power/knowledge. Assessment practice, established in relation to normalised standards and roles as in this example, produces an intensification of paperwork, protocolisation and the expansion of ICT. Hence, professionals also come under scrutiny as part of the continuous review of the client’s needs, a gaze that is ‘always receptive’ (Foucault, 1977: 89) to managerial control catches all.

## SOCIAL WORK AND POWER

The exercise of power, taken as the archetypal activity that defines professional practice, has provided the focus for a significant amount of debate and analysis concerning the status of professions in general and social work in particular. Discretion provides a paradoxical space for the operation of power both enticing resistance and inviting surveillance. Most of this debate has focused on the way managerialism, managerial forms of supervision and information technology have apparently undermined professional discretion (D'Cruz et al., 2009; Evans and Harris, 2004; Harris, 1998). Nevertheless, Evans and Harris (2004) provide an interesting discussion of discretion in social work practice drawing on Lipsky's (1980) work on 'street-level bureaucracy' which focused on face-to-face encounters of social workers with their clients. Analysis provides evidence that discretion is alive and well in social work practice although the micro-politics of the context means that this has been subject to ongoing revision: again the dance of resistance and surveillance.

The spaces within which social workers 'translate nebulous policy into practical action' (Evans and Harris, 2004: 882) resonate with a Foucauldian analysis of governmentality and the persistence of professional authority in complex situations where actions cannot be pre-prescribed. Persistence of spaces between rules requires judgements by professionals over which 'rules' apply in contexts that contain multiple possibilities. Practitioners also use discretion when deciding to 'apply the rules' in this instance, effectively closing down space. This leads to the proposition that discretion is a political activity that occurs in the context of uncertainty and complexity necessitating negotiation while highlighting localised and relational aspects of power.

This localised and relational aspect is also evident in power relations between practitioners and managers where enabling discretion has advantages for managers and organisations as it allows 'innovation' to be claimed for the organisation when things work well while directing blame at frontline practitioners when things go wrong, that is, 'failed to follow procedures'. In addition, discretion allows managers to distance themselves from difficult day-to-day consequences of organisational goals such as gaps between actions and resources. Discretion therefore operates in spaces governed by uncertainty that involve bargaining and negotiation over responsibility (Evans and Harris, 2004). Indeed, networks of power relations operating via the most mundane interactions between managers, social workers, service users and carers enable the formation and shifting of alliances between political and non-political authorities where experts – professionals – and expertise are crucial to operations (D'Cruz et al., 2009; Parton, 1994a ). 'Micro-politics' is the localised context where policy decisions are given meaning through practical application and the identities of participants are produced in the reciprocal relations of power or 'performativity'. Performance is always relational, drawing others into the act: managers, other professionals, clients and so on construct both meanings associated with performances and mutually dependent subject positions (Wetherell, 2001).

Such specific and localised contexts are typically complex with multiple demands providing circumstances where social workers can adopt different roles depending on their function and client group. There is always some degree of fluidity and uncertainty around expectations and therefore the space for discretion and thus innovation and resistance. In addition, social workers carry a range of discourses into these spaces. Face-to-face contact enables different

forms of interaction from that characterised in routinised and objectified practice. It also allows social workers to 'reclaim the language' to re-establish holistic and ethical practice:

Deconstructing the language of performance indicators and quality outcomes implies that rather than turning a conversation with a service user about how they think and feel about their situation into easily measurable service inputs, the social worker strives to reflect that conversation in the framing of objectives driven by the service user's internalized understanding of 'quality'. (Gregory and Holloway, 2005: 50)

However, it is not sufficient to assume that all face-to-face encounters are in themselves holistic and ethical and by that alone avoid the oppressive nature of objectifying discourses and routinised practice. For example, discourses of anti-oppressive practice developed from a radical critique of social work causing the profession to reflect and review practice – although with major benefits at the time, however. This discourse is now the nucleus of social work activity. Language and meaning associated with anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice are historically specific while discourse is dynamic allowing re-articulation of radical elements with more conservative positions that colonise and neutralise the discourse, institutionalising it in a range of organisational contexts:

Indeed anti-oppressive practice has allowed the state to reposition itself as a benign arbiter between competing identity claims. Perversely, given its aim to make the personal political, it has allowed the problems of society to be recast as due to the moral failings of individuals who need censure and correction from the anti-oppressive social worker. (McLaughlin, 2005: 300)

Similar contradictions arise in relation to the discourse of 'empowerment', which has become a theory of professional practice providing professionals with a central role in defining needs and designing interventions (Pease, 2002). Rose (1996) takes this criticism a stage further, suggesting that discourses of empowerment translate as the 'role of experts in the coaxing of others who lack the cognitive, emotional, practical and ethical skills to take personal responsibility and engage in self-management'. Disciplinary techniques embedded in discourses of empowerment located in initiatives such as 'Sure Start' (UK Department of Health, 2003), 'community development projects' and public health projects (UK Department of Health, 2005a), target 'damaged individuals' in an attempt to reform and normalise their conduct, encouraging them to take personal responsibility and engage in self-forming activities, self-care and self-help (Jordan with Jordan, 2000; Rose, 1999).

Nevertheless, a number of writers (Beresford, 2001; Butler, 2005; Evans and Harris, 2004; Gregory and Holloway, 2005; Harris, 1998; Hodge, 2005; Pease, 2002; Scheyett, 2006) emphasise, in different ways, social workers' potential for resistance in their practice with marginalised individuals and groups. Under such circumstances, social workers resist prevailing discourse defining individuals such as refugees and asylum seekers as a problem and undeserving. Instead, they provide space for the service users to develop and express their perspective on needs and priorities. Here, discretion provides space for the renegotiation of events making resistance possible through the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (Foucault, 1977: 88).

However, such possibilities may already be constrained regardless of the values of individual social workers. Social workers carry into their interactions ‘icons’ representing the collective experience of society concerning particular types of events (Kitzinger, 2000). These ‘icons’ are produced over time as a consequence of similar types of events, for example child abuse cases, homicides perpetrated by users of mental health services, neglect and deaths of people subject to community care. Such events provoke intense media discussion while icons provide a rhetorical shorthand for journalists and the public, which include interpretive frameworks that embed distortion and inaccuracy and provide templates for future events. As such, they have particular qualities, appear fixed and authoritative and resist renegotiation. Discursively, they provide a backdrop for social work activity disciplining discretion through a ghost-like media surveillance.

Surveillance in this world of face-to-face encounters takes more subtle forms than those produced by the objectifying processes of routinised work and ICT. Nevertheless, the dual aspect of bio-politics remains evident. At the macro-level, governance of professional activity requires professions to regulate the activity of practitioners by ensuring their commitment to professional development as a prerequisite to retaining a licence to practise. At the micro-level, discourse concerning the complexity of the social work task incites individual practitioners to adopt a position of reflexivity to their work (Taylor and White, 2000). Such reflexivity, achieved via confessional practices, includes, among others, techniques of reflection and supervision (Gilbert, 2001; Rose, 1999). In turn, organisations require practitioners to engage in supervision as surveillance of individual practice thus promoting processes that enable managers to maintain ‘the gaze’ on individual social workers and the exercise of discretion in relation to their caseload. Managers themselves are also subject to supervision, entangling all in an ever extending web of surveillance.

Such subjectifying technologies operating alongside the objectifying technologies discussed earlier, exemplified by the use of ICT, reproduce the panopticon in a contemporary form no longer constrained by the physical limits of the hospital, school, prison or barracks and enable the surveillance of social work activity across an increasingly complex and dispersed landscape. For Foucault (1977: 177), the panopticon integrates power and knowledge, the control of the ‘body’ and the control of space into a technology of discipline. To this, as noted earlier, we can also add a temporal dimension. It is efficient, since surveillance is everywhere and constant, and effective, because it is ‘discreet’, functioning ‘permanently and in silence’. It also provides the scope for the supervision of those entrusted with the surveillance of others.

## RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL WORK

Foucault (1977) wrote that where there is power, there is always resistance. Vicky White (2009) refers to actions such as these as examples of ‘quiet resistance’ and identifies the most common types as ‘dressing up assessments’ or strategic manipulation of knowledge and information about service users; bypassing decision-making procedures by deliberately delaying paperwork; overt cooperation with tasks which conceals resistance; ‘resistance through distance’ by escaping or avoiding managerial authority; cynicism; and withdrawal from active participation in the workplace, through sickness and stress, moving jobs or leaving the profession. Such tactics are

reminiscent of covert resistance adopted by subaltern groups throughout history as discussed by James C. Scott (1990) in his classic text *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, where he refers to them as ‘hidden transcripts’ aimed at challenging the ‘public transcripts’ or official views and practices of dominant groups.

## CRITIQUE OF FOUCAULT

While there is a strong claim for original insights to social work studies through the powerful work of Michel Foucault, there are several important questions that need to be raised, if the full complexity of the processes surrounding social work, social policy and power are to be appreciated and understood. There are points that need to be highlighted: critical pessimism, Foucault–Marxist duality, sociological structural fault lines and oppression.

First, one of the major criticisms centres on critical pessimism. As Powell and Chamberlain (2012: 158) suggest, a Foucauldian approach does little to encourage or instruct anyone interested in undertaking such resistance. In addition, Foucault himself ‘gives the impression that resistance is generally contained by power and poses no threat’ (Powell and Chamberlain, 2012: 22).

Second, Foucault suggests subjectivity is not a fabricated part of a deeper reality but is itself an aspect of the reality systematically formulated by discourse and power relations. Foucault sidesteps the binary relationship set up by Marxist theory between true and false realities, ways of knowing and political consciousness (Foucault, 1977). He loosens knowledge, ideas and subject positions from categories of social totality, such as social formation, mode of production, history, economy and society. Thus suspended from their ostensible connections, social ideas are rearticulated in Foucault’s thought to historical and societal features ignored in Marxist models of social reality based on the labour process and modes of economic exploitation. Nevertheless, we can ask the question: is not the class structure a key determinant of the position of individuals in capitalist society? The implication is society itself makes it very difficult for ‘resistance’ when population groups are decommodified and lose social worth brought about by a loss of productive roles that puts premium on production. In addition, Foucault’s notion of governmentality is problematic itself. A reflective critique is that Foucault failed to relate such ‘arts of governmentality’ to wider social class interests which may motivate policy development.

Third, and coupled with the above, Foucault does not pay particular attention to sociological fault lines of ‘race’, sexuality, disability and gender and how they are blurred and splinter off from other discursive formations, such as ageing. What is not included in Foucault’s work is how community groups collectively, in recent years, have formed and mobilised pressure groups, such as ‘Grey Power’, to address power imbalances regarding adverse care assessment.

In conclusion, adopting a Foucauldian analysis enables a critical approach to the dynamics of knowledge and power that lays open the implications and possibilities of practices promoted by social policy and enacted by social workers. In addition, this perspective, by moving beyond conceptions of power as domination to consider power as relational, poses a different range of questions over how particular subjects are formed, for example asylum seekers. Moreover, it raises questions over how that identity relates to the formation of other subjects

on which subjectivity is dependent. Furthermore, exploring power as relational exposes many of the principles that have guided social work activity, such as empowerment and anti-oppressive practice, to a critical stance, identifying how relations of power have seen such commitments detached from their original radical and humanitarian moorings to feature now as components of oppressive discourses they might once have challenged. Nevertheless, by identifying the effects of power as partially a Foucauldian perspective provides the possibility of resistance, enabling analysis of those many incidences, many mundane, some striking, where service users may come together with carers and social workers to establish alternatives to prevailing discourses and social practices. To contribute to this possibility social work is in need of a Foucauldian theory of power relations. Clarification takes place through an examination of the presuppositions that are embedded in social workers' worldviews. However, these developments in social work have their shadow side, and the ethics of using such technologies to help service users such as older people and refugees through complex power relations have been subject to less scrutiny. Indeed, it is perhaps emblematic of contemporary Western culture that social work offers the promise of escape from, rather than a deepened understanding of identity. For example, those who do not conform to the utopian dream appear to have been shunted into a non-participative discourse, bounded by professional surveillance, or the more palatable yet closely related discourse of 'monitoring'. In both cases, it could be suggested that a discourse on dependency has been supplemented, and in some cases replaced by, a discourse on risk, inter alia in regard to ageing, the risk of giving in to an ageing body, the risk of thereby being excluded from one's retirement community, the risk of being too poor to maintain a consumer lifestyle, the risk of being excluded from participation through incapacity that has been externally assessed, the risk of being abused, the risk of control being taken out of one's hands and the risk of tokenism in partnership.

## Study questions

- 1 How relevant is Foucauldian social theory to the study of social work?
- 2 What do you understand by Foucault's concept of 'power'?
- 3 What are the merits and weaknesses of Foucault's concepts of bio-politics, governmentality, resistance, and surveillance to social work practice?

## GLOSSARY

**Biopower** This emerged as a coherent political technology in the seventeenth century. It has two poles or components. First is the pole of scientific categories of human beings (think of species, population, race, gender, sexual practices, etc.). This pole is tied to the practice of confession.

**Governmentality** Can be understood as the way in which governments try to produce the citizen best suited to fulfil their policies as well as the organised practices (mentalities,

rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed. For Foucault, governmentality involved the ‘art of government’, that is to say the techniques and strategies by which a society was rendered governable.

**Surveillance** A Foucauldian term (often discussed as a ‘panopticon’ or ‘gaze’) which signifies that people are constantly but unobtrusively being engulfed in a web of watching in which their actions are being observed and monitored. Put simply, surveillance is the monitoring of the behaviour, activities, or other changing information, usually of people, for the purpose of influencing, managing, directing, or protecting them.

## FURTHER READING

As well as his own works, there are an immense number of scholarly publications on and about Foucault. There are several excellent biographies which are a good place to start for those unfamiliar with his life and work, among them Burchell et al. (1991), Deleuze (1988), Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983), Eribon (1991), Miller (1993), and Macey (1994).

Dean (1994) outlines Foucault’s theory on moral regulation, government, and self-formation and Dean (1999) develops Foucault’s theory of governmentality which he first outlined in *Discipline and Punish* (1977).

Fournier (1999) develops the analysis of professionalism as a disciplinary mechanism and Leonard’s (1997) *Postmodern Welfare* applies these ideas to the institution of welfare.

Several authors have applied Foucauldian thinking to social work including Chambon et al. (1999) and Margolin (1997). Biggs and Powell (2001) offer a Foucauldian analysis of old age, further developed in Powell and Chamberlain (2012).

# 5

## JUDITH BUTLER

BRID FEATHERSTONE AND LORRAINE GREEN

### INTRODUCTION

Judith Butler is Maxine Elliot Professor in Rhetoric, Comparative Literature and Women's Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She received her PhD in philosophy from Yale in 1984 and her dissertation was subsequently published as *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian reflections in twentieth century France* (1987), but her second book, published in 1990 and entitled *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, was to make her the most cited feminist academic of the 1990s. The book sold over 100,000 copies internationally and even inspired an intellectual fanzine, 'Judy'. Since 1990, she has written a range of influential books (see the References section at the end of this book). *The Judith Butler Reader* (Salih with Butler, 2004) gives an overview of key themes from all but her most recent works.

While it is the early challenging analyses of work on sex, gender and sexuality for which she is most well known, her later work continues to develop such analyses, but has seen her take on broader ethical and political questions, partly in response to developments such as 9/11, US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Israeli policies towards the Palestinians. She contributes to the fields of philosophy, ethics, humanities, gender and sexuality studies and queer theory. It is important to note, however, that she consistently interrogates disciplinary boundaries, including those within which she has been placed herself.

Politically, Butler has always expressed an allegiance to feminism, while interrogating many feminist claims. As indicated, she has taken a public stance in relation to contemporary political issues. A key theme is her concern with how processes of recognition and silencing contribute to make certain lives not only unliveable but also ungrievable. Her own battle to adopt a son challenged the Californian courts' categorisation of a 'parent' and she has been active around AIDS.



As a girl of 14 experiencing same-sex desires, she became aware of what could and could not be publicly acknowledged. Her work is, however, deconstructive of identities or categories and challenges ‘the frames of reference within which people speak, think, and live subject categories’ (Salih, 2004: 2). Thus, there is no recourse to a straightforward occupation of categories, such as ‘woman’ or ‘lesbian’. Indeed, she asks, ‘What is a human?’ in order to disrupt and critique the currently constituted social world, where she considers responses to such a question are given too straightforwardly and constituted through the violence of exclusion. Committed to ‘radical democratic’ practices, she asks her readers to engage in ‘rumination’ and critique in order to challenge the most basic of issues, such as who is recognised as human.

Butler cautions against expecting ‘radical accessibility’ from her work as it sets itself ‘the difficult task of rethinking and reconfiguring the possible within political theorizing’ (Salih, 2004: 2). Her work is often criticised for its inaccessibility and her philosophy background means that it can be difficult for those without such a background to engage with her work. However, she does return to core themes, allowing readers the chance to revisit key ideas. Moreover, we suggest that her most recent work – particularly that inspired by specific political developments – seems more accessible.

## KEY IDEAS

We explore Butler’s work in relation to themes that are integrally linked but, for the sake of clarity, dealt with discretely. These are the deconstruction of sex, gender and sexuality; and recognition and ‘the human’.

## SEX, GENDER AND SEXUALITY

*Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990) deals with the interconnections between sex, gender and sexuality, tracing how hegemonic heterosexuality is created through the simultaneous, yet fictitious, but fused co-construction of binary sex and gender within a heterosexual matrix.

To contextualise this work, prior to the 1970s, the assumption that one’s gender identity could be read from one’s biology was dominant in both academic and wider discourses. However, the emergence of ‘second-wave’ feminism, within the context of the rise of many civil rights (identity) movements, was to challenge such an assumption. A flowering of feminist scholarship ensued, documenting women’s disadvantage and inequalities.

Anne Oakley (1972) theorised a clear division between *sex* – the biological positioning of one as male or female – and *gender* – the social construction of femininity and masculinity. Although Simone de Beauvoir’s (1993 [1949]) earlier book *The Second Sex* established important groundwork, a key aspect of the context in which Oakley’s claims were being made was that of the emergence of a wider feminist movement. The emergence of a movement, challenging accepted ideas about sexuality, was also germane here. Therefore, between the 1970s and early 1990s, there was recognition of the socially constructed nature of gendered and sexual identities. Postmodernist and some psychoanalytic writers did contribute to a questioning

of the binary distinction between sex and gender, implied in analyses such as Oakley's (see, for example, Flax, 1990). The connection between sex, gender and the compulsory nature of heterosexuality was also made.

While the publication of *Gender Trouble* by Butler in 1990 must be seen within such contexts, it was to take matters much further and provide a theoretical, troubling and impassioned critique that was to prove controversial and highly influential.

Butler's *Gender Trouble* is a theoretical bricolage that weaves together ideas from philosophy, psychoanalysis and history. A key argument is that we have so much difficulty subdividing sex and gender because they are one and the same thing (Butler, 1990: 7):

If the immutable character of sex is contested, then perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender, indeed perhaps it was already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.

According to Butler, we cannot think about or even conceive of the body prior to gender because there is no sexed body or 'I' prior to gender and to discourse. The ontological 'truth' of gender is achieved through performative iterations that become inscribed on the body and the mind. It is repeated and often painful and involuntary performativity that simultaneously creates and constitutes our understandings of a 'natural', sexed, gendered and heterosexual body and mind.

Butler invokes the notion of male drag and its performed exaggerations to show that there is no natural origin of gender. She argues that an analysis of drag exposes gender's artificiality and constructs gender as always a chimera – 'copy to copy' rather than 'copy to original'. Patrick White's (2003) excellent analysis of how the blind were gendered and heterosexualised through blind-specific sex education in the 1970s and 1980s also reinforces Butler's claims.

Butler uses de Beauvoir's claim that one is not born a woman but becomes one as her starting point, but also draws from Foucauldian poststructuralist theory (see Chapter 4 on Foucault for a more detailed analysis) and Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Monique Wittig, among others. Like Foucault, she is anti-foundationalist conceptually in that she attributes the body with no original desires or expressions. Butler takes up Foucault's notion of discourse (a regime of assumed and hegemonic 'truth' constructed through a multiplicity of practices, law, ideology, language, beliefs and behaviour) to explain how binary positions in the context of heterosexuality are produced as 'natural'. Butler (1990) sees the subject and subjectivity as constituted by and within discourse – in this case, the discourse of hegemonic heterosexuality, within which stabilised gender identity is created and sustained.

Butler explains how the fictitious co-construction of sex and gender within a rigidly heterosexual matrix produces anomalous and unintelligible positions. These are nonetheless inhabited but are frequently derided and marginalised because they are seen as unintelligible – incomprehensible and outside 'normal' consciousness – and abject. One example might be a biological man who does not want 'gender reassignment' surgery – that is, he does not identify as a transsexual (a woman trapped in a man's body). However, he might want to identify as both a man and a woman without surgery or as possessing multiple genders or a third gender, neither male nor female.

Butler's theorising is complex and multilayered, acting at both the surface and depth levels. Borrowing from Lacan, it explores the power of the symbolic and the phallic signifier in language. It incorporates the corporeal, exploring how the surface of the body is engraved upon and disciplined by performativity. It also brings in the psychic, drawing on both Freud and Lacan to explore the interiorisation of gender in our psyche through bodily inscription and iterative repetitions.

Butler's (1990) radical exposé and deconstruction of gender and sexuality in *Gender Trouble* was inspirational but also troubling as it profoundly threatened the validity of identity politics, such as traditional feminism or traditional gay politics, by destabilising the categories they represent. She saw identity politics as unnecessarily homogenising, monolithic and restrictive, as not recognising differences within one group or multiple oppressions, as well as being a potential instrument of manipulation by oppressive regimes. Her alternative suggestion for challenging naturalised gender and associated and linked hegemonic heterosexuality is to create 'gender trouble' through subversive acts of gender and sexuality that involve parody. This point is returned to again below.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler (1993) extends her analysis out from gender to all those she sees as 'violently excluded'. She pays much more attention to the corporeality of the body and its sexed materialisation. She also emphasises the 'iterative' nature of performativity to dispel criticisms of *Gender Trouble*, which saw her as arguing that gender is a voluntary performance (that is, something which can be done or not done as one wishes). She uses Derrida's notion of iterability to reinforce how gender is sedimented through ritualistic and repeated reiterations that discipline and are inscribed on the body. She argues against the conflation of 'performance' and 'performativity'. *Performativity* is a term drawn from John Austin (1962) and means that the performance or speech can create what it names by its very naming. Gender is not a freely chosen dramaturgical presentation – particularly as the subject is constituted within discourses.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler (1997b) returns to an issue touched on in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*: the taboo on homosexuality. This, she argues, lies below Freud's incest taboo. She claims that the price of a stable heterosexual gender identity is the prohibition of the enactment or admission of desire for anyone of the same sex. She explores how power is psychically incorporated in subject formation, particularly in relation to 'melancholy'. This is a state of loss that, in the taboo, cannot be mourned or grieved for openly because it involves the desire for that which, at a deep psychic level, is illegitimate, abject, taboo and foreclosed:

There are certain kinds of love that are held not to be love, loss that is not held to be loss, that remain in this kind of unthinkable domain or in an ontological shadowy domain; it's not real, it's not real love, it's not real loss . . . that can be linked with some of the work I have done on the *unthinkability* or *ungrievability* of homosexual attachment. (Butler, in Bell, 1999: 170, emphasis in original)

Butler also sees melancholy as strongly indicated in the history of miscegenation and the way that cross-racial sexual relations have been both prohibited and foreclosed. In this book and others, such as *Antigone's Claim*, as well as articles, Butler (2000, 2002) also looks at kinship, lesbian and gay marriage and civil partnerships. She argues that the potentially subversive

nature of gay and lesbian relationships is diluted by the State's acceptance of their validity only if they mimic heterosexual models. However, even then there are limits. For example, Butler (2002: 23; see also Rasmussen, 2006) notes that civil solidarity pacts in France and Germany for gay partners were only given legal recognition as long as gay couples were proscribed from adopting children and accessing reproductive technology: 'For understanding this debate, it is important to recognise how . . . the child of nonheterosexual parents becomes a cathected site for anxieties about cultural purity and cultural transmission'. Butler (2002) also notes, critically, the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis on such developments, in that it lends itself to prescriptive notions of what children require psychically, and she critically aligns herself with feminist psychoanalysts who are rethinking notions such as the Oedipal complex in the light of the diversity of parenting and familial arrangements in contemporary society.

Butler's (2004b) *Undoing Gender* reflects on gender and sexuality, focusing on new kinship, psychoanalysis and the incest taboo, transgender and intersex diagnostic categories, social violence and the task of social transformation. While there is much here that links strongly with themes developed more fully in our next section on recognition and the human, this section focuses on sex, gender and sexuality. She reconsiders her earlier views in *Gender Trouble* with the focus more on the 'undoing' rather than the 'doing' of gender. She argues that she had two aims at the time of writing *Gender Trouble*: to expose the pervasive heterosexism within feminist theory and to try to imagine a world in which those who live at some distance from gender norms might still understand themselves and consider themselves worthy of recognition (Butler, 2004b). She argues that gender is not clearcut or univocal but has been constituted variously as both by different feminisms, despite also being challenged as such by some of those same feminisms. She worries that the frameworks we commit ourselves to, because they have strong explanatory power, may recommit us to seeing sexual difference as inevitable or, indeed, primary, as, she would suggest, feminist Lacanians do.

Butler (2004b) addresses some key criticisms that have been made of her work in relation to agency. Being constituted by and within discourse does not necessarily coincide with being determined or trapped immovably within or by discourse. She sees normative and hegemonic sexual and gender positioning being potentially 'undone' in contexts where psychological survival is at stake in relation to seeing oneself as possessing a valued identity. She also returns to a critique of her work which suggests that in engaging with drag, she reduced politics to parody. She responds that this was, in part, a way to think not only about how gender is performed, but also is resignified through collective terms. Drag artists tend to live in communities where recognition becomes possible and this can work to ward off violence, racism, homophobia and so on. Drag does not exhaust the realm of political possibilities, but it returns us to questions about what is considered 'real' and what can be questioned and rethought.

## RECOGNITION AND 'THE HUMAN'

The notion of 'recognition' runs throughout Butler's work. She argues in *Undoing Gender* (Butler, 2004b: 2) that the Hegelian tradition links desire with recognition and that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable

beings. However, while recognising the importance of the Hegelian tradition, she also suggests that important points have been missed:

The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer 'humanness' on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less than human. (Butler, 2004b: 2)

While this has clear implications for engaging with how the norms that structure intelligible gendered 'positions' and sexualities work, Butler extends out to consider wider questions in terms of who is able to be heard, whose lives can be grieved for and so on.

In *Excitable Speech*, Butler (1997a) examines the power of 'hate speech' to name, subordinate and wound individuals in bodily and psychic ways, thus refusing recognition to persons. She also interrogates the political strategies that can be employed to make subordinated or hitherto unrecognised persons 'heard'. She explores the famous case of Rosa Parks, who, in refusing to give up her seat on a segregated bus to a white person, was commonly seen as playing a pivotal role in the civil rights movement. However, Rosa was carefully chosen by the civil rights movement as a woman of the 'utmost respectability' who could challenge the Establishment while not straying beyond the conventions of femininity (Disch, 1999; Lovell, 2003).

Butler (1997a) is against State censorship or regulation of speech. She argues it is the social context – how language is intended, received and responded to – that is important, not the actual words themselves. One also has to recognise oneself in the naming – a process that draws on the Althusserian notion of hailing or 'interpellation'. She criticises the feminist Catherine MacKinnon for conflating pornographic speech with violent pornography and demanding censorship of such language. Butler (1997a) gives the example of when 'abortion' was seen to constitute an obscene word and was bleeped out and censored from a radio broadcast. This is a clear example of the need for caution about censorship and who it might benefit.

Butler (1997a) distinguishes between illocutionary speech – that which performs an actual act, such as a judge sentencing someone – and perlocutionary speech – speech that may have less definite effects. She suggests that insurrectionary counterspeech (insubordinate use of a derogatory or authoritarian term) should be used to defuse, subvert and challenge the latter. She suggests that subjects should call for justice in the very terms that have been used to disenfranchise them. However, sometimes there is no 'room' for apparent positive resignification, as Anita Hill found in the famous case in the USA that dealt with her claims of sexual harassment by Clarence Thomas. By recounting assertively his sexualised words and intimations in court, she was seen to be a woman standing outside the conventions of femininity and, therefore, not deserving of belief or protection. However, had she taken on the montage of passive victimised femininity, she would have been unable to 'speak' his offensive actions and words and would, therefore, have been equally ineffectual in gaining justice.

In *Precarious Life: The powers of mourning and violence*, Butler (2004a) returned to the question of what and whose is a life worth living and defending, but this time in the context of the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York in 2001. She locates this in the context of global US military, imperial violence, where the lives of those brutalised – for example, in Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq – are glossed over by Western consciousness.

Butler (2004a) asks us to look at questions of humanness and recognise how some lives are mourned and glorified whereas others are rendered invisible. Butler posits an ethics of non-violence and hopefulness through an examination of Emmanuel Lévinas's face of the 'Other'. She advocates a new moralism that is not based on fear, but on recognition of our own and others' vulnerability and interdependence.

Butler is clearly critical of new forms of governmentality in the USA, whereby public fear is politically mobilised to foreclose resistance to US violence and due process in law is evaded, as exemplified by the indefinite detention of people suspected of terrorism in Guantanamo Bay. In her work on Israel and Palestine, i.e. in *Precarious Life* and various articles, such as Butler (2003), she also shows how the label 'anti-Semitic' impedes discussion about and potential criticism of the USA and Israel. Reflecting on Israeli government policies, she highlights how the positioning of victim is shifting and ambivalent – one can be an oppressor in one sense at one particular moment in time and/or a victim in another. As Angela McRobbie (2006: 73) contends, this overt stance is not just a theoretical exposé but also a passionate and brave position to take:

In a situation in the US academy, where to engage critically with US support for Israel is to put oneself in some position of vulnerability, if not danger, we might suggest that Butler here is (not cynically, indeed passionately) utilizing a strategy which permits the possibility of critical intervention.

Butler's (2005) most recent book, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, examines what it means to lead an ethical life under problematic social and linguistic conditions. She offers an outline for ethical practice, although it is important to note her consistent refusal (and her explicit allegiance to Foucault in this regard) to offer prescriptive political programmes. She argues that when one gives an account of oneself, one is not merely relaying information through an indifferent medium. In arguments that have resonance with currents within sociological thought that have influenced social work (see Chapter 15), Butler (2005: 130) emphasises that the 'account is an act – situated within a larger practice of acts – that one performs for, to, even *on* another, an allocutory deed, an acting for, and in the face of, the other and sometimes by virtue of the language provided by the other'. The 'I' giving the account has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation or set of relations to a set of norms. She refutes fears that this means there is no concept of the subject that can serve as the ground for moral agency and accountability. If the 'I' is not at one with moral norms, for example, a process of ethical deliberation finds itself embroiled in the task of critique.

Butler (2005) also suggests that one gives an account of oneself to an other and every accounting takes place within a scene of address. The scene of address, or what might be called the 'rhetorical conditions for responsibility', means that the question is not restricted to whether or not my account of myself is adequate, but rather whether or not I establish a relationship with the one to whom my account is addressed and whether or not both parties are sustained and altered by the scene of address.

The 'You' who is addressed by 'I' is variable and imaginary at the same time as it is bounded and stubbornly there. She questions whether or not there can be telling without 'transference' in the psychoanalytic sense. I tell a story to you and we consider the story together, but I am doing something with this telling, acting on you, and this telling is also doing something to me,

acting on me in ways that I may well not understand. The latter point is a key to this book: one can never be known fully by oneself and, in asking the other ‘Who are you?’, the other will not be captured by any answer that is given. We will not achieve closure in relation to self-knowledge or knowledge of the other. The notion of responsibility, therefore, has to be rethought – it cannot be tied to the conceit of a fully transparent self. To take responsibility for oneself is to avow the limits of any self-understanding. As Patrick White (2003) suggests in his endorsement of the book, the height of self-knowledge may consist of the realisation that, in matters of the self, insight is perilous, perception flawed and judgement weak. Moreover, it cautions against the conceit of ever fully knowing (and, therefore, perhaps being able to sum up or dismiss) the other.

Drawing particularly from the work of Lévinas, Butler (2005: 91) argues that we need to rethink our concept of responsibility in relation to acts by another. We do not take responsibility for their acts as if we authored their acts, but we do affirm the unfreedom at the heart of our relations:

I cannot disavow my relation to the Other regardless of what the Other does, regardless of what I might will. Indeed, responsibility is not a matter of cultivating a will, but of making use of an unwilling susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other. Whatever the Other has done, the Other still makes an ethical demand upon me, has a ‘face’ to which I am obliged to respond – meaning that I am, as it were, precluded from revenge by virtue of a relation I never chose. (Butler, 2005: 91)

None of us is fully bounded, utterly separate, but, rather, in situations that we did not choose, *given over* to each other. While this can be intolerable, it is a reminder of our common vulnerability.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

The space available here precludes a consideration of the multiple critiques that have been made of Butler’s work in terms of its theoretical premises and political effects (see, for example, Benhabib et al. [1995] in relation to her early work). It is important to note that, within her own work, as it has developed, she has thoughtfully engaged with critics over the years.

We think that Butler’s work carries important possibilities for social work, although we also see some limitations. Such a radically deconstructive thinker clearly poses great difficulties if one wants to advance political claims on the basis of stable categories, such as women, lesbians and so on. Her reluctance to foreclose categories, but, instead, to keep them open to resignification and contestations (for example, the category of woman or gay), is welcome and problematic – advancing category claims is necessary in terms of specific issues, as she would recognise. Moreover, while she gives visibility to those often excluded from progressive campaigns – such as transsexual and transgender people – she does not devote attention, in the main, to the lack of recognition suffered by those who are economically vulnerable and the ‘mundane’ everyday pain of many of those who come to the doors of social workers. This is linked to the abstract nature of many of her analyses – the everyday world does not appear much in terms of exploring domestic violence, poverty and so on.

This does not mean that her mode of analysis, albeit often critical and partial, cannot be applied by others in order to understand these issues. Butler's theories of sex and gender, performativity and melancholy have, for example, been used to try and understand certain aspects and representations of disability (Shildrick and Price, 1996; Stocker, 2001), teen motherhood (Lessa, 2006) and the complexities of love and attachment within violent, but enduring relationships (Narayan, 2005). However, Butler's abstractness can be rather frustrating, particularly for those looking for readymade analyses and solutions to the ephemerally complex and multifaceted problems social workers routinely experience.

We find Butler's emphasis on loose coalitions of people – for example, women temporarily joining collectives for particular purposes – opens up possibilities for drawing more people into particular battles rather than signing up to universalist programmes. This is not unique to her, though, as it has been advocated by other feminists over the years. Moreover, her attempt to 'jam' the theoretical machinery is highly persuasive, especially in the sterile intellectual context of social work where dogma has often ruled in relation to anti-oppressive practice. For those of us who find ourselves caught between the Scylla of moral certainty, which often seems to characterise analyses promoting anti-oppressive social work, and the Charybdis of government-sponsored sanitised technical rationality within social work, Butler opens up possibilities for other kinds of conversations.

*Giving an Account of Oneself* attempts to think about what we can do within the limitations of self-knowledge and a knowledge of others and, moreover, to think about such limitations as holding important possibilities in terms of recognising our vulnerability. *Precarious Life*, too, is premised on recognition of others' and our own interdependency and vulnerability.

A difficulty with these works, however, is that, despite her interest in psychoanalytic theory, she rarely engages with concrete concerns about whether or not there are particular kinds of care practices that can facilitate the construction of those who use their shared vulnerability to build connections rather than destroy the 'other' (see, for example, Hollway, 2006). This is a serious omission for social work practitioners, who often engage with unloved and unrecognised people who, in turn, behave in damaging and destructive ways towards others.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

We would suggest that the greatest significance of Butler's work for social work practice lies in the asking of important questions. Thus, we can engage with and recognise the experience of those who are marginalised and excluded and expand the categories beyond what is usually included in social work. In particular, Butler supports those who wish to challenge heteronormativity and validate the lives and loves of gay, lesbian and intersex people.

Butler returns us to a tradition in social work that asserts our common humanity, but, at the very same time that we recognise our humanness, she asks us to question the grounds on which we have constructed what it is to be human. She challenges us to recognise our strangeness to ourselves and our familiarity to others as well as our strangeness to others and our familiarity to ourselves. Thus, we see her as opening up and supporting possibilities for the kinds of critical humane practices advocated by others in this book.



## Study questions

- 1 How can Judith Butler's work help to 'shake up' the pervasive heterosexism of much social work theory?
- 2 Recognition is an important concept in helping to move beyond the dogma and certainties of anti-oppressive theory as it is currently used in much of the social work literature. Discuss.
- 3 Who can be heard and who can be grieved for? Where are the silences in Butler's own work and how can the everyday practices of social work enrich her analyses?

## GLOSSARY

**Compulsory heterosexuality** Requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from the feminine term. The 'unity' of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to make identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality.

**Performativity** Does not equate with performance – a point that Butler has consistently argued when responding to critics. Gender is a doing, not an essence, and there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender. The identity is constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results.

**Recognition** It is only through the experience of recognition by others that we become constituted as socially viable beings. However, the terms by which we are recognised as human are socially articulated and changeable.

## FURTHER READING

The best introduction to the work of Judith Butler is Salih and Butler's (2004) *The Judith Butler Reader*.

# PART II

## THEORIES



# 6

## ATTACHMENT THEORY

DAVID HOWE

### INTRODUCTION

Social work has always been concerned about the development and well-being of children exposed to poverty, parental stress, maltreatment, rejection and abandonment. So any theory and practice with things to say about how children fare under conditions of adversity and what might be done to help is bound to be of interest. Historically, psychodynamic theories and most branches of developmental psychology have footed the bill. However, one theory in particular has recently stolen a march on many of the traditional applied psychologies: attachment theory. Indeed, modern attachment theory now concerns itself not just with the psychological development of young children but the behaviour, relationship skills and mental states of adults too. In short, attachment offers a lifecourse perspective (Howe, 2011). This being the case, attachment theory and practice now have things to say about the behaviour, mental health and well-being of children, young people, adults, parents, couples and older people.

The attachment story begins with the work of John Bowlby (1907–90). He was a British child and family psychiatrist who, during the 1930s, also trained as a psychoanalyst. Along with social work colleagues, particularly James Robertson, Bowlby held a strong belief that healthy development depended on the quality of children's early parenting and family life. In other words, children's psychosocial development was the product of their actual, lived experiences with their caregivers, siblings and other family members. This interest in the reality of children's relationship experiences put Bowlby at odds with the psychoanalytic community of the time, who believed that much of children's development depended on a subtle understanding of their libidinal drives and fantasy life (both acting independently of actual experiences of the psychosocial environmental). Showing great strength of character, Bowlby continued to plough his own furrow, often in the face of fierce criticism and dismissal from the majority of psychoanalysts.

After returning from army medical service in 1945, Bowlby joined the Tavistock Clinic in London as Head of 'The Department for Children and Parents'. His growing conviction was that the quality of the parent–child relationship was profoundly important for development and mental health. Working closely with James Robertson, the two collaborators carried out research studies and practice innovations around the issue of parent–child separations, including real-time observations of children. One of the outcomes of these studies was a series of powerful films showing how children reacted to parental loss and separation, including *A Two-year-old Goes to Hospital* (Robertson, 1953). In 1951, Bowlby also wrote a major report for the World Health Organization on the mental health of homeless children in the aftermath of World War II.

It was while thinking about the behavioural distress shown by young children separated from their parents, particularly when separation also involved being placed in unfamiliar surroundings or with strangers, that Bowlby began to fashion what is now referred to as attachment. To make sense of the distress and upset displayed by children at times of danger, loss and separation, Bowlby drew on a vast range of ideas from many different sciences. These included the animal behavioural, ethological and evolutionary sciences, developmental psychology, object relations theory, control and systems theory and the cognitive sciences. One of the products of Bowlby's pioneering analysis was his famous trilogy: *Attachment and Loss* (1969, 1973, 1980). Throughout much of his life, Bowlby also collaborated with the North American developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth (1913–99). She helped develop and extend many of Bowlby's ideas (see, for example, Ainsworth et al., 1978). Over the last 40 years, attachment theory has continued to grow and expand, informing not just developmental psychology, the developmental neurosciences, ethology and the evolutionary sciences, but also many fields of practice, including clinical psychology, psychiatry, counselling, and of course social work.

## KEY IDEAS

Originally inspired by the animal behavioural sciences and evolutionary theory, Bowlby explored the kinds of innate behaviours young vulnerable mammals need to have in place at birth, and thereafter, if they were to survive the real dangers, mostly in the form of predators, the natural world presented. Most of these behaviours revolve around staying close to the mother, the family and the social group, and if separated, deploying behaviours that get the young mammal back into close proximity with parents, family or group. A young lamb, for instance, suddenly finding itself separated from its mother will experience fear and distress. Being apart from the ewe exposes the lamb to real dangers (wolves and eagles). Fear and distress activate an inbuilt physiological system, the *attachment system*, which, once activated, triggers *attachment behaviour*, the goal of which is to recover proximity with the primary caregiver where safety and protection lie. In the case of the lamb, attachment behaviours include bleating (a distress signal to alert the mother) and running back as quickly as possible to the ewe. Upon return to the mother, the first thing the distressed lamb is likely to do is suckle. This provides comfort and helps regulate the lamb's physiologically aroused state. Many young mammals (puppies, baby monkeys and human infants) do not have locomotion at birth, so many of their attachment behaviours, when triggered, involve the

production of distress cries (if you can't get to your mother, get her to come to you), clinging, protest and eye contact. When the attachment behaviours have achieved their *set goal* of reuniting the infant with the parent, the parent typically offers a range of soothing behaviours to help regulate the baby's distressed physiology and aroused emotions. These regulating behaviours include licking, cuddling and stroking.

In order to understand human infants and their attachment behaviour, we need to remind ourselves that we had our origins as a species round about 200,000 years ago on the plains of North East Africa. While biologically more or less the same as modern-day men and women, our ancient ancestors lived in small social groups. They were hunter-gatherers. The biggest dangers for babies, particularly if they became separated from their parents, were thought to be leopards, hyenas and possibly adults from other hunter-gatherer groups, that is, strangers. From an evolutionary perspective, whenever young children feel frightened or in danger (lost, separated, large animal or stranger rapidly approaching, unexpected loud noise, darkness or feeling ill or in pain), their attachment systems are instinctively activated. This triggers one or more of a number of attachment behaviours, all designed either to recover proximity with primary caregivers or maintain closeness with them. Thus at times of distress, young children might be seen to cry, cling, protest, run back or seek visual contact. Smiling can also serve as an attachment behaviour if it helps keep a caregiver engaged, particularly if the child is anxious about loss and separation.

Babies are born social. Although at birth babies do show some preference for their mothers (their face, voice and smell), it is only through repeated and regular interaction and growing familiarity that caregivers gradually achieve the status of attachment figures, that is, the people to whom the young child's attachment behaviours are directed at times of need, anxiety or danger. Attachment refers to an enduring *affectional bond* one person forms to another. By seven or eight months of age, most children show clearcut attachment behaviours. Children can have more than one attachment figure. Any adult who is regularly involved with the child's care and plays and has fun with the child, and who comforts the child is likely to become an attachment figure. This might include the mother, the father, perhaps a grandmother, an older sister, maybe even a key-worker at nursery school. These several attachment figures are hierarchically organised so a mother, say, is likely to be the child's primary attachment figure, but if mum were out of the room and the child fell over and hurt his or her knee, he or she would happily hobble to dad for a kiss and cuddle to make it better. As children are smallest, most vulnerable and most dependent during their first few years of life, this is the time when their attachment systems are most frequently and intensively activated.

## THE CO-REGULATION OF AFFECT

The distressed child's return to closeness with the attachment figure is itself comforting, but over and above this, sensitive caregivers also seek to soothe and regulate the aroused child's upset. Regulation can take place at the somatic and sensory level. This might include rocking, stroking, kissing, eye contact, soft words, a concerned look, a changed nappy or an extra layer of clothes. However, of particular importance is the caregiver's willingness and ability to recognise and regulate the child's emotional distress. Indeed, many attachment theorists talk of *attachment as a theory of affect regulation* in the context of close relationships.

The skill and sensitivity with which parents regulate their children's arousal, or respond to their joy, has profound implications for children's neurological, physiological and psychosocial development. This is why the quality of the parent-child relationship in which regulation takes place matters. Attachment therefore has close links with other branches of the developmental sciences that recognise the importance of early parent-child relationships and the co-regulation of stress, including the developmental neurosciences, epigenetics, social psychology and developmental psychology.

One of the key characteristics of 'good enough' care is the degree of sensitivity and ability of parents to recognise and tune into their infants' needs and emotional states in ways that help children make sense of, and manage their own feelings. This mutual 'psychofeedback' (Gerhardt, 2004) can also be described as harmonious parenting. Babies' signals are recognised and read. Parental responses are in tune with infant rhythms. Environments are created in which young children derive a sense of the consequences of their own behaviour (Bowlby, 1997: 346). Communication (words, facial expressions and body language) is two-way: babies recognise and respond to their caregivers' communications just as much as caregivers recognise and respond to their babies' signals. The more open, relaxed, congruent, contingent and collaborative the communication, the more likely it will be that parent and child will be able to read and respond appropriately to each other's needs (Beebe et al., 2010).

It is equally important for caregivers to recognise and enhance their child's positive emotional states. The joy of play, the pleasure of shared eye contact, the fun of singing songs together, and the thrill when a new skill is learned give a boost to the security of the infant's attachment. The positive emotions also help the brain deal with stress, and lay down rich neurological structures that enhance children's resilience and ability to think about feelings and regulate affect (Schore, 2001). Early close relationships have the power to shape the brain, developing our very sense of a psychological self. The more young children are thought about, treated and enjoyed as independent, complex psychological beings, the more they become independent, complex psychological beings (Fonagy et al., 2002).

And so it is that children who are helped to regulate their arousal in the context of a sensitive and responsive caregiving relationship gradually learn to regulate themselves physiologically, emotionally and cognitively (Perry and Szalavitz, 2006). They get better at recognising, reflecting on and managing their own and other people's feelings and behaviour. As a result, they become less reactive and impulsive, and more reflective and thoughtful. Their social skills improve and emotional intelligence grows. Secure caregivers are, therefore, those parents who are willing and able to interact with their young children as psychological partners. They are happy to explain what is going on to young children in terms of their own and other people's psychological states, how feelings affect behaviour, and how someone else's behaviour affects other people's feelings. We could say good enough parents are training their children to be everyday psychologists, astute observers and interpreters of the social scene.

## INTERNAL WORKING MODEL

Over the first few years of life, young children begin to develop more conscious, cognitive understandings or models of themselves, their primary caregivers and other people. For example, secure children who feel loved, valued and praised begin to develop an internal working

model of the self as lovable, loving, worthy and effective. These *mental representations* refer to the kind of memories, experiences, outcomes, feelings and knowledge about what generally happens in relationships, particularly with attachment figures at times of need and distress. For young children, attachment figures are a particularly important bit of their environment of which to make sense. With these mental models of how others are likely to behave and how the self is likely to feel, children's attachment behaviours are *organised* along learning theory principles to increase the availability, proximity and responsiveness of their carers and reduce negative affect. They develop behavioural *strategies*, albeit unconsciously, to recover feelings of security when they feel anxious or frightened. In time, these mental representations begin to guide the child's expectations, beliefs and behaviour in all important relationships. Cognitive models of the environment influence what the child remembers, feels and sees as he or she interacts with the world. It is the memories, thoughts and feelings and any defensive behaviours associated with them that are evoked in current relationships, particularly those that seem as if they have the same character and 'feel' of key, early attachment relationships. Internal working models, therefore, act as a cognitive bias when attachment-related situations are experienced and appraised. Based on learning from past experiences with, and expectations of the caregiver, these models promote more efficient behaviour when having to deal with current social environments.

As attachment relationships become psychologically internalised, the quality of a child's social experiences becomes a mental property of the child. Thus, over time, internal working models begin to organise experience rather than be organised by it. Our personalities begin to acquire a regular, enduring quality. We begin to expect certain things of ourselves and of others, while others feel that we are becoming more familiar and predictable to them. For example, if the individual's experience of key relationships has been one of rejection and hurt, the world will be viewed as unpredictable, unreliable, not to be trusted, one in which there is little safety or comfort.

## ATTACHMENT BEHAVIOURAL STRATEGIES

Parents and caregivers will vary in their sensitivity, interest and love for their children. Parenting may be warm and loving, cold and rejecting, or neglectful and hostile. Depending on the character of the parent's caregiving, the attachment behavioural strategies that help children stay safe, engaged and regulated will be different for each child. In effect, once an attachment has been formed, various caregiving environments will demand different attachment strategies, each based on 'the generation of rules for *if, when, where, and how much* attachment behaviour should be exhibited with relation to a specific attachment figure' (Main et al., 2005: 257, emphasis in original). Each *adaptive* response and behavioural strategy, therefore, reflects the quality of the attachment relationship. An infant's attachment behaviours and strategies represent his or her best attempts to 'thrive and survive' in the context of the particular parent-child relationship (Crittenden, 2008: 16). These attachment behaviours make sense in terms of how children can best maintain some kind of safe proximity to their caregivers at times of need, no matter how unpredictable, insensitive or cold the parenting. Each pattern of attachment behaviours represents a particular *strategy*, including those of a defensive nature, adopted by children to help them cope with feelings of distress and anxiety



triggered in situations of perceived need, danger and threat. Whatever the quality of the parent–child relationship, the set goal of any attachment behaviour is to bring the child into proximity with his or her attachment figure where safety and protection should (but may not) lie. In the case of warm, responsive parenting, attachment behaviour also leads to comfort and understanding. This produces feelings of security. In contrast, when caregiving is less attuned and less responsive, children have to develop psychological strategies that attempt to ward off anxiety.

These different defensive, adaptive strategies produce a limited number of distinct attachment behavioural patterns, each shaped by the particular quality of the caregiving environment generated by the attachment figure (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Each pattern is associated with a particular type of internal working model whose characteristics have formed defensively in response to the attachment figure's caregiving which may be sensitive or insensitive, accepting or rejecting, cooperative or intrusive, or predictable or uncertain. If the caregiving remains consistent over time, whether it is sensitive or not, the internal working model generated by the child in that caregiving relationship is also likely to remain relatively unchanged through into adulthood. Four basic types or patterns of attachment have been recognised: secure, insecure–avoidant, insecure–ambivalent and disorganised.

## SECURE PATTERNS OF ATTACHMENT (TYPE B)

When distressed, securely attached children approach their carers directly and positively, they know that their upset will be recognised and responded to *unconditionally* with comfort and understanding. Secure babies happily play and explore but readily access their caregiver should the need arise. They trust others and recognise and value cooperative behaviour. Caregiving which is responsive, reliable, consistent and predictable allows children to develop an internal working model of the *self* as lovable and loving. The child feels effective, autonomous and competent. Self-esteem is high and resilience strong. *Other people* are experienced as attuned, loving, available, cooperative, predictable and dependable. The child is able to express his or her need for protection and comfort freely, directly and without distortion. If the pattern continues into adulthood, the secure (or autonomous) adult has a balanced approach to close relationships in which the individual feels comfortable with intimacy and autonomy, or relatedness and independence. The secure type is generally associated with good mental health.

## AVOIDANT PATTERNS OF ATTACHMENT (TYPE A)

When parents rebuff expressions of need, vulnerability and dependence, children are likely to develop attachment strategies that are *avoidant*. From the children's point of view, whenever emotional demands are made of parents, the caregiving feels rejecting and controlling. If children display distress or appear vulnerable, it seems to annoy or distress their caregiver. Displays of attachment are denied or dismissed by the parent. Any display of overt need actually leads to a decrease in the caregiver's availability. The caregiving is, therefore, experienced

as *consistently unresponsive* to negative affect. From the child's point of view, the best defensive strategy is to *minimise overt displays of attachment behaviour and displays of negative affect*. Paradoxically, maintaining proximity to the attachment figure is best achieved or maintained by avoiding displays of distress and attachment behaviours. Children who do not make too many demands on their caregivers might just be tolerated by an otherwise rejecting parent. Children learn to contain feelings. Their *affect is over-regulated*. A high threshold of arousal is required before attachment behaviour is elicited in avoidant children. Thus, 'infants who adopt a Type A response may mislead their parents into thinking they are OK – when they are actually uncomfortable' (Crittenden, 2008: 24). Avoidant children either deny or do not communicate their distress or vulnerability. However, play and being occupied are acceptable to caregivers who reject dependency. These defensive strategies help children contain need and mask distress. Children classified as avoidant have an internal working model in which the *self* is represented as unloved and unlovable, although self-reliant. *Other people* are cognitively represented as rejecting, unloving and unavailable if needs arise or emotional demands are made of them.

If the close relationship environment remains unchanged, the underlying expectations and worries of avoidant individuals continue into adulthood. There is anxiety that making emotional demands on others or appearing vulnerable is likely to lead to rejection or ridicule. To be rejected is painful and to be avoided. The best way not to get hurt and yet remain involved is to be self-reliant, emotionally independent and not to appear weak. This is a tight, tense strategy and comes at some interpersonal, psychological and mental health cost. There is desire for intimacy but a reluctance to lower one's defences and let go. The result is either to keep one's emotional distance or be aggressive, verbally or physically, if emotional demands become too great.

## AMBIVALENT PATTERNS OF ATTACHMENT (TYPE C)

Children whose parents are *insensitive, unreliable, anxious, uncertain* and *inconsistently responsive* develop strategies that are described as *ambivalent*. The ambivalent strategy *maximises displays of attachment behaviour* as children seek to remain close and provoke attention. By exaggerating and overplaying their needs and distress, children increase the chances of getting a response from otherwise under-responsive carers. Their *emotions are under-regulated*. Their threshold of arousal is low. It does not take much anxiety or stress to produce intense displays of protest, demand and upset. The attachment behaviours of ambivalent children are those of an angry approach. They are inclined to whine, cling, fret, complain, provoke and shout. Children doubt they are worthy of interest. Thus, 'infants who adopt a Type C strategy may mislead their parent into thinking they are very distressed or exaggerating their distress in order to control the parent', when, in fact, they are only somewhat distressed (Crittenden, 2008: 24). The ambivalent child's internal working model represents the *self* as of low worth, ineffective, deprived and dependent. *Other people* are experienced as depriving, withholding, neglecting, uninterested, unpredictable and unreliable. The only way to get noticed is to make sure all emotions, positive and negative, are played at full volume.

Because of their distressed dependence on other people's emotional availability, adults classified as ambivalent are often termed *preoccupied* or *anxious*. Their anxiety means that relationships tend to be conducted with emotions running high. Partners in such relationships can find the anxious other exhausting and they may want to quit, thus bringing about the very thing that drives the ambivalent person's anxiety – fear of abandonment and relationship breakdown. So, although there is a preoccupation with other people's availability, relationships are unstable and often very turbulent. The ambivalent self continues to be viewed negatively. There are constant complaints of emotional deprivation and that no one cares. There is a reluctance to try new tasks or pick up fresh challenges as failure risks abandonment. Motivation and concentration, therefore, tend to be low. There is a tendency to ruminate on distress-related thoughts and dwell on the more negative aspects of self (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2004: 26). Health worries are exaggerated and there is an increased risk of mental health problems, particularly those related to mood disorders.

## DISORGANISED (TYPE D) ATTACHMENTS

It is in the very act of caregiving that some parents are catapulted into either a hostile or helpless state of mind as their own attachment needs get activated. Parents find themselves trying to deal with their own unresolved feelings of loss, anxiety, anger and fear and not their children's attachment needs. This makes parents dangerous (abusive, neglectful, or both) (Howe, 2005). When the cause of children's fear is the behaviour – or condition – of the attachment figure him or herself, it is very difficult for babies to find any strategy that increases feelings of safety or comfort. Parents who are abusive or neglectful, hostile or helpless, drugged or drunk, who reject and traumatise their children, bring about a state of fear in young minds. Fear activates the attachment system, triggering attachment behaviour, the goal of which is to gain proximity with the ostensible source of safety and comfort, the attachment figure. But as the attachment figure is the source of danger and cause of fear, approaching the attachment figure only serves to increase distress and arousal. Young abused and neglected children, therefore, find it difficult to find, or organise a behavioural strategy that increases feelings of safety – hence the classification *disorganised attachment*. They remain aroused, unregulated and highly distressed. Chronic stress is a major risk factor for a range of developmental impairments, including behavioural, mental and physical health problems. In the internal working models of children classified as disorganised, the *self* feels frightened, alone, ignored, dangerous, sometimes powerful and even bad. *Other people* are represented as confusing and contradictory, frightening and frightened, hostile and helpless, dangerous and unpredictable. In short, a disorganised attachment indicates an undermining and a disorganisation of the mental self, and the lowest level of reflective function (Fonagy and Target, 2005: 336).

With maturation, disorganised children do gradually develop a range of more organised self-protective, defensive strategies: if my caregiver cannot keep me safe, then it is up to me to keep myself safe, comforted and self-soothed. In effect, during the preschool years, a degree of developmental reorganisation begins to take place (Lyons-Ruth, 1996: 68). Other people are experienced by children as either irresponsible, or helpless and needy, or potentially dangerous

and in need of constant monitoring requiring extreme vigilance. In order to survive, children attempt to organise their behaviour in various ways to try to increase parental availability, improve parental predictability and reduce parental danger in what seems to be a frighteningly unpredictable caregiving environment. Children have to see the self as competent and in control, even though their own attachment needs are neither acknowledged nor met. Not feeling in control is extremely stressful. Children, therefore, begin to develop strategies to increase their experience of feeling less helpless and more in control. The bottom line of these *controlling* strategies is safety and survival.

By trying to deal with the caregiver's needs or dangerous behaviour defensively, controlling behaviours represent a way for children to remain safe in a relationship with an otherwise helpless or hostile parent. For example, in the case of parents who are drug addicts, alcoholics or the victims of domestic violence children might develop parentified strategies based on protecting or comforting the parent. In the case of dangerous parents, children might seek to control, diminish, ignore or avoid them. So, by the age of three or four, although maltreated children may still show disorganised attachment behaviour under stress, they increasingly deploy more organised attachment strategies (usually some extreme form of the avoidant or ambivalent type) around the issue of control (Main and Cassidy, 1988). Controlling strategies consist of either *punitive* behaviours (children behave in a bossy, rejecting, humiliating, sarcastic, aggressive and manipulative way towards their caregiver), or *caregiving* behaviours (children fuss over, worry about, nervously try to cheer up, assist, nurture and protect the caregiver). These behaviours are often referred to as examples of *role-reversal*, that is, the child inappropriately behaves towards the parent as a parent might behave towards a child. These role-reversed strategies represent a major distortion in the child–parent relationship.

Disorganised–controlling attachments are clearly complex. Indeed, discussions still surround their exact nature. Crittenden (1992), for example, prefers to see children who are classified disorganised according to the Main and Solomon (1986) model as really showing an underlying logic (i.e. organisation) in their behaviour as they attempt to adapt to the adversities of their dangerous or helpless caregiving. In her elegant Dynamic Maturational Model (DMM), she describes a variety of avoidant (compulsive) and ambivalent (coercive) strategies, many of which will be used by children who feel in danger in their relationships with abusive and neglectful parents. The DMM is proving both plausible and attractive to many practitioners who work with parents and children where there are concerns about abuse and neglect (Crittenden, 2008). Children who continue to suffer abuse, neglect and trauma throughout their childhoods are at increased risk of major behavioural, relationship and mental health problems in adulthood. And if their childhood traumas remain unresolved, these are the adults most likely to become the next generation of parents who abuse and neglect their children.

## RELEVANCE OF ATTACHMENT THEORY FOR SOCIAL WORK

As the theory is one of psychosocial development and personality, it has much to say about what constitutes 'good enough' caregiving, and what is likely to happen when parent–child

relationships are 'sub-optimal'. It has particular relevance for practitioners who work in the fields of child protection, family support and the preventative services. Not only does it help make sense of children's development and behaviour in conditions of adversity, it provides a powerful model for understanding the mental states, behaviours and responses of the parents who abuse and neglect their children. Although many children who have suffered abuse and neglect do not go on to maltreat their children, nearly all parents who do harm and neglect their children have experienced childhood violence, trauma or neglect. Recent studies have expanded attachment's reach to include assessment and practice with mental health service users, couples therapy and work with disabled children and adults.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Attachment types and patterns are likely to remain unchanged if (1) the social environment remains constant or (2) the inbuilt expectations of an individual's internal working model with its self-fulfilling tendencies brings about the very relationships the individual expects. However, attachments can and do change. Indeed, 'Bowlby's model of clinical intervention is based on clients reappraising and restructuring their internal working models' (McMillen, 1992: 208). They are most likely to change (from insecure to secure, or indeed from secure to insecure) when the quality and character of close relationships change: a violent stepfather joins the family, a mother stops drinking excessively, a child is placed with sensitive fostercarers or parents manage to escape the stress of poverty. Social workers are in the business of improving the quality of existing relationships (leading to more securely attached children and adults) or they are involved in removing people from dangerous and damaging relationships (taking a child away from abusive parents or supporting a mother as she moves to a safe refuge).

Attachment research and theory has always been good at helping social workers assess and plan in their work with parents and children. It provides a powerful model that helps make sense of why parents parent in the ways they do, and how their caregiving impacts on children's behaviour and development (Howe, 2005). By requiring social workers to explore and understand how people's relationship histories affect their current personality, defences, mental states, behaviour, relationships and parenting, attachment theory helps practitioners to observe, know which data to collect, interview, assess, and formulate problems. It has, therefore, been particularly influential in the fields of child protection, fostercare and adoption, family support and early intervention and prevention.

The last few years have seen the appearance of a growing number of evidence-based studies providing solid support and encouragement to attachment-based practices with families and children. Using behavioural, cognitive and reflective-based interventions, most rely on helping parents, including fostercarers and adopters, improve their understanding, sensitivity, attunement and reflective capacities as they relate with their children (Juffer, 2008; Schofield and Beek, 2006). The aim is to bring about more sensitive parenting so children might shift from insecurely organised attachments to ones which are more secure. And although less developed, there are also studies that have examined attachment-based treatments when working with adults in the fields of bereavement and loss (Parkes, 2006), adult mental health and counselling, again

using techniques based on improved mental reflection and social understanding (e.g. mentalised-based treatments with people diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder [Allen and Fonagy, 2006]).

Effective attachment-based practice techniques require workers to act as a safe haven and secure base (transitional attachment figures) for psychologically troubled adults (Crittenden, 2008; Howe, 2005). This offers clients a relationship experience with the social worker in which they feel it is safe to acknowledge and explore difficult, emotionally dysregulating feelings. In order to generate such a relationship, social workers must be able hold in mind the client's troubled mind to help the client feel it is safe to think about feeling, and safe to feel about thinking (that is, develop their reflective capacities and emotional intelligence). And as supervision is an emotionally laden business in which both thought and feeling play out in both subtle and complex ways, attachment-based understandings can be of great help for supervisors and supervisees alike (Baim and Morrison, 2011).

### Study questions

- 1 Why might an understanding of a person's relationship past be helpful in making sense of their relationship present?
- 2 Pat Crittenden (2008) argues that, when working with parents who have maltreated their children, treatment needs to involve psychological and behavioural reorganisation, as opposed to symptom reduction. Do you agree?
- 3 What is meant when it is suggested that social workers, acting as 'transitional attachment figures', should act as both a 'safe haven' and a 'secure base' when working with clients?

## GLOSSARY

**Ambivalent attachment** The attachment that children develop when their caregiving is anxious, uncertain, inconsistent and unpredictable. In order to increase the responsivity of the attachment figure, children hyperactivate their attachment behaviours to provoke the caregiver's availability and emotional responsiveness.

**Attachment and affectional bonds** Forming attachments is what young children do in the presence of familiar adults, even if those adults are harsh and abusive. Infants instinctively attach to their carers (Prior and Glaser, 2006). For most children, attachment leads gradually to the formation of *affectional bonds* with key adults, particularly primary caregivers who in turn will become the children's *attachment figures*.

**Attachment system and behaviour** The *attachment system* is that behavioural system which gets activated whenever the individual feels threatened, alarmed, in danger, in distress or in need. When activated, the attachment system sets in motion *attachment behaviours* whose *set goal* is to recover physical or psychological proximity to one or other of the child's caregivers where safety and protection lie.

**Attunement** The ability of each partner in a relationship to be in tune with the mental state, particularly emotional states, of the other.

**Avoidant attachment** The attachment children develop when their caregiving is rejecting. In order to increase the responsivity of the attachment figure, children deactivate their attachment behaviours to avoid activating the parent's negative affect and attachment system.

**Disorganised–controlling attachment** The attachment children develop when their caregiving is dangerous and/or neglectful, frightening or frightened. Children find it difficult to organise a behavioural strategy that helps them feel safe or comforted.

**Internal working model** The cognitive or mental representations of the self, others and relationships children develop in the light of their experiences with attachment figures that help guide thoughts, feelings, behaviour and memories in future relationships.

**Reflective function** The ability to think about one's own and other people's thoughts, feelings and mental states and how they affect behaviour.

**Secure attachment** The attachment children develop when their caregiving is sensitive, attuned and responsive. Children develop confidence and trust in their caregiver's availability at times of need and distress.

## FURTHER READING

Four key texts provide an essential introduction to attachment theory and are highly relevant to students and researchers in social work working in generic practice or in the broad field of child and family welfare:

Cassidy and Shaver's (2008) *Handbook of Attachment* provides the most comprehensive introduction to attachment theory and research. Each one of its 40 chapters is written by a leading authority in the field.

Patricia Crittenden is a major figure in attachment theory and practice. Her influential book *Raising Parents* (2008) applies attachment theory to clinical work with children and parents.

Howe's *Attachment Across the Lifecourse* (2011) and *Child Abuse and Neglect* (2005) offer accessible reviews of attachment theory for social work practitioners, including those specialising in child protection work.

# 7

## FEMINIST SOCIAL WORK

JOAN ORME

### INTRODUCTION

There are multiple feminist perspectives that draw on, critique and spawn further theoretical approaches. This is not to suggest that feminism plagiarises other theories or is a disordered ‘eclectic’, adopting an ‘anything goes approach’. The shared aim of diverse feminist perspectives is to develop a theoretical understanding of the position of women and frameworks for action to improve this.

Feminist theorising is developmental – not in a chronological sense, but in an iterative and reflective way, such that emerging positions raise questions about the nature of theory and its relation to practice. Feminism, like social work, draws on diverse theoretical perspectives, but is more than the mere application of these. Feminist theorists reflect on mainstream theories and test their implications for meanings related to the construction of the category ‘women’ and the conditions of women (Orme, 2002a). As Sheila Rowbotham (1992 [1973]: 45) notes, ‘the bizarre complexities and combinations of women’s lives’ require theory. However, there has been resistance to pure ‘theorising’. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (2000) express concern about ‘deontological feminism’, arguing that reifying theory leads to prescriptive actions and practices.

That feminism does not provide a single, coherent and unified way of analysing and conceptualising the world is part of its complexity and maturity, but this creates problems for practitioners looking for codified practice – that is, prescriptions for how to act. In this context, this chapter begins with an overview of a range of feminist perspectives and identifies significant concepts and debates that have implications for social work theory and practice. It then analyses the influence and impact of feminist theories on social work.



## KEY IDEAS

For feminists, classification is an artificial process associated with rational, male ways of organising knowledge. Feminism comprises fluid, interlocking ways of thinking (Bryson, 1999), ‘takes its meaning from the moment’ (Mitchell and Oakley, 1986: 4) and reflects on the interrelationship between theory and experience – in so doing, developing new perspectives and understandings. Though resistant to classification, feminists realise that it is sometimes necessary to create order, if only to disrupt it by highlighting the paradoxes and contradictions in the way in which the world and women’s place in it is explained and understood.

Initial categories of *liberal* (conservative) feminism and *Marxist* (socialist, radical) feminism, have been expanded and reworked over time.

## LIBERAL FEMINISM

Historically, feminism was linked to liberal democratic theories of rights. Mary Wollstonecraft’s (1975 [1792]) text on the rights of women is often seen as stimulating ‘first wave’ feminism – the suffragette movement – and the beginnings of ‘second-wave’ feminism. The principles of equal rights, equal treatment and access to, for example, the vote, work and owning property were based on liberal notions of citizenship: if women could participate, they would achieve the same position(s) as men.

Liberal feminists reflected the concerns of white, educated, middle-class women who worked within the State apparatus and political system to ensure the universal and consistent application of rights (Bryson, 1999). Their approach was individualistic and overlooked the meritocratic nature of liberal systems wherein citizenship involved male participation in the public domain, hence the association with conservatism. Private, familial and personal relationships as sites of male domination and oppression that created barriers to women’s participation were not considered.

Regardless of their weaknesses, Imelda Whelehan (1995) notes that subsequent feminist positions derived their impetus and inspiration from early feminists, such as Betty Friedan (1986), who echoed de Beauvoir (1972) in exploring the ‘nature’ of femininity. They created precedents for debates about nature and nurture that still exercise feminists, and others, in the twenty-first century.

## MARXIST FEMINISM

Marxist feminists addressed the lack of attention to class differences in liberal constructions of equality. They drew on ‘classic’ Marxism where class is seen as the ultimate determinant of oppression. They argued that inequality related to power and its distribution. This resonated with women’s experience (MacKinnon, 1992). They saw collective interests, based on socio-economic groupings, rather than personal equality as an important and effective means of liberating oppressed groups. Collective interests provided the power of the ‘standpoint’

(see Glossary at the end of this chapter) for understanding the world from a particular perspective.

The writings of Marx – and their manifestations in political activism – however, did not recognise particular conditions for women. In fact, Marxism often placed women as subordinate to the politically, materially and ideologically dominant man (Whelehan, 1995). Nevertheless, Marxist feminism can provide a useful guard against the individualism and elitism that arise when collective inequalities and strategies based on, for example, class and race are ignored (Bryson, 1999).

## SOCIALIST FEMINISM

Although liberal and Marxist feminism share a belief that women's oppression is caused by sexism, racism and class divisions produced by a patriarchal society (Payne, 2005), socialist feminism is based on mainstream political thinking that focuses on individual rights and opportunities and champions the collective interests of working-class people as a group; socialism stresses economic and social rights (Bryson, 1999). It argues that the divisions created by patriarchy permeate private – and interpersonal – relationships and this supports capitalist arrangements of production. For socialist feminists, patriarchy is fundamental because the oppression of women predates capitalism (Rowbotham, 1992 [1973]).

Though not of concern to Marxism *per se*, matters of sexuality and identity became the focus of socialist feminism: 'even the loosest analysis of Marxism suggests class and capitalism is more fundamental than gender and patriarchy' (Bryson, 1999: 20). Feminism applied the Marxist concept of consciousness-raising to reflect on women's social situation, which Marxism ignored. The feminist mantra 'the personal is political' identified that the subordination of women in their everyday lives had to be the focus of political action at all levels. It counteracted the individualism of liberalism, took strength from the notion of the collective – which was more in tune with women's ways of taking action – and, while focusing on women's position, did not ignore or eradicate men but sought to dialogue with them (Segal, 1987).

## RADICAL FEMINISM

All approaches based on mainstream political positions and strategies were seen by some feminists to be limited inevitably by their masculinist assumptions (Bryson, 1999). Taking 'the personal is political' to new territory and recognising that oppression permeated all aspects of human relationships, radical feminism saw the means of reproduction as key.

Among the first to use 'patriarchy' (see Glossary) as shorthand for the multiple ways in which women were oppressed (Whelehan, 1995), radical feminists eschewed political structures and male-orientated philosophies where patriarchy was omnipresent, claiming that they had to be rejected, dismantled and overthrown. There was no single philosophical doctrine other than the negation of 'phallogocentric political hegemony' (Whelehan, 1995: 68).

This led, *inter alia*, to a new theory of politics (Mitchell, 1974) in which women were a class in their own right with men as the antagonists (Firestone, 1971). It led to separate women's structures within existing organisations. Heterosexuality in all its forms was an abuse of women (Daly, 1990; Dworkin, 1981).

## POST(MODERN) FEMINISM

If radical feminism demanded a new theory of politics, postmodern feminism questioned the project of theorising or, at least, producing monolithic, all-encompassing grand theories. This was problematic for feminist theory because it challenged the hegemony of certain theoretical positions and the means by which these positions had been reached.

Although he did not address the position of women directly, and has been misquoted on notions of discourse (Sawyer, 2002), the work of Foucault became influential (see McNay, 1992). With reference to his work, the role of language and discourse was said to provide the means for women's voices to be heard and enable the creation of new meanings and possibilities for understanding and action (Healy, 2000).

Feminists embraced postmodernism to disturb the roots of patriarchy and modernism (Rossiter, 2000) but also disturbed feminism. Black women (hooks, 1984), women with disabilities (Morris, 1993) and older women questioned postmodern feminism defined by white, able-bodied, young, middle-class, educated women who had divested it of its political force. This led to explorations of diversity and difference (see Glossary).

While Mel Gray and Jennifer Boddy (2010) associate postmodern feminism with the process of 'academisation' which led to the disappearance of political action, they also see this recognition of diversity and difference as contributing to postcolonial feminism (Gray and Boddy, 2010: 379).

The multiplicity, plurality, contradiction and conflict in contemporary feminist thinking require a conceptualisation that neither collapses the categories of 'personal' and 'political' nor presents them as binaries (Braithwaite, 2002). The rejection of 'the personal is political' mantra is sometimes associated with postfeminism (see Glossary), suggesting that there is no need for feminism. However, Brückner (2002: 275) has suggested that developments in feminist theory strengthen the need for what she calls gender political cooperation.

All such debates highlight the relevance of feminist theory in social work.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

Social work is a profession mainly providing services for women by women (Balloch, 1997; Howe, 1986). While the 'feminisation' of the profession has had implications for women (Harlow, 2004) and men (Christie, 2006), it is not necessarily a fertile area for feminist theory and practice.

Early feminists were critical of social work as a profession and of women working in it, arguing that, at best, it ignored women and, at worst, held women responsible for social problems. It kept them under surveillance, constrained them to subjugated roles or victimised them.

Arguing from a Marxist critique of the State, Elizabeth Wilson (1977) suggested that women's needs would be better met by providing services outside of State organised systems.

Thirty years on, Payne (2005) suggests that the contribution of feminism to social work practice has been recognised but is resisted – that, while it provides prescriptions for working with women, it offers no extensive account of how theory is applied to generalist social work practice. It could be argued that the prescription and codification of social work practice are together an example of rational–technical approaches resonant with masculinist, logocentric thinking, but also reflect resistance to practice theory within social work and feminism (Featherstone and Fawcett, 1995a; Healy, 2000) and misrepresent the feminist contribution as atheoretical (Orme, 2003).

Nevertheless, it is possible to discern three strands of feminist social work that are informed by and responsive to developments in feminist thinking:

- synergies between feminism and social work based on shared values (Collins, 1986);
- prescriptions for practice with women (Dominelli, 2002b; Dominelli and McCleod, 1989; Hanmer and Statham, 1988) and men (Cavanagh and Cree, 1996);
- use of feminist perspectives to understand the gender dimensions of social work practice (Orme, 2002a).

## SYNERGIES BETWEEN FEMINISM AND SOCIAL WORK

Early writers elaborating on the relevance of feminism to social work (Collins, 1986; Wearing, 1986) drew heavily on socialist feminism as representing mainstream feminist thought. The critique of male dominance as part of the economic foundation of society and the subjugation of women through a multitude of State, institutional and interpersonal practices resonated with the experiences of women with whom social workers worked. Barbara Collins (1986) links the feminist mantra 'the personal is political' with the 'person in environment' principle – both mean that private woes are public issues. Feminist perspectives and theories offer paradigmatic ways of understanding patriarchal culture, but this conflicts with what feminists and social workers 'want for humanity and society' (Collins, 1986: 214), which includes men.

For Roberta Sands and Kathleen Nuccio (1992), all strands of feminist thinking share the political project to end women's oppression. For them, postmodern feminism, with its emphasis on deconstructing categories, acknowledging difference and rejecting essentialism, recognises the diverse constitution of the client [*sic*] population and unique individual needs. They reject criticisms that postmodernism negates or undermines the political project or there has to be a unified category, perspective or standpoint on which to base political action. While recognising that this might be problematic for social work, which has used categories such as race, gender and class to legitimise their action against oppression, they argue that awareness of difference within the category 'woman' means that workers can act in concert with an individual as a member of a special population and as a person in her specific environment.

Their individualised approach redefines the nature of subjectivity – basing it on the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of individuals – and 'the person in

environment' – that is, their sense of self and ways of understanding their relationship with the world. Therefore, subjectivity is not 'essential' or stable but contradictory and changing (Sands and Nuccio, 1992).

Important links can be made between the political nature of the subject – which may be the 'feminine' – and the way in which the world is constructed and experienced – which includes subjective interpretations of being female. Feminist social work, therefore, works with women to raise consciousness. For some, this involves not only political awareness but also feminist psychoanalytic theory (Mitchell, 1974), which informs continuing work on identity, sexuality and abuse (Hollway and Featherstone, 1997; see also Chapter 5).

The complex link between theory and practice, therefore, highlights tensions and contradictions (Orme, 2003). Collins (1986) was clear that feminism was a philosophical perspective or way of visualising and thinking about situations to explain women's oppression. For Sands and Nuccio (1992), what differentiates postmodern feminism from postmodernism is the link between theory and practice (or praxis). However, neither they nor Collins (1986) went so far as to prescribe practice.

## FEMINIST PRESCRIPTIONS FOR PRACTICE

A number of texts have explored feminist social work practice as a unified phenomenon, focusing predominantly on working with women either generically (Dominelli and McCleod, 1989; Hanmer and Statham, 1988) or via particular approaches, such as group work, that could be 'converted' to feminism (Cohen and Mullender, 2003). They identify with the political project of feminism from a standpoint or position (see Glossary). They acknowledge differences, but accept a commonality of experience, such that all women can agree on principles to eradicate gender inequality (Dominelli, 2002b). They challenge the operation of power between women workers and women service users by recognising commonalities and differences (Hanmer and Statham, 1988). Commonality of experience – as victims of oppression – is both a source of identity and the basis on which relationships between women workers and service users can be built.

Questioning the feasibility of this egalitarian approach, Sue White (1998) suggests that it fails to recognise the operation of power in relationships within statutory social work, even those between women. Equally, Sue Wise (1990) suggests that exhortations to listen to women and focus on women's contributions and experience, while laudable, do not address the complexity and messiness of women's lives or acknowledge that women themselves are capable of unacceptable and antisocial behaviour. Working with these women, not men, poses an immense challenge to feminist social workers (Crinall, 1999).

These critiques challenge the assumption that it is possible and desirable to homogenise the category 'woman' in social work practice. Doing so denies the presence of power differentials created by being a provider of State services and implies that women are only ever offended against. This essentialises passive, non-violent femininity, limits the emancipatory project associated with women-centred practice and has implications for women who do not conform to

gendered prescriptions – for example, abusing women involves theorising in a feminist minefield (FitzRoy, 1999; Orme, 1994).

Not all who write about working with women argue for purely women-centred practice. Judith Milner (2001: 66) advocates solution-focused therapy based on the ‘naturalness’ of women’s use of discourse, but acknowledges that narrative techniques might also enable men to learn to ‘talk like women, negotiate, value relationships and embrace complexity’.

## UNDERSTANDING GENDER DIMENSIONS

A further development of women-centred practice involves focusing on women while working with men as part of the feminist project. For example, Kate Cavanagh and Viv Cree (1996) argue for destabilising men to ensure the protection of women. Others use concepts of masculinity emerging from feminist theory (Segal, 1990) for working with men to help them understand how their behaviour oppresses women (Orme et al., 2000) and children (Featherstone and Fawcett, 1995b). Mainstream male social theorists have ‘adopted’ feminist theory to explore the impact of gender oppression on men (Connell, 1994; Hearn and Morgan, 1990) and social work (Christie, 2001; Scourfield, 2002).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

In attempting to identify the significance of feminism for social work, a nihilistic view would be that it has made little lasting contribution because no single method has emerged as ‘feminist social work practice’.

A more accurate perspective sees feminist theories as fundamental in highlighting the oppressive conditions of women and the ways in which social work can exacerbate or alleviate them. Feminist thinking has led to a reappraisal and reconfiguration of core social work principles and micro-practices through understandings of power and gender, ethics of care and the use of empathy, identity, individualisation and so on.

The breadth of feminist theory encompasses social, political, theoretical and practical considerations of the position of women, women’s social and economic progress (or lack of it) and the subjugation of women through mechanisms of physical and sexual violence. Issue politics for feminism involve all aspects of social life – public and private.

Critical analysis of women in the paid labour force leads to the deconstruction of the notion of family built on motherhood, femininity and women’s innate capacity to care. It has led to theories on the feminisation of poverty (Lister, 1997; Pateman, 1987) and feminist campaigns against pornography (Dworkin, 1981), prostitution (MacKinnon, 1992) and male violence (Hester et al., 1996).

One challenge is how to negotiate complex issues surrounding women’s relationships with men. Some find ‘oppositional politics’, which depend on particular constructions of femininity that run counter to the overarching feminist project to understand the human condition and produce knowledge to enhance women’s welfare, problematic (Oakley, 2005).

## POWER

Rowbotham (1983) eschews oppositional politics because it entails adopting male approaches to theory and action in favour of understanding the operation of power within and between categories.

Foucault's (1980) analysis that power exercised and experienced at the micro-levels of society makes it the site for resistance by marginalised and subjugated groups has been influential in feminist thinking (Bryson, 1999). Foucault saw power as both repressive and productive, operating through, rather than on, individuals and, therefore, being significant at both the local and global levels. Not only are personal issues politicised but also the personal and local become the site of political action – 'the personal becomes *the* political'. That is not to say feminists are not interested in the macro-organisation of power. Early feminists in the suffragette movement constantly challenged the power of the State and its denial of women's suffrage. Friedan's (1986) writing stimulated second-wave feminists to organise themselves politically. However, power does not only mean domination. From a liberal feminist perspective, Naomi Wolf (1999) argued that 'power' feminism could resist male abuses of power and promote equal rights for women while not subjugating those of men.

Engagement with the State is necessary because of its power to legislate aspects of women's personal lives, such as outlawing domestic violence (Bryson, 1999), but, for social workers, working at the intersection of the State and women's lives, the influence of the State is more pervasive than this. The multitude of health and social care policies that inform the legislative duties of social workers are based on constructions of femininity – as represented in motherhood, caring, sexuality and so on – and restrict women's lives and their capacity to define their own welfare needs (Dale and Foster, 1986). In State social work, the law not only defines the ends but also the means by which social workers intervene in service users' lives as they exercise their statutory duties (V. White, 2006).

## ETHIC OF CARE

Equally important for social work is feminists' deconstruction of the concept of care.

Carol Gilligan's (1983) 'different voice' feminism identified differences in women and men's moral reasoning: women operate according to an *ethic of care* and men according to an *ethic of justice*. What was significant was not just the differences but also the privileging and, therefore, dominance of masculinist, rational, logical ways of thinking that devalued women's ways of negotiating based on connectedness and relationship.

She concluded that the 'different voice' of women prevailed in personal and public relationships via an ethic of care, but the problem was that women's 'care work' was devalued in the personal and public spheres (Dalley, 1988; Ungerson, 1987).

Feminist theorists have questioned misconceptions about caring as unreservedly positive (Koehn, 1998; Orme, 2001), highlighting that a proper reading of an ethic of care could bring new understanding to professional practice (Parton, 2003). Some have explored male roles in caring (Fisher, 1994) and theorising an ethic of care has been central in rethinking

understandings of ethics and justice (Held, 1995; Orme, 2002b; see also two special issues of the *Journal of Ethics and Social Welfare*, 2010, 2011) and its links to identity (Young, 1990).

## IDENTITY

The ‘politics of identity’ was one consequence of feminism’s relationship with postmodernism and notions of difference. It is not identity per se that leads to oppression, but the processes of oppression linked to how any one group is defined in relation to other groups. This has particular significance for social work as it works with people whose identities are prescribed in a number of different ways.

While people might identify strongly with a group, they may also have associations with many different groups. This suggests that identities shift in relation to context (Young, 1990). Identity has also complicated notions of gender. Judith Butler (1990) argues that, if there were no one, universal, homogeneous category of ‘woman’ and, therefore, no one perspective, standpoint or way of being represented by women, then there could be no one category of ‘man’ (see Chapter 5). These analyses are being applied to deconstructing the category of ‘men’.

## INDIVIDUALISATION

The notion of the individual is core to social work but has also been contentious because working at the level of the individual was seen as a conservative and constraining approach. Early casework was said to pathologise individuals. Developments in community care have led to a focus on the individual in terms of personalised packages of care, but in bureaucratic ways that construct people as belonging to categories – ‘old’, ‘disabled’ or ‘mentally ill’, for example.

While it is argued that personalised budgets can be used to empower service users, the majority of whom are women, Marion Barnes (2011) uses theories developed in feminist care ethics to argue that such approaches can lead to devaluing care for and of individuals within ‘social care’ policy.

Debates about whether the focus should be on the individual, to alleviate problems and bring about change, or the social structures that constrain, constrict and construct individuals within them have been at the heart of social work.

Developments in feminism emphasising diversity and difference are seen by some as privileging the individualistic approaches of postmodernism over the collective approaches of feminism (Dominelli, 2002b). Others argue that encouraging critical thinking facilitates more positive individualised work, enabling practitioners to respond to particular situations rather than the traditional social work ‘methods’ approach, where predetermined decisions often guide practice (Fook, 2002).

The use of narrative and discourse in person-centred approaches recognises multiple identities and the complexities of people’s lives. Hence, individuals are not seen as fulfilling



certain types and paradigms (Plant, 1973), nor do they represent some sort of natural order. Rather, they are constructed by historical and social conditions (Weedon, 1999).

Whether the mantra is the feminist ‘the personal is political’ or the social work ‘person in environment’, both place the individual at the centre of theory and practice, such that social work mediates between the individual and the social. Feminism’s emphasis on identity helps to reconcile these tensions by suggesting that the personal, individual and private experiences of women are a legitimate focus for, and site of, political action.

## EMPATHY

Linked to individualisation, the concept of empathy highlights paradoxical positions that can emerge for feminist social work. While recognising the objective conditions of those with whom they work, social workers are expected to understand, accept and respect individual understandings and expressed wishes. This has implications for working with the most marginalised – that is, men who abuse women and children. Empathy does not mean agreeing with abusive behaviour, nor does it involve imputing wants and needs to individuals, nor constraining them by assumptions based on gender stereotypes, but, rather, being prepared to hear the conflicts and confusions.

Sandra Harding’s (1987) suggestion that differences can be reconciled by the recognition that ‘your claims are valid for you, but mine are valid for me’ adds an important dimension to empathy and acceptance that can illuminate social work and gender.

## FEMINISM, SOCIAL WORK AND GENDER

Social work shares with feminism the project of enhancing the welfare of citizens (Oakley, 2005). The problematic element for feminist social work has been how to foreground women and recognise how gender impacts on the material resources, life chances and experiences of women without either essentialising women into some form of passive femininity or compromising social work values when working with men and boys.

The contribution of notions of identity and difference (Williams, 1996) from postmodernism and postmodern feminism to social work has been transformative (Pease and Fook, 1999). The focus has been widened from women-centred practice to include the impact of gender relations on social work with both women and men (Christie, 2001; Featherstone, 2004; Scourfield, 2002) and has led to understanding of how gender impacts on all aspects of social work (Orme, 2001).

This chapter has sought to explain the complexities of feminist theory and its relationship with social practice. In identifying multiple strands of feminist thought and their applications to social work practice, the aim has been not to criticise or judge negatively, but, rather, to explore how the shared aim of analysing and eradicating the oppression of women can lead to solutions.

Feminism offers explanations at macro- and micro-levels and the fact that there is often no prescription for how to ‘do’ social work is both frustrating and exciting. For students,

practitioners, researchers and theorists alike, it means that they have to reflect on the situations in which they are involved from a variety of perspectives, and consider the impact of any interpretations of that situation and their implications for action. This is good social work and one of the major contributions of feminist theorising is that it has enriched and improved social work practice.

## Study questions

- 1 Thinking of your own experiences – in what ways do you think feminism has contributed to current social work practice?
- 2 Policy developments in different countries impact on women and men differently. From the perspective of your own country and/or agency, which policy developments have had a negative impact on women and which have had a negative impact on men?
- 3 What are the arguments for and against working with men who have committed acts of violence against women and children?

## GLOSSARY

**Difference** Influenced by the work of French feminists, notions of difference challenge political activities based on the idea of a single and unified category of ‘woman’.

**First wave feminism** This term is applied retrospectively to the emergence of the feminist suffragette movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the UK and USA. However, women had been writing about ‘women’s issues’ long before the emergence of these movements, so first wave feminism began much earlier than this (see Wollstonecraft, 1795 [1792]).

**Patriarchy** Refers to social arrangements within the private and public realms that privilege and give power to men. It emphasises the social and economic systems that impact on the relationships between women and men rather than differences as ‘naturally’ given.

**Postfeminism** Implies a discontinuity with the feminist project, suggesting either that feminism has achieved its aims or that past feminist approaches are restrictive and no longer relevant, restrictive because they are descriptive of beliefs and behaviours.

**Second-wave feminism** Acknowledging the political activities of women at the beginning of the twentieth century who were striving for equality in public life, second-wave feminism is associated with ‘the women’s movement’ from the 1960s onwards – that is, with women writers and activists who drew attention to and sought to explain how women were oppressed and subjugated in their personal lives.

**Standpointism** Initially pertinent to a Marxist perspective, particularly significant for feminism was the idea that the world is perceived from a particular standpoint. Though not

uncontested, feminists privileged the standpoint of oppressed groups. The question is whether the 'standpoint' involves an automatic correlation between the social location and the standpoint. This becomes problematic when recognising the different experiences and standpoints of women and men and the complexity and diversity of women's experiences, as influenced by their race, age, (dis)ability and economic status.

## FURTHER READING

Useful and important reading for students interested in feminist social work are:

Lena Dominelli's (2002b) *Feminist Social Work: Theory and practice*, a good introductory text which examines how feminist insights, developed through practice, can inform ways of working in social work.

Mel Gray and Jennifer Boddy's (2010) 'Making sense of the waves' provides a recent overview of feminist theory with useful tables analysing similarities and differences between the theories.

Joan Orme's (2001) *Gender and Community Care* provides an overview of feminist theory and explores how it can inform working with women and men in community care.

Jonathan Scourfield's (2002) *Gender and Child Protection* conducts a similar exploration of how gender influences social work in the area of child care, and especially child protection.

Vicky White's (2006) *The State of Feminist Social Work* explores how working in State-funded organisations presents challenges to feminism in social work.

# 8

## CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK

MEL GRAY AND STEPHEN A. WEBB

### INTRODUCTION

Does social work thinking have any influence on real-world events? This issue of ‘real-world’ influence is posed with particular acuity in social intervention-driven fields. Social work is just such a field and ‘practice relevance’ has become an oft-cited slogan among key stakeholders.

While social work is an intervention-driven discipline, researching the relationship between social structure and individual agency requires a high degree of interdisciplinarity. This has undoubtedly been an obstacle in establishing the relevance of social work thinking about real-world events.

Such interdisciplinarity is required as the question of practice relevance is situated at the confluence of a number of dimensions of thinking, the approaches of which are similar, but their preoccupations are diverse. These include direct concerns with the desirability and feasibility of practice-relevant research itself, a focus on the relationship between theory and practice and the role of researchers in policy formation processes, as well as higher order questions, such as the role of critical intellectuals in social work.

The important role of critical thinkers in modern societies ultimately rests on their critical position in relation to mechanisms of domination and analyses of hierarchies of power. It also rests on challenges to the institutionalised abuse of power as the cause of vast inequalities and injustice. The analysis of power figures centrally in the preoccupations of critical thinkers. In this regard, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s distinction (see Chapter 3) between three types of practitioner lends itself neatly to social work. These three types are the critical intellectual, the professional expert and the servant to the Prince.

In this chapter, we are very much concerned with thinking about social work in ways that, on the one hand, draw attention to the significance of the critical intellectual and, on the other, juxtapose this position as a means of demonstrating the problems associated with those social

workers who fall into either of the other two positions – professional experts or servants to the prevailing dominant system.

‘Critical social work’ has a narrow and a broad meaning in social work. In this chapter, we refer to these two meanings as Critical social work and critical social work. In the following discussion, Critical social work, when capitalised, refers only to the narrow definition and use of the term. All other uses are meant in the broader sense and, thus, are not capitalised. When used in a broader sense, some aspects of the perspective may have obvious relations with its counterpart as they have components to which some key thinkers have contributed.

Critical social work in the narrow sense designates several generations of key ideas, themes and commitments originating in a progressive political stance that emerged in the 1970s. According to this perspective, a ‘critical’ theory is distinguished from traditional social work approaches according to a specific set of values: a theory is *critical* to the extent that it seeks social transformation as forms of justice, equality and emancipation.

Critical social work in this narrow sense, then, seeks to explain and transform various circumstances that social workers and service users find themselves in, while connecting this to a structural analysis of those aspects of society that are oppressive, unjust and exploitative. In this respect, Critical social work (with an upper case ‘C’) emerged in connection with various intellectual movements that identified dimensions of economic and political domination in modern societies, including feminism, race theory and Marxist criticism.

Critical social work in the broad sense (with a lower case ‘c’) is indicative of a much more generic approach that attenuates the necessary attributes and characteristics for effective interventions. While it is sensitive to core social work values, this broader sense is much more concerned with developing ‘best practice’ agendas that can maximise potential for social workers and clients. Typically, the emphasis is on ‘being critical’ as a crucial disposition and in relation to existing practices, organisations and ideas. It draws attention to the value of using criticism as a capacity to contrast, reformulate or challenge existing practices. It contends that social workers *should necessarily be critical* and reflective in all their dealings with other human beings.

Payne’s (1996) ‘critical contrastive approach’ is an almost perfect embodiment of a critical social work perspective with a little ‘c’, wherein he accentuates the need to engage in ‘critical reflection using theory’. The main emphases are on finding alternatives, recognising clients’ strengths and resilience and identifying the inadequacies of resource provision. While it is still reconstructive, unlike the narrower sense of Critical social work, this perspective does not couple a structural analysis of, say, oppressive regimes in modern societies with a set of militant commitments, engagements and resistances to change.

In this sense, critical social work, while recognising existing institutions and policies as obstacles to the emergence of better forms of engagement with service users, remains committed to the prevailing liberal democratic mode of political rule. Indeed, the unifying element of critical social work is its adherence to a liberal humanist sentiment. Thus, transformation is concerned with the incremental modification of individuals, resources and interventions within the current state of affairs rather than wholesale economic and political change. In this respect, critical social work, unlike structural social work (see Chapter 9), tends to focus on the cognitive work of the practitioner, emphasising change at the individual or community level rather than demanding the necessity of widespread structural change.

## KEY IDEAS

### CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK

We conceive of the broader critical social work as encompassing a range of eclectic perspectives that invoke the aura of Critical theory (see Introduction and Chapter 1) without marshalling the normative requirements of structural explanation. The relation to Critical theory is, however, largely impressionistic, with the uses of the term ‘critical’ being casual and loose.

A host of critical perspectives that loosely align themselves to Critical social work are representative of this tendency, including reflective practice (Schön, 1983), critical best practice (Ferguson, 2003c), the service user movement (Beresford, 2000; Beresford and Croft, 2004), strengths-based perspectives (Saleebey, 2002) and empowerment and advocacy (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 1995). We wish to draw attention, also, to the way in which some Critical social work thinkers inadvertently cross over into critical social work once they adopt the postmodern turn.

What these various positions share in common, as critical social work, is an appeal to progressive liberal democratic ideals and an emphasis on certain humanistic social work values. This is sometimes called a ‘post politics’ based on consensus and an acceptance that liberal capitalism is the only viable world system. The most obvious example of this in the social work literature is Robert Adams et al.’s (2002) *Critical Practice in Social Work* (see also H. Ferguson, 2008). In only partially accommodating the stricter and more authentic aspects of Critical social work, this softer set of persuasions, in fact, has the tendency of neutralising the systematic political intent of the more progressive project of an emancipatory social work.

Donald Schön’s (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner* has had a major influence on both Critical social work and critical social work (see, for example, Fook, 1996, 2002; White et al., 2006). Jan Fook (2002: 42) notes ‘the similarities between a reflective approach and post-modern and critical ways of thinking’ as well as qualitative research (Fook, 2004). Following Carolyn Taylor and Susan White (2000), she sees deconstructive techniques as similar to reflective processes (Fook, 2002: 42) so that the client’s ‘story’ told to the social worker is a ‘text’ that can be subjected to reflective analysis: ‘Deconstructive questions can be used to assist in reflecting upon written (or verbal) accounts later in time (or . . . at the same time), in a similar way’ to that used by a qualitative researcher when analysing interview transcripts or ‘texts’ (Fook, 1996, 2002). In this way, reflective questions enable the social worker to research experience to uncover the theory implicit in action, understand or construct the situation, and discern gaps, biases, themes and so on, engaging in a process of ‘deconstructing’ experience and, in so doing, reconstructing the situation.

Empowerment is a theme developed by Suzy Braye and Michael Preston-Shoot (1995) in their *Empowering Practice in Social Care*. Graham McBeath and Stephen Webb (1991) note that empowerment used in this sense is thoroughly ambivalent and can be read either as endorsing a critical approach to social work or one that evokes neoliberal affinities based on individual responsibility and choice in a market economy of social care provision. They perceive much theorising about empowerment in social work as typifying the latter and falling into an exclusively individualist account of change and action. Here a market rationality becomes the single defining element of all social relations.

The mantra of empowerment has been deployed in a number of misleading ways, thus enabling easy appropriation by commentators of various political persuasions and, most often, simply as an acid test of service users' ability to make their own choices and decisions free from protectionist social interventions.

Taking a different approach, Harry Ferguson (2003c, 2008) developed what he calls a 'critical best practice' (CBP) approach, wherein he uses Critical theory as an interpretative framework to develop a more positive perspective on critical social work. Like Dennis Saleebey's (2002) strengths perspective, CBP seeks to move beyond a deficits approach to focus on strengths, capacities, capabilities, resilience and so on, as constructed by a range of stakeholders in the practice situation.

Like Fook (2002), Ferguson is attempting to establish examples of best practice inductively – that is, from the ground up or from the practice experience or situation.

For both Ferguson (2003c) and Fook (2002) knowledge is constantly developing as practice improves through reflection-in-action. Like Fook (2002; see also Napier and Fook, 2000), Ferguson's aim is to provide exemplary cases as to 'how to engage service users, promote protection and wellbeing, establish empowering relationships and conduct long term therapeutic work in an antioppressive manner' (Ferguson, 2003c: 1006).

Given the more systematic exegesis of Critical social work, the remaining parts of this chapter concentrate on addressing the distinctive contribution it has made to thinking about social work. This is followed by a summary critique drawing on the work of McBeath and Webb (2005) and Stephen Webb (2006).

## CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK

Key contributors to Critical social work are Jan Fook (2002), Karen Healy (2000, 2005), Steven Hick (Hick et al., 2005), Jim Ife (1997), Peter Leonard (1997, 2001), Robert Mullaly (1993, 1997, 2002, 2007), Bob Pease (Allan et al., 2003, 2009; Pease and Fook, 1999) and Amy Rossiter (1996).

The growth of Critical social work, especially in Canada and Australia in the last decade (Allan et al., 2003, 2009; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2000; Ife, 1997; Pease and Fook, 1999; Rossiter, 1996), has its roots in the lasting influence of radical social work (Bailey and Brake, 1975; Brake and Bailey, 1980; Corrigan and Leonard, 1978; Galper, 1975, 1980; Jones, 1983; Langan and Lee, 1989; Reisch and Andrews, 2002) and community work in the 1970s within the UK (Mayo, 1977).

In its socialist and Marxist guise, radical social work 30 years ago cast itself within the problem of the identity of the worker qua social worker. More precisely, the question was about the reconciliation of the contradictory identity of the community worker as part agent of the State and as part agent and advocate of the working class (the 'client' base). An intelligible dialectic of dominant and subordinate forces, State social worker 'against' the people, professional language versus the vernacular and so on emerged from this. What theory was used was essentialist in its appeal to defined identities and reductionist in pressing the case of the working class.

Within social and cultural theory in the late 1970s, however, there emerged theories that rejected *universalisable* explanations based on a single or delimited set of foundations – self-consciousness

(rationalism), class consciousness (Marxism) or raw observations (empiricist positivism), for example. Though coming late to social work, such perspectives led to a re-evaluation of social work's universalist and Marxist approaches and the organisation of generic social work agencies (McBeath and Webb, 1991). As we shall see, the claim of Critical social work that there are multiple starting points of equal status from which to assess the validity of social work interventions rather than a single one embraces what can be identified loosely as the 'postmodern' turn. This resistance to the idea of a unity or foundational 'ontology' (existences and their status), such as God, human nature and 'reason', out of which all else is derivable, expresses postmodernism's best known figure: 'fragmentation'. If we have multiple, equally basic starting points, then we do not found explanations on a single factor or whole – 'the unity' – but on 'difference'. We shall show that 'difference' is basic to Critical social work theory. What it is, though, and how it is used in social work theory and practice may be subject to argument.

We have noted that Critical social work tends to use postmodernism and Critical theory as strategies of thought rather than as specific theories. This allows for a variety of readings and engagements. As Fook (2002: 17) notes, 'There are clearly many points of similarity between postmodern thinking and a critical approach'. While Critical social work carries with it an idea of an intellectual whole, it is clear that there are divergent approaches within it. Critical social work theorists share certain key concepts and theoretical ideas. As Healy (2000: 13) comments:

despite their obvious variations, what these critical approaches to practice share is their foundation in the critical social science paradigm . . . there is a general endorsement of critical social science understandings about the nature of the social world and human existence.

Postmodernism and Critical theory provide Critical social work with the theoretical and political resources to deal with contemporary issues, particularly in relation to social justice, emancipation, power relations, oppression, exploitation and domination. Pease and Fook's (1999: 2) foreword to *Transforming Social Work Practice* captures these emphases when they ask:

How can we maintain what was positive and liberating in the critical tradition in social work, the emancipatory side of the Enlightenment, but still use postmodernism to deconstruct the problematic elements in the metanarratives of feminism, Marxism, and other critical perspectives to the point where reconstruction becomes possible?

Critical social work seeks to understand how dominant relations of power operate through and across systems of discourse and deconstruct and reconstruct these discourses. We have noted that Critical social work has high hopes of a better and more expansive future for modern societies. In summing up the characteristics of the postmodern and critical approach to social work, Fook (2002: 18) says that a 'postmodern and critical approach to social work is primarily concerned with practicing in ways which further a society without domination, exploitation and oppression'. In referring to the ideology critique of the Frankfurt School of Critical theory, Richard Pozzuto (2000, unpaginated) explains that 'the task of Critical Social Work is to lift the veil of the present to see the possibilities of the future'. Similarly, in his influential book *Challenging Oppression: A critical social work approach*,



Mullaly (2002) proposes a psychology of emancipation for social work so that oppressed groups might resist the dominant hegemony that encourages them to internalise and blame themselves for their oppression by accepting as normal and inevitable the present society and its oppressive social institutions.

## CRITIQUE OF CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK

It is ironic that there has been little by way of sustained critique within the Critical social work perspective itself. In their essay 'Post critical social work analytics', McBeath and Webb (2005) undertook a close analysis of its central claims. They raised three doubts about the validity of Critical social work. They contended that these problems leave Critical social work in a difficult position, unable to achieve the degree of intellectual challenge to established social work theorising that it aspires to, especially in relation to the analysis of power. The three doubts are as follows.

Critical social work mixes incompatible theoretical sources, particularly those of Foucault, postmodernism and Critical theory. The mixing of Marxism and Critical theory on the one hand with those of Foucault with postmodernism on the other has produced a confused state of affairs. The muddling of theoretically incompatible sources has left Critical social work bereft in undertaking the important task of analysing *actual relations of power* in social work. Thus, it seems that Critical social work misuses Foucault's work while being happy for it to signal its commitment to postmodernism. Rather than acknowledging Foucault's tension with Marxism for what it is – that is, a very different treatment for the analysis of power – Critical social work seizes on certain Foucauldian slogans – such as 'power from below' and 'resistance as always already' – as well as the convenient replacement of ideology for dominant discourses, to create affiliations with postmodernism, particularly around the 'celebration of diversity' and the 'politics of difference'. McBeath and Webb (2005) show that the emphasis on difference signals the birth of a postmodernism from the womb of his earlier class reductionist account in Marxism. Now class is seen as one, if particularly influential, variable among many. This displacement of class as a universal signifier of oppression permits Critical social work a retheorisation in terms of alliances between relatively diffuse oppressed groups.

Insofar as Critical social work makes dominant discourses a theme, it aligns itself with Foucauldian terms, but, in aspiring to emancipating selves, it is working on a plane of freedom and redemption. As we shall see, this is a dubious position to adopt as it implies that there is something already out there – 'emancipation' or one's true self – that has been repressed by power and simply needs to be released. Fook (in Fawcett et al., 2000: 118) notes:

expert professional social workers are able to create critical knowledge which potentially challenges and resists current forms of domination, and they are able to maintain commitment to a system of social values which allows them to work with, yet transcend the contradictions and uncertainties of daily practice.

From a critical theoretical viewpoint, Fook (in Fawcett et al., 2000) offers a very bourgeois model – namely, the dominance of the concept (value systems) over the object (daily life). This kind of ‘totality thinking’ provides for a liberal utopian politics wholly out of sympathy with Foucault, but it is even more worrying and old fashioned than that in some cases. Fook, for example, trades on a tired, imprecise, but ‘critical’ notion of ‘false consciousness’ – a term that is rooted in binary thinking if ever there were one.

Critical social work’s ‘Foucauldian’ appropriation rests on an inadequate model of power that is organised by a rather fixed, narrow set of oppositions and so ignores the importance of complex power relations and more fluid operations and flows of power that are central to Foucault’s analysis. Critical social work is happy to seize on historical and methodological grounds for evidence of fixed systems of power – such as identifying ‘oppressive structures’ along the lines of race, gender and class – but is reluctant to grasp the significance of the ‘becoming’ of historical events as a function of the proliferation of complex strategies and flows of power. Thus, the analysis of power cuts across two incompatible sources: Marx and Foucault. While, for Marx, power is a universality tale of class division and conflict, for Foucault, the structural dynamics became more fluid across time. This point is not recognised by Critical social workers, who apply Foucault’s analysis of nineteenth-century rather fixed systems of disciplinary power to what is arguably far more fluid – namely, modern societies today. Critical social work seems to believe that Foucault persists in using his disciplinary model of modern power for late twentieth-century conditions and this provides a warrant for them to theorise power similarly.

Given the centrality of power for analysing regimes of domination, Critical social work does not let loose the full methodological force of Foucault’s ‘analytics of power’ on the issues at hand. Foucault’s theory of power is closely linked to concrete empirical studies that, in turn, contribute to the refinement of his theoretical tools (see Chapter 4). Critical social work fails to produce detailed analyses of micro power relations that are constituted by wider systems of domination and leaves largely unaccounted for the formation of social work divisions within agencies and the relationship between discursive and non-discursive power. A stronger emphasis on relations of power as ‘governmentality’ and ‘bio-politics’ would help offset this bias (see Lemke, 2011).

Emerging towards the end of Foucault’s life, the notion of ‘governmentality’ spawned a mass of secondary literature from many of Foucault’s closest collaborators (see Burchell et al., 1991; Dean, 1999). What Foucauldian studies of governmentality do is identify the terms of social interventions that, via subtle power relations, have attempted to shape the ‘conduct of conduct’ – the management, and, thus, regulation, of populations and then analyse the ‘capillary action’ of these programmes on the various strata of society at which they are aimed (see Chapter 4). Critical social work has not looked deeply at the relations of power as the conduct of conduct and of power/knowledge within the domain of social work agencies. Critical social work assumes an ideological mode of operation by social workers on an oppressed population – service users. Such accounts tend towards the deterministic and do not take seriously enough the flowing variable character of the formations of practice. This weakness provides Critical social work with an all-too-easy link to the strategy of Critical theory that gives a picture of a standardised practice constituting and repeating patterns of injustice.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

We have shown that there is a distinct – though not always clearly perceptible – difference between those who advocate Critical social work and critical social work. As mentioned previously, Critical social work has an interesting symbiotic relationship with critical social work. The large ‘C’ has been referred to by some as the ‘beginning’ of critical social work (Fook, 2002). We have implied that a ‘radical’ or Critical approach to social work is weakened by a broader critical social work. Even though the term ‘radical’ is problematic, as the early writers themselves pointed out, the legacy of this ‘early’ writing is evident in various critical social work discourses, such as the literature on critical thinking skills, the questioning of dominant ideologies, locating one’s own values and social positioning – reflexivity – in relation to particular issues, organisational and social change strategies, caution over language use and traditional structural analysis. Gone is the questioning of the profession’s propensity to enact *radical* social change and instantiate policies of equality. This has been traded for structural analyses that underestimate the capacity of the individual – social worker and client – to enact change while working ‘within the system’ (see Chapter 2) or else for ‘critical reflection’ and language analytics that focus attention on the social worker’s subjective construction and deconstruction of the client’s situation as determinants in their analysis (see Chapter 18).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

We would like to end by making some positive recommendations for Critical social work that draw attention to its significance for practice.

In providing analyses for practice contexts, it would benefit from concentrating on three related levels:

- paying closer attention to the minutiae of governmentality as practices and flows of power, as ‘the conduct of conduct’;
- moving beyond orthodox Marxism to theorise ‘the State’ and its apparatus as bio-politics, policing and regulatory power;
- recognising the perverse influence of the ‘marketisation of everything’ under neoliberalism including personal and family relations.

The postmodern turn does not facilitate such an analysis and impedes serious empirical investigations of relations power and the politics of refusal.

Critical social work’s contribution to a progressive Left agenda would also be less hindered if it focused its analytical lens on ideology and ideological formations, in the spirit of Alain Badiou, Antonio Gramsci and Nicos Poulantzas, rather than the neologism of dominant discourses.

If we are correct in saying that Critical social work is both a symptom of and reaction to modernity, it should drop its postmodern pretensions by concentrating on the acute and deleterious effects of late modernity – particularly those of neoliberalism – on social work. As noted by John Solas (2002: 128), ‘if postmodernism is such a thoroughly baseless,

reductive and inert doctrine, then why persist with it? The poverty of postmodernism prompts a timely return to the rich legacy of Marxism’.

The lasting importance of Critical social work is that it has provided a theoretical foundation for articulating the complexities social workers often experience in practice, especially in seeking to achieve change. Indeed, unlike many other theories in social work that are either politically neutral or servants to dominant systems of power, Critical social work is affirmative about the possibilities of progressive transformation. It adheres to strong notions of social justice, equality and freedom. This is undoubtedly part of its strength and appeal.

The political critique undertaken by Critical social work centres on the theoretical implications of concepts that sustain a transformative tradition of engagement, commitment and action that posit the possibility of new political forms. This entails its opposition to mainstream forms of social work theory and practice that find their legitimacy as either examples of professional expertise or servants to the Prince. The aim of Critical social work is practical, but its grounds of justification are political and ethical. In this sense, Critical social work is superior to mainstream theory *as theory*, by which we mean that it is superior in terms of its knowledge. This is most evident in the way that Critical social work takes the important steps towards a reflexive turn of theory that conceives of itself as an agonistic event in the political life of modern societies.

Notwithstanding the criticisms raised above, what Critical theory in social work is, above all, then, is derived from the level of engagement it achieves *through its thought* in permitting a ‘self-awareness’ as the first step in engaging in processes of social and political transformation. There has been much debate and discussion in social theory and political philosophy about an upsurge of renewed interest in radical and progressive politics. In part this has occurred due to what David Harvey (2012) calls ‘the crisis of capitalism’ and continued violence of neoliberalism. It is also mobilised by the emergence of a new and talented group of Left and Marxist thinkers, including Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière and David Harvey himself. This progressive work was showcased at the March 2009 conference ‘The Idea of Communism’ organised by the Birkbeck Institute for Humanities in London. The conference had huge political significance with contributors developing new forms of political radicalism that particularly resonated among young people and was the first occasion for bringing together some of the most interesting philosophers of the Left under the name of communism. As finance capitalism shows signs of collapse, radical Marxist thinkers claim ‘the long night of the Left is over’. These rich strands of radical thought drawn from this new Left group assists in framing the way a Critical social work can be instantiated. This is oriented by taking a political stance that is inherently antagonistic against its adversaries: neoliberalism and parliamentary capitalism, while projecting an emancipatory intent by which to comprehend new social movements without ignoring long-standing problems of structural economic inequality and injustice. In the name of this radical project David Harvey (2012: 277) urges us to:

constructively rebel if we are to change our world in any fundamental way. The problem of endless compound growth through endless capital accumulation will have to be confronted and overcome. This is the political necessity of our times.

Social work owes it as much to itself as to its clients to confront the dominant neoliberal apparatus with every tactic available to it. Much good work has been achieved recently in

critical social work. Michael Lavalette's (2011) *Radical Social Work Today* and Iain Ferguson's (2008) *Reclaiming Social Work: Challenging neo-liberalism and promoting social justice* are fine examples of how the long night of the social work Left is drawing to a close. The development of the Social Work Action Network (SWAN) in Britain is an example of social workers on the Left organising against the impact and austerity cuts of neoliberal capitalism. The launch of the new Policy Press journal *Critical and Radical Social Work* is also an important development to be supported. In this vein, a new politics of Critical social work is a *renewed politics* building on radical trajectories that have been persistent in the profession at least since the 1970s. To return to the insights offered by Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 8), he made no secret of the significance offered by the role of the critical practitioner when he noted that:

What I defend above all is the possibility and the necessity of the critical intellectual, who is firstly critical of the intellectual *doxa* secreted by the doxosophers. There is no genuine democracy without genuine opposing critical powers. The intellectual is one of those, and of the first magnitude.

### Study questions

- 1 Read Orme on feminism (Chapter 7) and Murray and Hick on structural social work (Chapter 9) and identify three key features from each chapter, explaining why they lend themselves to Critical social work theory.
- 2 How can social workers taking a critical stance in practice confront the exploitation and injustices of a neo-liberal capitalist system?
- 3 Does 'postmodernism' (Chapter 12) make a positive contribution to Critical social work theory?

## GLOSSARY

**Alienation** Refers to the negative effects for individuals of living in certain types of modern society. The concept is often used to refer to a person's estrangement, loneliness and dissatisfaction that are felt especially in everyday life.

**Critical theory** Originated as an organising concept in the work of German social and political scientists, particularly those working at the Frankfurt School, including Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas (see Chapter 1) and Max Horkheimer.

**Critical poststructural theory** This is a variant of structuralism in anthropology and literary theory that derives from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Poststructuralism encompasses the intellectual developments of Continental – French – philosophers. This is often referred to as the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy, whereby meaning, beliefs and values were seen to be determined by and reduced to linguistic or language systems as expressed in text, narrative and conversation (see Chapters 17 and 18).

**Deconstruction** Derives from the philosophy of Jacques Derrida and has been particularly influential in literary criticism and social theory. The operation of deconstruction is a method that shows how unifying and enduring concepts in Western philosophy – such as truth, reason, universality and progress – are, in fact, rhetorical constructions based on the function of language. It shows how dominant meanings and symbols that we assume are the truth are little more than textual manoeuvres and shifts that demonstrate the value-ladenness of the author's intention.

**Doxa** The fundamental, deep-founded, unthought beliefs, taken as self-evident universals, that inform an agent's actions and thoughts within a particular field. Doxa tends to favour the particular social arrangement of the field, thus privileging the dominant and taking their position of dominance as self-evident and universally favourable (see Wikipedia).

**Governmentality** This feature of Foucauldian analyses of power, which has been more recently developed in the work of Nikolas Rose, Mitchell Dean and Pat O'Malley, is different from other analyses of power in its emphasis on the micro-power of concrete social relations, which is often referred to as 'the conduct of conduct' – that is, how individuals monitor, regulate and observe themselves in ways that conform to the normalising requirements of dominant systems, such as schools, religions and the State.

**Ideology** An organised set of ideas or beliefs formed by normative regimes of power that purport to form a comprehensive vision of the truth. Marxist analysis of ideology shows it to be a set of ideas proposed by the dominant class of society to all members of society. In this way, it is constructed as a normative truth. Hence, the main function of ideology is to maintain the existing social order through normative processes.

**Liberal humanism** Derived from liberal theory, which affirms the individual dignity and worth of people based on their ability to determine right and wrong by appealing to universal human qualities, particularly the use of reason. It entails a commitment to the search for truth and morality through rational means to support human interests and emphasises the importance of free will, self-determination, respect for persons and positive freedom.

## FURTHER READING

David Harvey's (2012) *The Enigma of Capitalism and the Crisis of Capitalism* is crucial for social workers wishing to take a critical stance. Social work journals that endorse a Critical social work stance are *Social Work and Society*, *Critical Social Work* and the *Journal of Progressive Human Services*. A new journal launched by Policy Press is *Critical and Radical Social Work*, edited by Michael Lavalette and Iain Ferguson. A good introduction to Critical theory is Agger (1998). Key social work texts are Allan et al. (2009), Ferguson and Woodward (2009) Fook (2002), Harris and White (2009), Healy (2000), Lavalette (2011) and Taylor and White (2000). See Mel Gray and Stephen Webb's *New Politics of Critical Social Work* published by Palgrave in 2012 and Gray, Stepney and Webb (2012).

# 9

## STRUCTURAL SOCIAL WORK

KATE M. MURRAY AND STEVEN F. HICK

### INTRODUCTION

The emergence of structural social work in Canada during the mid-1970s and its subsequent development, mainly by Canadian social work scholars, challenges the individual-level focus of conventional social work which emphasises client adaptation and support provision within existing political–economic and social contexts. Structural social work (along with other radical approaches) suggests that real advances in social welfare cannot be achieved without fundamental changes to the global organisation and distribution of resources and power. The approach draws from various critical, historical perspectives – including Marxism, feminism, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, radical humanism and postmodernism – to emphasise how oppressive structural relations of patriarchal capitalism, colonialism, racism, heterosexism, ableism and ageism, among others, lie at the ‘root’ of social problems (Carniol, 2005a; Lecompte, 1990; Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 2007; Payne, 2005). Structural social work emphasises social transformation but does not neglect personal issues and individual difficulties; these are understood as related. Hence, structural social work, like radical social work, has twin goals: alleviating the negative effects of an exploitative and alienating social order on individuals, while simultaneously aiming to transform society (Moreau et al., 1993; Mullaly, 2007).

### KEY IDEAS

Structural social work is grounded in critical social theories. Beginning in the 1930s, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School critiqued traditional theory for merely describing how society functions, rather than exposing and challenging how ‘society’ itself is constructed. These and other critical theories interrogate how historical and contemporary relations of

domination impact on consciousness, such that humans can come to participate in reproducing their own dehumanisation and exploitation (see Fanon, 1961; Smith, 1987). Within critical Marxist, feminist and anti-colonial traditions, thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, Franz Fanon, Betty Friedan and Paulo Freire began exploring processes through which individuals might become critically aware of, and active in transforming, these internalised everyday relations of injustice.

Key features of structural social work include a critique of unjust social, political and economic relations; a focus on power, privilege and multiple oppressions; a dialectical understanding of agency and social structures; and a commitment to social transformation.

## CRITIQUE OF UNJUST SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS

Structural social work draws on critical *materialist* analyses, which emphasise physical and economic conditions as pivotal elements of the social world. It critiques and challenges the relations through which a minority of powerful (mostly white, male, able-bodied and heterosexual) global elites amass wealth and power through the exploitation and oppression of poor, oppressed and working groups. Historically, European nations, including England, France, Spain and Portugal, ‘used a combination of force, gunboat diplomacy, and trade to exploit the people, lands, and natural resources of other continents’ (Carniol, 2005b: 9). White colonisers gained access to land, resources and labourers through theft and enslavement and – backed by religious and moral beliefs about their own racial and cultural superiority – imposed their economies, religions and patriarchal social structures on Indigenous Peoples around the world. These colonial and imperial patterns continue today as, for instance, powerful global financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund impose ‘structural adjustment’ policies on poor countries. These policies require poor countries to privatise public services (like healthcare and education) and sell collective resources (like minerals and forests) while reducing corporate taxes and regulations. The overall effect has been a transfer of power and wealth (through loan repayments and corporate profit) from poor to rich countries and from the less affluent to the wealthy (see Seabrook, 2002). This pattern is especially devastating for the most vulnerable population groups – particularly women, youth and those with disabilities; money that could have been used for health, education and housing has been transferred to wealthy bankers and investors (Danaher, 1994).

Within local contexts, racist colonial histories and the ongoing organisation of paid and unpaid work within capitalism continue to maintain patriarchy, profits and private property. Rights, resources and rewards are allocated differentially on the basis of inter alia gender, class, racialisation, sexuality, age and perceived (dis)ability (Carniol, 2005b; Moreau with Leonard, 1989).

Structural social work’s critical analyses interrogate how taken-for-granted social institutions, including schools, churches, the media, the family and the State, maintain hegemonic forms of group living and sexuality – for instance, the nuclear family and heterosexuality – that reinforce economic arrangements (Moreau with Leonard, 1989). These institutions also



reinforce *ideologies* – partial or selective ways of thinking that are limited within certain horizons or parameters (see Allman, 2001). For example, contemporary institutions cultivate ideologies of individualism, choice and meritocracy – the idea that anyone can get ahead through skill, hard work and a positive attitude (see Seabrook, 2002). These beliefs persist despite widespread experiences to the contrary, including those of the 9 million employed US-Americans whose hard work has not enabled them to surpass the official poverty line (Stanford, 2008). Feminist analyses, along with those of anti-colonial, poststructural and other postmodern scholars, explore how power is subtly and reflexively constituted within multiple everyday and discursive relations. In addition to these subtle forms of domination and coercion, unjust political and economic arrangements are maintained by institutions of regulation and correction, including the police, armed forces, courts and social services.

## FOCUS ON POWER: MULTIPLE INTERSECTIONS OF OPPRESSION AND PRIVILEGE

The central concern of structural social work is power (Moreau, 1979). Structural social work draws on a range of critical theories with their multiple analyses of diverse forms of oppression. It seeks to expose how contemporary social arrangements entail structural relations of inequality, increasing or decreasing access to opportunities, resources and power for certain groups, and resulting in multidimensional individual and collective experiences of oppression or privilege.

In confronting women's oppression, feminist ideas and struggles have exposed how women's so-called 'personal' experiences of inter alia childcare, housework, sexuality, domestic violence and femininity are shaped by, and reinforce, broader institutional relations of patriarchal domination and male privilege (see, for example, Baines et al., 1998; Smith, 1987). Notwithstanding the subordination of 'women' as a political category, working-class, racialised and queer women have challenged the feminist myth of *universal sisterhood* and feminism's ability to represent Indigenous women (Monture-Angus, 1999, in Ewashen, 2003).

Critical race theories illustrate how language, religion, nationality, ancestry and skin colour continue to be the basis of inequality and oppression (hooks, 1984; Ing, 1991; Satzewich, 1998). Racism often occurs subtly and invisibly, via institutional arrangements built on assumptions of *whiteness* (Frankenberg, 1993). Racist beliefs and practices are, in part, the basis of colonial relations through which Indigenous Peoples historically and currently experience cultural and physical violence (e.g. through forced displacement, poverty and disproportionate imprisonment), and non-indigenous settlers have gained illegitimate privilege through access to land and resources (see Carniol, 2005b).

In response to oppression based on gender and sexuality, queer theory and other critical understandings of sexual diversity explore how social arrangements are infused with heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia based on assumed heterosexuality and gender 'norms' (O'Brien, 1994; Richardson, 1996).

Critical disability theories challenge oppressions based in perceived ability and disability, illustrating how 'disabilities' are socially constructed via barriers, assumptions and sociopolitical

conditions, rather than constituting a ‘medical condition requiring rehabilitation’ (Dunn et al., 2008). While existing supports or arrangements for those who are young, able-bodied, healthy and male are seen as *entitlements*, people requiring a different kind of help are assumed to be ‘needy’ or ‘dependent’ (Wendell, 1996). The oppression of people with disabilities is understood in terms of these relations and conditions.

Moreau (1988: 4–5) described how structural social work ‘places alongside each other the divisions of class, gender, race, age, ability/disability and sexuality’ which are not placed in a hierarchy of importance, but are seen to generate ‘highly interconnected but irreducible social forces’ within advanced, patriarchal capitalism. Structural social work explores how, through these interrelated structural, cultural and personal relations of power, organised illegitimate privilege is achieved by certain groups at the expense of others (Carniol, 2005b).

The approach uses the concept of *internalised oppression* to understand how individuals can become influenced by ideologies that characterise them as *undeserving* and can come to accept their exploited position (e.g. Moreau, 1979, 1990; Moreau with Leonard, 1989; Mullaly, 2002, 2007). Meanwhile, those who are privileged tend to view their advantages (for instance, family inheritances) as *entitlements* (Carniol, 2005b; Mullaly, 2007). Structural social work thinkers and practitioners have continued to refine this analysis by attending to historically marginalised voices and by enlisting postmodern sensibilities and insights. (For a discussion of postmodern and poststructural theory, see Chapter 12.) Experiences of oppression or privilege are often shared collectively, but are also unique to individuals (Lundy, 2004). Further, there is fluidity in group membership and differences (e.g. in status, power and historical context) between and *within* different oppressed groups (Mullaly, 2002). Postmodernism’s diffuse (versus state-centred) view of power, which Hick (2005) describes as reflexive, assembled and coordinated rather than simply possessed, enables understanding of how oppression and resistance have multiple sources based on a diversity of positions, perspectives and identities expressed through specific interactions in local arenas (Carniol, 2005a, 2005b).

## DIALECTICAL ANALYSIS

Thinking dialectically entails thinking in terms of relations. Marx critiqued Hegel’s dialectic as *idealist* (focusing on abstract thoughts) and developed a *materialist* form of dialectical thinking that discerned how, through history, the material world is pivotal in influencing human ideas and sociality. Marx’s distinctive philosophy of internal – or inner – relations ‘involves apprehending a real phenomenon as either part of or the result of a relation, a unity of two opposites that could not have historically developed nor exist as they presently do outside the way in which they are related’ (Allman, 1999: 63). While many approaches – often those described as ‘scientific’ – attempt to understand society one part at a time, ‘isolating and separating it from the rest, and treating it as static’, dialectical theorising assumes we cannot adequately understand our world without recognising how ‘the “bigger picture”, both spatially and temporally (past and future), enters into and affects whatever we perceive directly and immediately’ (Ollman, 1998: 339).

Structural social work uses dialectical thinking to understand the relationship between human agency and social structures in shaping experiences of privilege and oppression. In

many theories, ‘agency’ and ‘structure’ are perceived as separate and one or the other is given priority. On one extreme are analyses, including contemporary, conservative ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, that attribute life experiences exclusively to personal actions and *choices*; liberal notions of a ‘level playing field’ assume that those who are poor, are criminalised or who experience addiction have *chosen* this through ‘irresponsible behaviour’ (Carniol, 2005b). At the other extreme, are structuralist–determinist theories which hold that social laws or structures control individuals’ lives such that individuals are merely *victims* of structures that cannot be changed.

Structural social work rejects this perceived duality between ‘individuals’ and ‘structures’ – viewing this as (partial or fragmented) ideological thinking – and understands these as existing in dialectical relation, wherein each affects (perpetuates or transforms) the other. This agency–structure dialectic was clarified by Marxist existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre who described how objective, worldly, material and social *facts* (e.g. institutions, culture and political–economic arrangements) actually stem from concrete, historical human *praxis* (thought and action). In turn, these arrangements condition future praxis such that we are continually faced with ‘genuine options in concrete situations’ (Flynn, 2004: para 24). Pre-existing conditions act as compelling ‘invitations’ to act and think in particular ways, but we can still choose otherwise (see Feehan et al., 2010). Then again, sometimes our *field of choice* is very narrow. Dialectical thinking thus understands individuals’ social location, oppression and privilege as relational, historical and contextual – continually produced, reproduced or transformed through the cumulative choices and actions of individuals within particular social, cultural, political, economic and material circumstances.

## COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Social workers are rarely hired as activists; most work in government-funded institutions or agencies. Some conventional beliefs that ‘professionalism’ requires non-directiveness and value-neutrality suggest social workers can or should ‘leave their politics at home’. Other critical, but sometimes rigid, analyses of social location understand social workers primarily as agents of State authority whose professional self-interest and/or embeddedness in dominant power structures inevitably render them unable to engage in actions that fundamentally challenge the dominant social order (see McDonald, 2006; McKnight, 1995; Meyer, 1981). Recognising the significant constraints associated with professional and institutional status, the structural approach nonetheless asserts that social workers can and should critically investigate social, economic and political injustices to reveal how they can be dismantled and to work actively towards social transformation based on values of freedom, humanitarianism, collectivism, equality, self-determination and popular participation. Carniol (2005b) states that, although full liberation is elusive within an overall system that is highly oppressive, social workers can work from experiences of *partial liberation*, acting in solidarity with others to resist and transform injustices.

Integral to this assertion is Marx’s formulation of consciousness as a theory of *praxis* which postulates a dialectical, inner connection – or unity – of thought and action: ‘we do not

stop thinking when we act, and thinking itself is a form of action' (Allman, 2001: 167). Allman (2001: 72) develops the term *uncritically reproductive praxis* to signal how, by participating in 'the relations and conditions that we find already existing in the world and assum[ing] that these are natural and inevitable . . . these material relations become integrated into our thinking'. However, she describes how praxis can become critical and revolutionary when, instead of participating in the reproduction of existing relations, we critically grasp and work to abolish or transform both the relations and the conditions they maintain (Allman, 2001). This suggests how oppressive institutions can be transformed over time and how everyday practices (e.g. of family roles and the workplace) are dialectically related to broad social and political conditions.

As we have described elsewhere, authors have suggested how structural social work practitioners might envision and contribute to transformed relations of social and ecological justice (Murray and Hick, 2010). For instance, Mullaly (1993) noted that social agencies often force their frontline staff to mimic capitalist practices and values; he suggested radical practices through which these structural relations of domination might be resisted (see *Implications for social work practice*, below). In addition, he has advocated the dismantling of capitalism via public control of the economy and redistribution of resources according to equity and/or need (e.g. through solidaristic wages to counter concentrations of wealth); universal provision of services, such as healthcare and education; comprehensive environmental planning; and participatory democracy (Mullaly, 2007). As we illustrate in the final section, an increasing number of individuals are engaging with structural social work in research, education and practice, and are documenting these experiences in order to explore how the approach might contribute to transformative change from within the specific realities of diverse and complex practice contexts.

Meanwhile, postmodern critique has deconstructed modernist concepts embedded within structural social work, such as those prescribing one 'linear track' to emancipation (Carniol, 2005a; Mullaly, 2007). Feminist, racialised, indigenous, queer, anti-colonial and poststructural scholars have critiqued an undifferentiated notion of 'we' that is assumed to share common experiences, needs and visions of the future. These critiques have enriched structural social work's approach to transformative praxis, underscoring that, unlike rigid, deterministic appropriations of Marx's ideas, a radically different socially and ecologically just future cannot be fully conceptualised ahead of time. Descriptions and suggestions demonstrate possibility by identifying transformed practices and relations that might be nurtured and/or recreated imaginatively elsewhere. However, there is need for continuous attentiveness and openness to critique and change. Ultimately, individuals 'learn together how to build the future – which is not something given to be received by people, but is rather something to be created by them' (Freire, 1996, in Thompson, 2006: 105).

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

Structural social work has developed through time, in response to changing social, economic and political contexts, theoretical discourse and reflexivity in practice (see Chapter 18).

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Until the 1960s, the dominant approach to social work practice was social ‘casework’ – initially a pseudo-medical methodology for diagnosing and treating individual behaviours that came to incorporate Freudian psychoanalytic principles. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, economic and political upheaval and the heightened consciousness of second-wave feminist, gay and lesbian, environmental, labour, independence and Indigenous activism increased awareness of collective aspects of social problems. Systems and humanistic theories began to challenge diagnostic categories and medical concepts of ‘causality’. The anti-psychiatry movement and critical sociological theories, especially labelling and deviancy theories, exposed the social control functions of social work and challenged traditional professional definitions (Moreau, 1988).

Radical authors criticised social casework – even after its psychodynamic and ecosystems transformations – as ineffective, elitist, forcing adaptation to injustice, pathologising social problems and valuing professional self-interest over client needs (Moreau with Leonard, 1989). In response, many progressive social workers turned to holistic ecosystems theories; for instance, Ruth Middleman and Gale Goldberg’s (e.g. 1974) approach (also named ‘structural social work’) identified the social environment as the source of social problems. However, others took up critical approaches rooted in feminism and Marxism, noting systems theories’ failure to address interpersonal, material and structural power imbalances adequately (Moreau, 1988). Embracing these insights, Carleton University students in Canada demanded action against institutional injustice, fostering structural social work’s simultaneous focus on individual change and longer-term structural transformation (Moreau with Leonard, 1989).

Conservative global trends in the 1980s led to the declining visibility and perceived impracticality of transformative approaches. However, the 1990s saw a renewed resurgence of radical or critical social work literature. Beginning in 1993, Mullaly’s *Structural Social Work* aimed to provide social workers with a nuanced analysis of contemporary sociopolitical and economic issues and a coherent framework for radical practice. Fook’s (1993) *Radical Casework* simultaneously advanced transformative methods for practice. Subsequently, there have been several noteworthy contributions to this literature (e.g. Baines, 2007; Carniol, 1992, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Dominelli, 1997b, 2002a, 2002b; Fook, 2002; Hick et al., 2005, 2010; Ife, 1997, 2001; Leonard, 1997; Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 1997, 2007; Pease and Fook, 1999; Reisch and Andrews, 2002; Shera, 2003). Despite academic interest, Reisch and Andrews (2002: 226) describe concerted attempts by the mainstream US social work profession to suppress radical practice, describing this as ‘the road not taken’ by the profession as a whole.

## ONGOING PRAXIS

As an increasing number of scholars, educators and practitioners are drawing on structural social work in Canada, the UK and elsewhere, the approach continues to be challenged and enriched in theory and practice. One such challenge has taken the form of calls for increased

theoretical clarity. Perhaps because of Middleman and Goldberg's (1974) ecosystems approach which goes by the same name, structural social work seems lost or blurred within a string of similar approaches, including critical, political, progressive, radical, anti-discriminatory and, especially, anti-oppressive social work. Terms differ across contexts; approaches with similar theoretical roots have developed as 'structural social work' in Canada, 'critical social work' in Australia (e.g. Allan et al., 2003, 2009; Gray and Webb, 2009) and 'radical social work' in the UK (e.g. Ferguson and Woodward, 2009; Lavalette, 2011).

Despite its dialectical understanding (and perhaps owing to the approach's title), some authors have continued to critique structural social work as deterministic, overemphasising structure at the expense of personal, lived experience (Hart, 2001, in Harris, 2006; Rossiter, 1996). Hillock and Profitt (2007: 39) suggest that social workers are often 'unclear and imprecise about what [they] mean by structural change and how [they] can make these changes happen'. Carniol (1979) suggests this relates, in part, to stereotypical and oppressive versions of Marxism that discredit attempts to present alternatives to capitalist exploitation. Ongoing efforts to document and theorise particular examples of structural social work practice respond, in part, to this concern.

Additional tensions and developments concern structural social work's analysis of interconnected structural relations of oppression. Carniol (2005b: 60) describes this analysis as a key strength of the approach, noting that Moreau 'expanded the scope of radical social work in Canada by . . . arguing that multiple oppressions were interwoven into the structures of systemic inequality. [Moreau] warned about the futility of debates trying to show that any one particular oppression was . . . more central than another'. Carniol (personal communication with Hick, 18 March 2007), along with Fook (1993) and Mullaly (1993) suggest this has enabled structural social work to foster solidarity and coherence among various critical social work traditions. Carniol (pers. comm. 2007) further describes how structural social work's distinct analysis has enabled receptivity to new areas of critical awareness over time, for instance critique of historic and contemporary colonialism, and calls to transform international trade structures. Indeed, recent Canadian publications have described the complementary use of structural social work with queer theory (Coates and Sullivan, 2005; Murphy, 2007), postmodern feminism (Murphy, 2007; Todd and Burns, 2007), family systems therapy and ecological systems theory (Coates and Sullivan, 2005), Africentric theory (Thomas Bernard and Marsman, 2010) and Indigenous perspectives (Baskin, 2003; Carniol, 2005b).

At the same time, scholars have warned of the problems associated with combining distinct critical analyses within one framework, cautioning that this has potential to obscure, leave out or risk the integrity of these important critiques. Razack and Jeffery (2002: 259) assert that there has been a dangerous weakening of focus on racism and the oppressive ideology of whiteness as 'core analyses of race have been . . . cloaked under the rhetoric of anti-oppression, diversity, cross-cultural approaches, and [the ideology of] multiculturalism'. Baines (2003) highlights how the racisms faced by, for instance, Chinese, African or Jewish Canadians are multiple and distinct, and Tester (2003a) describes how such diverse experiences of oppression require different analytical and practice tools. Related, are concerns that structural social work's incorporation of postmodern sensibilities, including emphasis on difference, power as diffuse, localism and fragmentation, may obscure structural historical domination, enable *anything goes* relativism and play into the divide-and-rule tactics

employed by agents of increasingly consolidated power and wealth (see Ife, 1997; Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 1997, 2007). Based on such insights, Carniol (pers. comm. 2007) emphasises that structural social work's analysis must remain different from versions of social work that try to homogenise distinct structural oppressions into a 'vague mush', or characterise oppression as subjective and individual.

The concept of oppression is linked to additional concerns. In his discussion of anti-oppressive practice, Tester (2003a) cautions that prioritising *oppression* as a framework is dubious, given its problem focus and potential reduction to binary definitions of *oppressor–oppressed*. Further, social work students and educators describe how classroom explorations of oppression can bring disorientation, pain, anger, powerlessness and guilt, as well as clashes with the approach of students' practice settings (Ewashen 2003; George et al., 2007b). Hughes et al. (2003) describe how idealised notions of classroom 'safety' can become confused with *comfort* for students with dominant subjectivities, creating permission for sexist and homophobic attitudes, while sanctioning defensiveness, and can mean personal vulnerability for those students who are called on to act as 'spokespersons' for their exoticised and homogenised culture or minority group.

Critical scholars have also critiqued the concept of *internalised oppression*, insofar as it evokes the problematic notion of 'false consciousness'. Rossiter (1996: 26) notes that structural social work has tended to view service users as 'blank slates . . . awaiting inscription by a politically aware social worker'. Both she and Tester (2003a) warn that any tendency towards designating another's perception as a 'false framework' is disempowering.

Though these critiques are important, none of these thinkers is suggesting that taken-for-granted relations and practices of oppression should go unchallenged. Carniol (2007, pers. comm.) describes how dialectical, relational understandings of power are helpful in viewing each individual (including ourselves and all 'oppressors') as capable of and responsible for choice, but simultaneously as subject to social structures that facilitate exploitative relations (see also Feehan et al., 2010). Tester (2003a, 2003b) suggests that, instead of debating what is *true* or *false*, social workers can honour differing cultural perspectives through moral and philosophical deliberations about values, inclinations, strengths and common ground, recognising how these develop through individuals' histories, commitments and reflexivity.

Additional critiques have emphasised that, even as structural social work has sought to learn from emerging perspectives and critiques of oppression, this process remains incomplete. Baines (1999: 457) critiqued Mullaly's (1997) epistemology of structural social work suggesting that instead of integrating feminist insights, it offers a 'broad Marxist approach with a few gestures at social work as a female terrain'. Likewise, there are increased calls for structural social work to acknowledge the distinct experiences of Indigenous Peoples (Baskin, 2003; George et al., 2007b; Gray et al., 2008). With the exception of Carniol (2005b), key structural social work publications (e.g. Lundy, 2004; Moreau, 1979, 1990; Moreau with Leonard, 1989; Mullaly, 1993, 1997, 2007) have been somewhat superficial in addressing First Nations' experiences and worldviews – for instance, cooperation, giving (versus accumulation), respect for elders and children, attention to holism and balance, and the struggle for decolonisation (Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird and Herherington, forthcoming; Murray and Hick, 2010).

Finally, Lysack (2010a) has noted that the field of social work is devoid of any substantial discussion of environmental issues or engagement with ecological problems. Meanwhile, the

environmental literature is replete with accounts of the way in which environmental events, such as natural disasters and climate change, impact heavily on marginalised and oppressed peoples (Bullard, 1993, 2000). Lysack and others advocate an ecological orientation, including understanding problems in a larger ecological context, despair/empowerment work, sensitivity to physical space, and reinhabiting our bioregions and bodies (see also *International Journal of Social Welfare*, Special Issue on Environmental Social Work, Vol. 21 Issue 3; Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., forthcoming).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Structural social work practices are guided by the approach's twin goals of alleviating the negative effects of exploitation, while simultaneously seeking to transform the underlying structural conditions and relations that cause these negative effects (Mullaly, 2007). Because of this dual focus, practices of structural social work are wide-ranging; they can include 'macro-level' interventions to seemingly 'conventional' and 'micro-level' activities including counselling, group work and referral. Within the structural (and other critical) traditions of social work, helping practices are informed and 'radically extended' (Fook, 1993) through analysis of, and opposition to, historical and contemporary structural relations of power, including those embedded within social work. Addressing immediate issues and needs is seen as important and necessary, but insufficient if practices do not also challenge underlying structural relations of oppression and privilege.

Because structural social work does not prescribe a particular set of practices, and because it developed in opposition to the dominant overemphasis on pseudo-medical case-work techniques throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the approach has been critiqued for failing to offer concrete skills and frameworks to practitioners wanting to implement it. In response, various publications have provided descriptions or suggestions outlining what structural social work *looks like* in practice (e.g. George and Marlowe, 2005; George et al., 2007a; Hick et al., 2010; Lundy, 2004; Moreau with Leonard, 1989; Moreau et al., 1993; Mullaly, 2007). These accounts make an important contribution, however it is also worth bearing in mind Moreau and Leonard's (1989) caution against the assumed need for practice tools. An overemphasis on skills, they note, can reinforce dominant beliefs that locate social problems – and their solutions – within the realm of the individual; responsibility for problem-solving thus becomes centred within a social worker's 'expert' performance of a particular technique or competency. McDonald (2006) describes how a heightened focus on 'competencies' in social work is also indicative of the neoliberal governance rationality of New Public Management.

While they include a diversity of activities and contexts, structural social work practices can be understood in terms of a coherent set of interrelated themes; these are illustrated below, with examples:

- 1 *Awareness-raising*: education and consciousness-raising based on critical dialogue, analysis and action.
- 2 *Collective approaches and responses* to social issues.



- 3 *Materialisation*: grounding problems in access to and distribution of resources and prioritising material needs.
- 4 *Anti-oppressive alliances* between individuals and groups.
- 5 *Strategic, multi-level political action* to challenge structural injustices and advance rights and entitlements.

## AWARENESS-RAISING: EDUCATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

Through *uncritical or reproductive* praxis, historical and contemporary exploitative social relations have become integrated into how we understand our world and ourselves. Awareness-raising practices are undertaken to invite people, including institutional actors, the general public, service users and social workers themselves, to explore links between their own and others' thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and the social relations within which problems are embedded. Structural social work draws on feminist and other radical versions of consciousness-raising and education (e.g. Freire, 1970), versus those which are authoritative or expert-prescriptive.

Education and consciousness-raising based on critical social analysis and action can take many forms:

- *Group work*: In their work on child sexual abuse, practitioners carefully explore, with both victims and perpetrators, the historical–structural 'social processes that invite both perpetration and victimization'. This becomes the basis for facilitated activities wherein children practise supporting one another to challenge dominant relations of patriarchy (e.g. gender socialisation), depersonalisation (e.g. ideologies of ownership and wealth accumulation) and dominant cultural attitudes towards sex (Feehan et al., 2010: 61).
- *Organisational development*: Members and allies of a collaborative project critically discuss and reflect on their modes of decision-making and priorities for action (Brown et al., 2010).
- *Educating community and institutional decision-makers*: A collaborative confronts the labelling of racialised youth as 'at risk' using public forums, filmmaking, grant proposals and research (Wright et al., 2010).
- *Critical self-reflection*: Practitioners consider their own practice to confront their hidden beliefs and power issues (Peters, 2010).
- *Public actions*: A women's organisation holds a 'Take Back the Night' march to raise awareness about the right to live without fear of violence, harassment or sexual assault (Hemingway et al., 2010).
- *Emotional support and mutual aid*: Staff members support women in exposing oppressive narratives of victim-blaming or mother-blaming (Hemingway et al., 2010).

Practices of critical education and consciousness-building require openness to being challenged and informed by others' perspectives and the recognition that one cannot know what is *true* for others at a particular time or in a particular situation (see Feehan et al., 2010; Rossiter, 2006). They involve drawing on dialectical understandings of power and agency to explore one's own, fluid, capacity to perpetuate, resist or dismantle injustices. In doing so, workers and others seek to cultivate *critical or revolutionary* praxis – transformation of those ideas and practices which maintain oppressive relations and conditions (see Allman, 2001).

## COLLECTIVE APPROACHES AND RESPONSES

Education and consciousness-raising efforts are closely linked with collective approaches and responses to problems. Such practices entail supporting the identification of common concerns, and collective action to address them through formation of networks, solidarities and alliances among different individuals or groups (Moreau et al., 1993). For example:

- *Organisational cooperation*: Against the normal trend of secrecy and competition between organisations, member agencies of a collaborative networked, exchanged insider-information, shared resources and supported each other through times of crises or development (Wright et al., 2010).
- *Creation of collective spaces*: A youth project worked to develop Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs) in schools to create safer spaces in which queer youth and allies could affirm their experiences and/or work together to transform heterosexist institutional relations (Brown et al., 2010).
- *Linking seemingly separate struggles through analysis and collective action*: In Canada, the grassroots anti-colonial migrant justice group, No One Is Illegal – Vancouver (NOII, 2012), undertakes a range of campaigns, direct support, awareness-raising and solidarity actions based on common root causes of oppressions experienced by migrants and racialised and Indigenous Peoples.

## MATERIALISATION

Structural social work understands individuals' problems as grounded in their historical and contemporary relationships to land and distribution of material resources, emphasising the limits of self-help, mutual aid or counselling when these do not address the redistribution of power and resources. It prioritises meeting individual's material needs including: income, housing, food and necessities, and understands how economic inequality produces differential access to services, such as childcare, legal representation, healthcare, and resources including time (Moreau et al., 1993). The approach also emphasises how thoughts, feelings and behaviours are linked to historical and contemporary material circumstances, including displacement, labour conditions, ecological crises and relations of global, colonial and patriarchal capitalism.

Practices of materialisation are those which focus attention and actions on facilitating access to resources and disrupting unjust material relations and conditions:

- *Reducing barriers to access*: Practitioners arrange provision of childcare, meals and/or transportation to those participating in initiatives (Carniol and Del Valle, 2010; Wright et al., 2010).
- *Redistribution of resources*: An agency collective facilitates access to government funding for youth-led and youth-staffed projects and services, and redirects grant funding to shift focus from 'youth violence' to systemic violence affecting youth – including police targeting, racial profiling and poverty – as the root causes of this issue (Wright et al., 2010).
- *Emphasising the material foundations of seemingly personal issues*: A group work model makes explicit how disproportionate rates of addiction, incarceration, family violence and child sexual abuse within native communities are linked to material conditions, including the imposition of residential schools, indiscriminate apprehension of children and the failure to uphold treaty rights (Feehan et al., 2010).

- *Prioritising immediate needs for resources and services:* An organisation in rural India pursues structural change while simultaneously responding to immediate community needs for health, education, economic self-sufficiency and housing; they establish education centres modelled on Freire's (1970) approach to consciousness-raising and critical literacy, and hire Dalit and caste Hindu teachers to challenge discrimination based on untouchability (George and Marlowe, 2005).

## ANTI-OPPRESSIVE ALLIANCES

Instead of viewing social workers' interactions with others as top-down or expert-prescriptive, structural social work practices seek to highlight, challenge and minimise inequalities of power, and especially the systemic power or authority that frequently resides with workers (Carniol, 2005a). Often, this involves working collaboratively so that 'directly affected communities and individuals lead their own struggles, and those . . . who participate as allies do so from a position of solidarity not charity' (NOII, 2012 ). Such alliances emphasise self-determination and are explicit and proactive in addressing intersubjective relations of power. Anti-oppressive alliances can be enacted in various ways:

- *Minimising practitioners' power:* In counselling contexts, workers challenged the idea of professional 'expertise'; made transparent agreements and contracts; shared the rationale behind questions, practices and interpretations; shared personal experiences, perspectives and values; and supported the self-determination of individuals and groups (Moreau et al., 1993; Olivier, 2010).
- *Respect for self-determination in constructing meaning:* In awareness-raising dialogues, practitioners offered and invited analyses of structural relations of power, without re-victimising individuals by imposing the worker's interpretation (Feehan et al., 2010).
- *Sharing of responsibilities:* All members of a group introduced topics, offered analysis, identified common concerns and benefited from relations of mutual aid (versus one-way 'help' from the social worker-facilitator) (Olivier, 2010).
- *Creating cooperative models of resource and power-sharing:* In alternative – often feminist – modes of community-controlled service delivery, service users participate directly in organisational consensus-based decision-making (including staff hiring and evaluation), and workers' salaries are determined according to need (Carniol, 1979, 2005c).

## STRATEGIC, MULTILEVEL POLITICAL ACTION

Individuals' difficulties often relate to political and institutional relations that legitimise unequal access to rights, resources and power, for instance, restrictive and unfair welfare policies, policing or immigration procedures, or ongoing colonial denial of the rights of Indigenous communities. Often, social workers are capable of reinforcing or challenging these relations. Practices of structural social work may include political action within interpersonal, institutional and legislative spaces to oppose unjust relations and advance the legitimate rights and entitlements of individuals and groups:

- *Subverting repressive rules*: Practitioners may turn a blind eye to a service user's violation of policies; provide individuals with 'insider' knowledge; or deliberately avoid documenting certain kinds of information (Mullaly, 1997).
- *Challenging oppressive ideologies*: An alliance of youth agencies acted together to refuse municipal funding that would have required them to be complicit in constructing marginalised youth as 'gang members'; their collective refusal to participate effectively shut down the funding programme (Wright et al., 2010).
- *Opposing transgressions of rights and liberties*: A practitioner advocated for a mental health service user's legal rights in the restrictive context of community treatment order legislation (Schwartz and O'Brien, 2010). In response to government refusal to permit Dalits to start a school, a community agency filed a lawsuit causing the government to amend its decision and, in doing so, set a legal precedent (George and Marlowe, 2005).
- *Pushing for legislative and policy change*: Social workers engaged in political advocacy work that resulted in changes to provincial legislation (Olivier, 2010; Thomas Bernard and Marsman, 2010). Others may undertake collective organising against unjust organisational regulations or practices (Mullaly, 1997).

The above accounts of structural social work demonstrate how 'radical extensions' of social work practice can occur within interrelated personal, interpersonal, community-based, political and institutional spaces, not only within one's workplace but also in concert with broader struggles for justice (Olivier, 2010; see also Feehan et al., 2010). Many of the examples illustrate the enactment of two or more practice themes simultaneously, and each of them demonstrates a reflexive, collaborative and context-specific approach.

## TOWARDS RADICAL PRAXIS

Although the human capacity to produce the goods and services needed for global human and ecological well-being has never been greater, we continue to experience a global social order in which a minority of individuals benefit from the labour, subordination and relative (or sometimes extreme) poverty of the majority, and from ecological devastation. Economic crises in major world economies have increased threats to poor and working people's livelihoods, but economic policies continue to favour the global financial elite. Stephen Webb's (2010) analysis of Left politics shows that within social work, neoliberalism has led to increasing pressure in the name of efficiency, privatisation and consumer 'choice'. In practice, this has meant larger caseloads, job instability and lower wages, and severe cutbacks in welfare services (Carniol, 2005b; Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 2007). At the same time, there currently exists what appears to be a global climate of growing awareness, critique and opposition to these increasingly absurd and intolerable social, economic, political and ecological injustices. The structural approach suggests how social workers, despite the significant limits posed by their professional and institutional locations, might offer immediate and material support to individuals while simultaneously working with them to challenge and transform the structural relations which lie at the root of social injustice.

## Study questions

- 1 Betty is a 39-year-old Indigenous woman who grew up in a reserve community with a history of imposed residential schooling. After leaving a husband who was sometimes violent, she moved to the city to her mother's senior's apartment, but was evicted because her children were not allowed there. Now, her children have been apprehended by Child and Family Services because she was not providing appropriate shelter. Using structural social work practice principles, how might you work with Betty?
- 2 What is the difference between 'ideology', 'internalised oppression' and 'false consciousness'?
- 3 Working as a welfare caseworker, how could you use a dialectical understanding of structural relations of oppression and privilege to work towards systemic social change? What challenges might you face as you tried to do this and how would you confront these?

## GLOSSARY

**Dialectical thinking** Entails understanding phenomena in terms of relations. In this view, the social world is viewed as constantly changing based on the interplay between many historical personal, social and material elements.

**Ideological thinking** Partial or selective ways of thinking that are distorted, not because they are mythical falsities, but because they are limited within certain horizons or parameters; ideologies reflect partial or fragmented truths.

**Materialist analyses** View physical and economic conditions as pivotal in shaping, and being shaped by, the social world. Marx's materialist concept of history explores how people not only produce the material world, but in doing so, produce themselves.

**Praxis** Marx's conceptualisation of the dialectical unity of thought and action: we think as we act, and thinking is also action. Allman (after Marx) suggests praxis can be *uncritical/reproductive* when we participate in existing relations, or can be *critical/revolutionary* when we critically grasp unjust social relations and work to transform them.

**Social relations** Marx used this term to describe the dialectical interactions among people, and between people and the objects of their world. Our social world (including economic, cultural and individual ideas and activities) can be understood in terms of these relations.

## FURTHER READING

Moreau's (1979) 'A structural approach to social work practice' reflects the birth of structural social work and his *Empowerment through a Structural Approach to Social Work* (1989, with Leonard) illustrates the development of practice principles.

Starting in 1993, Mullaly's *Structural Social Work* (1993, 1997) and *The New Structural Social Work* (2007) advanced the approach based on critical theories, transformative feminism, black liberation philosophy and critical postmodern insights within a changing context of globalisation. Mullaly's *Challenging Oppression* (2002) provides an in-depth exploration of the central concept of oppression.

Hick began writing about structural social work in 1997 and integrated this in discussions about anti-oppressive practice (2002) and critical social work (2005). Hick et al. (2010) produced an edited collection of practice examples entitled *Structural Social Work in Action* and Lundy (2004) has also offered a practice-oriented text *Social Work and Social Justice*, a second edition of which is forthcoming.

Carniol's (2005a) article 'Structural social work (Canada)' in the *Encyclopedia of Social Welfare History in North America* outlines the approach's development over time. His *Case Critical* (now in its sixth edition, 2010 ) addresses the merging of structural social work theory and practice, as does his 1992 article introducing structural social work as Maurice Moreau's challenge to social work practice.

# 10

## MULTICULTURALISM

PURNIMA SUNDAR AND MYLAN LY

### INTRODUCTION

Rapid global change is a fact of life in the twenty-first century. Technological advances, expanded economies and enhanced systems of communication have facilitated and supported immigration on a massive scale throughout the world. As a result, the industrialised nations continue to experience growing ethnic, racial, cultural and religious diversity (see Glossary at the end of this chapter). Such shifts have prompted writers and policy-makers to study, discuss and debate the multiculturalism that has come to characterise cities and towns across the globe.

In both popular and academic texts, multiculturalism is distinguished from monoculturalism (where there is one homogeneous group in society) and assimilationism (where a majority group establishes political, behavioural and social norms that newcomers must emulate to ensure inclusion) (James, 2003). Multiculturalism is a philosophy that acknowledges and values diversity in society and describes the various tangible (that is, economic) and intangible (for example, social) benefits that result from different ethnic, cultural, racial and religious groups living together. Its goal is to support the full political, social and economic integration of all members of society. Both philosophically and practically, multiculturalism has unsettled traditional notions of collective national identity and exclusion and inclusion in society.

Multiculturalism is more than a simple way to describe culturally plural societies and how they function. Instead, multiculturalism is an *ideology* related to ethnic, cultural, racial and religious diversity that influences people's identities and behaviours. This ideology plays a critical role in shaping a country's nationhood and its reputation on the global stage. It is also reflected in a country's institutions and official policies. Finally, it guides the way that social workers understand and respond to diversity as helping professionals working in multicultural societies.

In this chapter, we explore the ideology of multiculturalism, its impact on institutional policies and its influence on the way social workers think about and shape their practice. We review the work of key thinkers, discuss how this ideology influences knowledge production and the development of practice guidelines in the field of social work and conclude by summarising major controversies related to multiculturalism.

## KEY IDEAS

Formal reflections on multiculturalism began to emerge in the late 1800s as intellectuals considered the cultural pluralism resulting from the European colonisation of North America and Africa. Writers such as sociologist W.E.B. DuBois and pragmatist philosopher William James adopted the view that such societies would create opportunities for people to embrace diversity and work towards a humanistic and egalitarian social world.

Today, ideas about multiculturalism vary considerably. Most of the debate centres on notions of identity, equality and difference. Multiculturalism presents a unique challenge to contemporary liberal democracies that strive to ensure equality for all members of society, such that they are viewed and treated in the same way, while at the same time making certain that diverse identities are valued and supported (Gutmann, 1994; Rattansi, 2004; Reitz, 2009). The question, then, is: within multicultural societies, is it possible for people from diverse groups to experience full economic, political, social and educational inclusion (that is, to be perceived as equals), while at the same time sustaining the traditions and practices unique to their cultural group (that is, to honour their differences) (Abu-Laban, 2002; Mydin, 2009)?

## ‘DIFFERENCE BLINDNESS’

Some would argue that, in order for a liberal democracy to function as intended, people need to practise a ‘difference blindness’ that ensures individual rights and privileges are applied to everyone in the same way, without reference to one’s cultural background, ethnicity, race and/or religion. This allows the State to maintain its neutrality in decisions about the allocation of resources, the application of the law and the general treatment of society’s members.

This view is clear in the writing of Canadian author Neil Bissoondath (1994), who suggests that focusing on people’s differences emphasises how they are *dissimilar* to one another and weakens a broader commitment to national unity. He argues that, in Canada, rather than promoting a shared sense of ‘Canadianness’, the emphasis on multiculturalism pits one group against another. According to this perspective, remaining committed to the ‘homeland’ identity prevents people’s full inclusion in the country in which they live and reinforces the inequality that exists between diverse groups and mainstream society.

Although sound in theory, the ‘difference blindness’ point of view has practical limitations. Despite an articulated commitment to equality, policies and laws are differentially applied to people and resources are unevenly distributed. This results in the sustained marginalisation of diverse groups and, ultimately, works in favour of the interests of the dominant group in society (middle- and upper-class white men) (Abu-Laban, 2002).



Clearly, differences based on culture, ethnicity, race and religion are real because they are real in their consequences (Dei et al., 2004). Society must, then, consider the various histories of oppression experienced by diverse groups to understand how they have significantly disadvantaged them in the past and decide how to repair this damage so that full inclusion and participation are ensured for the future.

## 'RECOGNITION OF DIFFERENCE'

As an alternative to the above perspective, it has been suggested that true equality and the protection of individual rights can only exist when there is the 'recognition of differences' between people and these differences are valued.

Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor has played a key role in developing this view. In his seminal chapter 'The politics of recognition' (1994), he traces the historical and theoretical roots of 'identity' and 'recognition' and applies them to the modern, liberal challenge of multiculturalism. Taylor draws on George Mead's (1962 [1934]) view of identity as a *process* that emerges through human interactions (rather than an objective 'thing') and the shared meanings that arise from such exchanges. Taylor describes human life as 'dialogical' and suggests that the way in which we are recognised by others is important because this influences the way we see ourselves. This has particular consequences for self-esteem and self-confidence (Taylor, 1994: 36):

The understanding that identities are formed in open dialogue, unshaped by a predefined social script, has made the politics of equal recognition more central and stressful. . . . Equal recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it. . . . The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized.

Ethnicity, culture, race and religion are critical aspects of our identities that help us navigate the complexities of the modern world. External recognition of these identities, however, results in the creation of a hierarchy in which some groups (read white, middle class and male) experience advantage while others (read people of colour and immigrants) experience marginalisation. As a result, it is difficult to maintain self-esteem, self-confidence and self-respect when one's ethnic, cultural, racial or religious background is used as the grounds for exclusion, at both interpersonal and systemic levels in society (Honneth, 2002; Schuster and Solomos, 2002).

According to Taylor, a necessary foundation for democracy is equality, with no one identity being privileged over another. At the same time, however, people need to be recognised as *having a unique identity in order to feel an authentic, strong sense of self*. Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka suggests a practical solution to this dilemma. In his work *Multicultural Citizenship* (1995), Kymlicka, like Taylor, highlights the importance of recognising and valuing diverse identities. He argues that, historically, liberalism has been focused solely on the rights of the individual at the expense of group rights. Further, political processes continue to reflect the interests of middle-class white men, whose views are consistent

with this liberal notion of an emphasis on the individual. Such processes do not support the needs of an increasingly diverse population as they exclude people of colour, women, people who are economically disadvantaged, people with disabilities and so on from full participation in society. Therefore, the goal of a liberal democracy in the age of heightened cultural pluralism should be to introduce a focus on group rights. These ‘special representation rights’ would eliminate barriers that prevent people from marginalised groups from participating in the political realm by designating spaces that would secure their role in shaping society. In this view, particular groups that have been disadvantaged historically need special privileges to restore equality.

The ‘recognition of differences’ perspective has been critiqued for its fixed view of identity and its lack of in-depth attention to the ways in which particular elements of our identities, especially for women and people of colour, intersect to produce marginalisation and oppression (Abu-Laban, 2002; Bannerji, 2000). For example, by simply creating ‘special interest rights’ for people of colour, we do not fully acknowledge the way that gender and class can intersect with race so that poor women of colour continue to be marginalised. Therefore, the effects of a history of colonialism, empire-building and displacement on our identities, as well as the oppression that can result, require more attention.

## CRITICAL MULTICULTURALISM

Critical scholar Peter McLaren argues that the ‘difference blindness’ and ‘recognition of differences’ perspectives are both inadequate to deal with the challenges posed by cultural pluralism. He offers an approach he calls ‘critical multiculturalism’.

This view emphasises the need to acknowledge the ways in which race, class, gender, nationality and sexuality have been constructed within a particular sociohistorical and capitalist context (that is, through a white, middle-class, male, Western, heterosexist lens) and how this is the key challenge to multiculturalism. By interrogating both the conditions of ‘otherness’ and ‘whiteness’ in depth, McLaren (1994) suggests that members of society can become aware of and address the ways in which hegemonic norms continue to marginalise and oppress people with diverse identities.

## GLOBALISED MULTICULTURALISM

While it is important to distinguish between the *ideology of multiculturalism* and *official approaches to multiculturalism*, the two are clearly linked. The way a country thinks about multiculturalism (‘difference blindness’, ‘recognition of differences’ and critical multiculturalism) informs responses (or non-responses) to diversity. Together, this ideology and the presence or absence of official approaches to cultural pluralism shape a country’s national identity and influence the ways its citizens interact with one another and its institutions. While critical multiculturalism is not yet visible in State structures, a ‘difference blindness’ approach and ‘recognition of differences’ perspective are evident in various national responses to cultural pluralism.

In her book *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on multiculturalism, nationalism and gender* (2000), scholar Himani Bannerji distinguishes between ‘multiculturalism from below’ and more official approaches to diversity, or ‘multiculturalism from above’. In ‘multiculturalism from below’, an anti-colonial or anti-racist project is initiated by ‘the people’, and has most often occurred in places like Europe where multiculturalism emerged from a criticism of assimilationist policies and racism (Horsti, 2009). As well, ‘multiculturalism from below’ appears most prevalent in places such as the UK and USA, where a ‘difference blindness’ approach to multiculturalism predominates. Here, the emphasis is on individual opportunity and the need for ‘civic integration’ (read assimilation) in which immigrants are expected to adopt the language and cultural norms of the majority (Soroka et al., 2007). This is particularly true of the USA, where the term ‘melting pot’ describes a nation in which diverse groups have come together and shed their ethnic identities to create an entirely new ‘(North) American’ society with particular attitudes, norms, beliefs and behaviours that differ from the traditional identities ‘back home’ (Kivisto, 2002). While multicultural-type initiatives have been introduced in both the UK and USA (particularly to deal with discrimination in housing and employment), these have not been formalised at the central government or federal level.

In ‘multiculturalism from above’, policies consistent with the goals of a multicultural ideology are created at the level of society’s institutions. These ‘official’ responses to cultural pluralism (where a strong policy framework accompanies a well-articulated, government-endorsed vision for a diverse society) tend to be associated with countries that adopt a ‘recognition of differences’ approach. For example, Canada’s growing ethnic, cultural, racial and religious diversity prompted the introduction of the Canadian Multicultural Policy in 1971 and the Multiculturalism Act in 1988. These national strategies – the first of their kind – were developed in part to promote cultural diversity as an intrinsic component of Canada’s social, political and moral order (Calliste and Dei, 2000). The goal of such initiatives has been to encourage the diverse groups in Canadian society to participate fully in its social, economic and political life, especially in areas such as employment and education (Kobayashi, 2005; Wood and James, 2005).

Similarly, in 1996, Australia articulated a vision for multiculturalism for the new century through a Statement on Racial Tolerance. This vision formed the basis for policy recommendations that emphasised inclusion and focused on four core principles: civic duty, cultural respect, social equity and productive diversity (National Multicultural Advisory Council, 1999). Today, multiculturalism is presented as an approach with cultural, economic and political benefits for all members of society, with the ‘core of Australian identity embedded in the notion of diversity’ (Kivisto, 2002: 110). These policies and related initiatives reflect multiculturalism as a fundamental aspect of the national character of these countries and have prompted important policy changes (especially in relation to employment and education) at the federal level.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

In addition to affecting a country’s national identity and shaping its official policies, the ideology of multiculturalism affects the way in which we interact with one another. This happens both

informally, within our communities, and in the context of formal, professional ‘helping’ relationships. In this section, we describe how ideas about multiculturalism have influenced the field of social work, both in terms of its theory and practice.

## TRENDS IN SOCIAL WORK THEORY

In recent decades, various theoretical frameworks have emerged in social work in order to understand the ways that diverse groups experience the world and interact with one another. In North America, prior to the late 1960s, a commonality of needs was assumed and issues related to diversity were mostly overlooked (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2003). Since that time, different perspectives have been influential, including the colour-blind approach and different models of cultural pathology and inferiority.

Currently, theories that view race, racism, inequality and oppression as central in the lives of people of colour are most influential in social work (Tsang and George, 1998). The anti-racist perspective, for example, focuses on how racial inequalities are manifested materially at the individual, organisational and structural levels of society (see, for example, Calliste and Dei, 2000; Dei, 1996). Similarly, critical race theory (which originated in the field of law) has been used by social work scholars (see, for example, McDowell, 2004; Razack and Jeffery, 2002) to understand the existence of racism in interpersonal relationships, as well as within public structures and institutions (Delgado, 1995; Singer, 2005). These perspectives view race as central in the lives of people of colour, as whiteness is understood (both historically and in the present) as being the optimal, privileged standard in society (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Also popular is anti-discriminatory practice (ADP) that originated in the UK and encourages the understanding of clients from multiple standpoints (Graham and Schiele, 2010), and anti-oppressive (e.g. Dominelli, 2002a) and critical approaches to understanding power and oppression (e.g. Mullaly, 2002). These frameworks broaden discussions of domination and subjugation to include other types of identity (including age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, race, ability, religion, sexual identity and class) that form the basis of inequality in society.

## SHIFTS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The ideology of multiculturalism has also created an increased awareness of the challenges that cultural plurality introduces to social work practice. Of particular interest, then, is the impact of racism and oppression on diverse groups and the ways in which people can be supported in responding to these challenges. Indeed, professional associations responsible for overseeing the education and accreditation of social workers throughout the world have made explicit commitments to addressing the issue of social work practice with diverse groups in multicultural contexts (such as the Australian Association of Social Workers, the National Association of Social Workers in the USA and the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work).

A popular concept to emerge in the area of cross-cultural social work is ‘cultural competence’. This term describes strategies used by social workers to increase self-awareness,

knowledge and skills in working with members of diverse groups (Williams, 2006; Yan and Wong, 2005). Developing cultural competence is seen as *necessary* for social workers engaging with diverse clients in multicultural environments and, according to the National Association of Social Workers in the USA, neglecting to become so is considered a violation of one's ethical responsibility. North American social work professor Doman Lum (1999: 29) suggests that four elements are key to providing a service that is culturally competent: acceptance of and respect for cultural differences; analysis of one's own cultural identity and biases; awareness of the dynamics of difference in ethnic clients; and recognition of the need for additional knowledge, research and resources to work with clients. In addition to the emphasis on knowledge and skill, vital to becoming culturally competent is one's capacity for self-awareness. As human beings, social workers have particular biases, values and beliefs that are informed by their culture. These necessarily seep into their work with clients, including those with diverse backgrounds.

Despite its influence on social work practice, the concept of 'cultural competence' has been critiqued extensively. For example, Ruth Dean (2001: 624) argues that it is an untenable goal, a myth 'located in the metaphor of [North] American "knowhow"'. It is consistent with the belief that knowledge brings control and effectiveness, and that this is an ideal to be achieved above all else'. Also, Charmaine Williams (2006) argues that cultural competence is presented as an objective 'technique' rather than a way of approaching social work with clients that is rooted in a strong theoretical foundation. In addition, Miu Chung Yan and Yuk-Lin Wong (2005: 181) question the extent to which it is possible for social workers to actually 'suspend their own cultural influences' and maintain neutrality when working with clients as the use of self – which includes cultural aspects of identity – is seen as key in these professional interactions.

Perhaps most problematic, however, is that cultural competence is based on a particular understanding of what culture is. The term 'culture' is used in a commonsense way, without critical examination or debate (Park, 2005). It is seen as fixed, unchanging and consistent across all members of a group, which is what makes it knowable and controllable (Dean, 2001). This essentialist view of culture emphasises differences between those who practise social work (and who are assumed to be 'cultureless') and clients from diverse backgrounds who 'have culture', which is at least partially responsible for their problems (Keenan, 2004). Those with culture are constructed as 'other' and judged as deficient against the mainstream, hegemonic norm of white culturelessness (Park, 2005). Implicit in these assumptions is that social workers should 'intervene' to resolve the problematic influence of culture on the lives of diverse clients (Park, 2005).

In light of such critiques, there are several suggestions for how the field of social work might shift its approach to work within multicultural contexts. First, rather than attempting to 'know the other' prior to assessment and intervention, social workers might seek to gain understanding through the therapeutic relationship (Dean, 2001). Second, Ortiz and Jani (2010) assert that social work practice needs an approach that examines social contexts (such as institutional and structural arrangements and the integration of multiple identities) and propose the use of critical race theory (which attempts to understand and transform the relationship between race and power) as a framework for teaching diversity. Third, drawing on philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas's theory of the 'Other' (1987), Ben-Ari and Strier (2010) reject the idea that cultural competence is necessary to work with differences, and suggest

that rather than knowledge, respecting differences lies in the relational sphere. Finally, adopting a critical multicultural approach (as described earlier) may be helpful here. For example, US social work scholar David Nylund draws on Peter McLaren's 'critical multiculturalism' as a way of teaching social work students how to work across differences from an anti-racist perspective. Critical multiculturalism (Nylund, 2006: 30):

- 1) recognizes the sociohistorical constructions of race and its intersections with class, gender, nation, sexuality, and capitalism; 2) creates pedagogical conditions in which students interrogate conditions of 'otherness'; 3) challenges the idea of social work as an apolitical, transhistorical practice removed from the power struggles of history; and 4) makes visible the historical and social construction of whiteness.

In its application, then, critical multiculturalism can be an appropriate strategy used to educate students about minority groups that are considered to be controversial, such as the Muslim population since 9/11 (Jackson, 2011), and is viewed as a means to increase capacity for developing a balanced and accurate understanding of those considered to be outside the mainstream. Further, such an approach forces social work students to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions related to culture, racism, oppression and white privilege in order to be more informed, ethical and purposeful in their work (Daniel, 2008).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

In the field of social work, the topics of multiculturalism, anti-racism, anti-oppression and so on remain important issues to consider. The approaches described above attempt to unsettle the 'centre-margin' and 'mainstream-other' relationships that tend to predominate in social work (Keenan, 2004) and move towards creating inclusive therapeutic settings in which mutual learning and critical reflection can take place.

The extent to which these themes are discussed in mainstream social work, however, varies from country to country. For example, in the USA, as well as throughout many parts of Europe, interest in multicultural issues in social work have been relegated to special subdisciplines, such as 'cross-cultural' or 'anti-racist' and 'anti-discriminatory' social work practice, as the main emphasis throughout the field has shifted to 'service user perspectives'. This trend expands the focus beyond culture and ethnicity to include human rights more broadly. In Canadian social work, however, cultural pluralism, diversity and anti-racism have remained very much at the forefront of social work discourse. Indeed, academic research, writing and debate continue at a national level in order to stimulate discussion and work towards reasonable, appropriate responses to the issues raised.

## CRITIQUING MULTICULTURALISM

In general, few people in liberal democracies disagree with the fundamental goal underlying the ideology of multiculturalism – that is, to create an inclusive society in which people are both

viewed as unique and treated as equals and with respect. We tend to believe that immigration has more positive outcomes than negative ones (Hiebert, 2003) and diversity can enrich a country significantly. Most criticisms of multiculturalism are rooted in the disjunct between what we imagine as the ‘ideal multiculturalism’ and the way this is experienced and practised in people’s everyday lives.

For example (as described earlier), some would argue that multiculturalism highlights *differences* between people rather than emphasises what *unites* them (see, for example, Bissoondath, 1994; James, 2003). The ideology of multiculturalism suggests that liberal democracies are places where people can sustain their ethnic, cultural, racial and religious traditions and values *while also* participating fully economically, socially and politically in mainstream society (Dewing and Leman, 2006). The reality, however, according to Canadian scholar Carl James (2003: 210), is that ‘multiculturalism promotes a discourse of “difference”, signalling that culture is primarily carried in and exhibited by people with “foreign bodies” who are “linguistically different” . . . and “do not look and sound Canadian”’. The term ‘Canadian’, then, is used to refer to people who are white with European backgrounds. These individuals serve as the norm from which people of colour are said to deviate. People in these ‘different’ ethnic, cultural, racial and religious groups are also *homogenised*, or lumped together, so that similarities between group members are exaggerated and individual differences are ignored. A related concern is what British scholar Tariq Modood (1997: 10) calls the practice of *cultural essentialism*, in which ‘each culture (or ethnic, racial, and religious group) has a unique, fixed essence that can be understood independently of context or intercultural relations, and which makes a . . . group act the way it does’. ‘Essentialising’ tends to privilege – or, more often, problematise – certain groups based on characteristics all members are assumed to share. When these differences intersect with global events (such as 9/11), the resulting exclusion and marginalisation of people from certain groups are disastrous (Abu-Laban, 2002).

Another common criticism of multiculturalism is that it is a superficial treatment of diversity that is mostly focused on festivals at which ethnic trinkets, foods and cultural music and dance are presented for mainstream consumption. This has been called the ‘saris, samosas and steel band syndrome’ (Dei, 1996; Khan, 2000) or a ‘shallow’ approach to multiculturalism (Bissoondath, 1994; Hiebert, 2003). In addition to trivialising the rich histories and customs of diverse groups, this practice undermines the very principles that the ideology of multiculturalism claims to support.

At the root of most of these critiques is the argument that, despite the admirable goals articulated by decision-makers and politicians in liberal democracies, the ideology of multiculturalism is a set of beliefs that is used by those in positions of power to reap the economic rewards of immigration, while at the same time ‘containing’ and controlling cultural diversity (Bedard, 2000; Bhabha, 1994; Hage, 2000). According to Canadian scholars Henry et al. (2006: 49), the policies and practices of multiculturalism:

position certain ethno-racial groups at the margins, rather than in the mainstream of public culture and national identity. While ‘tolerating’, ‘accommodating’, ‘appreciating’, and ‘celebrating’ differences, it allows for the preservation of the cultural hegemony of the dominant cultural group.

It has been argued that, despite promises of inclusion and equality, official multiculturalism sustains an arrangement in which there is one dominant culture with access to political, economic and social power, and several multicultural groups with little (if any) access to these (Bannerji, 2000). This happens because people in positions of power promote a discourse that embraces multicultural values and goals, but then neglect to establish an appropriate framework to ensure accountability (Henry et al., 2006).

According to Canadian writer Clifford Jansen (2005: 31), ‘words like “promote”, “encourage”, “recognize”, “ensure”, “develop”, and “reflect” are used in legislation and public discourse . . . but there seem to be no sanctions [to enforce this]’. For example, in Canada, despite policies and practices designed to promote employment equity, people from diverse groups (including visible minorities and Aboriginal people), although increasing numerically in the workforce, tend to be concentrated in low-level, lower-paying jobs (Kobayashi, 2005). Without a mechanism in place for monitoring and evaluating the success of such policies, there is little hope of achieving true change.

A final criticism of multiculturalism is that the language used is incongruous with the very real existence of racism and xenophobia in society. Within liberal democracies, a national commitment to a multicultural ideology projects the image of benevolence and charity towards ‘others’ on the global stage. In such a context, a ‘celebratory’ view of diversity becomes a commonsense, unquestioned way of approaching diversity (Bedard, 2000). The problem, then, is that, if one accepts the classic multicultural rhetoric that we live in societies that value equality based on race, religion, nationality and so on, it is difficult to identify or take seriously claims that violate this ‘norm’ (such as racism, or biased hiring practices). Any discourse that challenges this taken-for-granted way of doing things is seen as an exception to the rule or the fault of the injured party (Dei et al., 2004).

In an increasingly global context, discussions about the nature and consequences of cultural plurality have become common, both in academic circles and within the broader society. In this chapter, we have presented multiculturalism as an ideology that informs State policies, shapes national identities and influences the way that social workers talk about and practise in relation to cultural diversity. The future of multiculturalism is unclear. The way we think about multiculturalism, the extent to which it is reflected in public policy generally and how it shapes the field of social work will likely change depending on shifting global conditions.

## Study questions

- 1 What are some of the key arguments for and against multiculturalism? Which of these do you agree and disagree with and for what reasons?
- 2 Select a country from the Multiculturalism Policy Index ([www.queensu.ca/mcp/index.html](http://www.queensu.ca/mcp/index.html)). What are some of the ways this country handles diversity? What policies would you keep and what would you change?
- 3 How might your view of multiculturalism impact upon *your* practice in the field of social work – at the individual, family and group levels?



## GLOSSARY

**Citizenship** A framework of status, rights and obligations within a particular nation.

**Culture** The ideas, values, norms and behaviours associated with a particular group with specific geographic origins that shape how we interpret and act in the world. Culture is never static – it is constantly evolving and changing.

**Diversity** The range of ethnic, cultural, racial and religious characteristics of different groups in society.

**Ethnicity** Sense of ‘peoplehood’ based on common descent, language, religion and tradition.

**Globalisation** The increased economic, sociocultural, technological and political interaction and interdependence that occur between countries throughout the world.

**Multiculturalism** A philosophy that acknowledges and values diversity in society and describes various tangible (economic) and intangible (social, for example) benefits that result from cultural pluralism. Its goal is to support the full political, social and economic integration of all members of society.

**Nationalism** Identification with a particular nation-state defined by the geographic boundaries that separate countries from one another. National narratives establish a sense of cohesion between those sharing a particular physical space (such as Canadians versus North Americans).

**Race** The observable, physical features that are shared by several people and distinguish them from members of other groups. Meanings associated with and classifications based on race are socially constructed.

## FURTHER READING

Three important foundational resources that summarise thinking about multiculturalism over the past two decades are Kivisto (2002), Kymlicka (1995) and *Multiculturalism: Charles Taylor*, with commentary by K. Anthony Appiah, Jürgen Habermas, Steven C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer, and Susan Wolf, edited and introduced by Amy Gutmann (1994), while Thompson (2006) provides a more recent perspective. An important website providing an up-to-date summary of how these concepts are (or are not) realised in contemporary policies relating to multiculturalism around the world is the Multiculturalism Policy Index: [www.queensu.ca/mcp/index.html](http://www.queensu.ca/mcp/index.html).

# 11

## NEOLIBERALISM

SUE PENNA AND MARTIN O'BRIEN

### INTRODUCTION

A reading of the literature on contemporary social work yields reference after reference to the detrimental impact of neoliberalism on the delivery of social work services, yet it is often unclear quite what neoliberalism actually is. It is understood variously as an ideology, a hegemonic project, a policy framework, a set of initiatives and a government strategy.

Neoliberalism is all of these things and, at the same time, none of them because it has become an umbrella term – a shorthand reference to a set of theoretical orientations and institutional changes that, together, have altered the terms of reference of contemporary social work. For this reason, it is impossible in this short chapter to do justice to the wide sweep of ideas and changes encompassed by this term, so here we first outline two key theoretical contributions to the body of literature designated 'neoliberal' and then turn to some of the major institutional changes enacted within the policy agenda influenced by these theoretical contributions.

Perhaps the most important thing to grasp about the different theories gathered together under the banner of neoliberalism is that they have in common a central emphasis on the market as the organising principle of social life. The theorists most commonly understood as proposing neoliberal social arrangements are principally – although not exclusively – from the discipline of economics and, therefore, social life and social relationships are viewed through the prism of economic categories.

It is not surprising, then, that they have little to say about social work per se. Rather, their interest lies in the welfare state – in particular, in this coupling of the terms 'welfare' and 'state', which is seen by neoliberal writers as detrimental to the efficient reproduction of societies. Why should this be the case? Well, there are several reasons, the most important being:

- the loss of freedom entailed in welfare states;
- the bias towards those who deliver services against the needs and wishes of consumers of services;
- the stifling of economic activity and its wealth-generating potential.

How is it that something which sounds as benign as ‘welfare state’ can generate such dysfunctional and sinister consequences? To answer this question, we need to take an excursion into the philosophy of the Enlightenment – the period in European thought that saw the development of secular and scientific worldviews.

One of these philosophies was liberalism – developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a set of ideas that challenged the feudal structures of European societies, mounting a powerful critique of the idea of a monarch ruling by *divine right*. The arbitrary exercise of power inflicted on citizens and subjects of a king or queen was legitimated by a *theological worldview*, which held that a monarch was more or less enacting God’s will on Earth. Liberalism proposed instead a secular understanding of social and economic life that emphasised the importance of protecting the *freedom of individuals from the State*. The defining characteristic of liberalism is a fundamental distrust of power exercised by the State.

Updating classical liberalism in the wake of the major expansion in the public sector that followed World War II (1939–45), neoliberalism reiterates classical liberalism’s concern with protecting the *liberty of individuals* against the arbitrary exercise of power by governments. However, in neoliberalism, this concern is developed in the context of a major extension of State responsibility, authority and activity during and immediately after the war. The war years saw key resources, such as coal and steel, nationalised and further nationalisation programmes, together with the rapid extension of public services in the postwar period, accounted for a much enlarged State apparatus, provoking an ongoing and systematic set of critiques of these arrangements.

In the neoliberal view, the State’s responsibility for welfare should be confined to maintaining a residual welfare system of last resort. The preference is for private forms of welfare services that are held up as not only the most efficient way of providing for collective need but also as harbingers of freedom, choice and consumer satisfaction. There is no explicit neoliberal theory of *social work practice and user–provider relationships*, but rather of *State practice and State–market–citizen relationships*. Since the late 1970s, the gradual adoption of neoliberalism as the basis of a comprehensive policy programme in institutions of global governance, such as the European Union, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund and World Bank, means that neoliberalism has fundamentally altered the conditions under which social work takes place and the conditions of life of service users. It is in this sense that neoliberalism is an important factor in understanding contemporary social work. As social work is one of the key operational embodiments of the welfare state (McDonald, 2006), so it is a main target of the perceived need to dismantle the latter’s institutional foundations.

## KEY IDEAS

Friedrich von Hayek has to be acknowledged as a leading force in the development of neoliberal theory. An economist trained in Austria during the 1920s, Hayek was exposed to the ‘subjectivist turn’ in social theory and philosophy, which had its home in Austria. Rejecting

macroeconomics, with its emphasis on large statistical databases, Hayek specialised in microeconomics – the micro-dynamics of markets and the role of subjectivity in economic phenomena. Yet, more than that, Hayek understood economic activities within a philosophical framework, locating them within a theory of knowledge that underpinned his argument of how societies could best provide for their members.

Hayek acknowledges that government can and should play an important role in ensuring the material well-being of the least well off in society. Indeed, the target of Hayek's critique, and that of neoliberalism more generally, is not the *aims* of government in seeking to alleviate suffering or support those in need, but its *methods* of doing so (see Hayek, 1959). In particular, the proposition that government should, or even could, devise a system of social support that ensures each citizen is awarded the collective resources that he or she deserves is completely counter to the very idea of a 'free society'.

The road that aims at *social justice*, says Hayek (1959: 261–2), leads inexorably to an authoritarian socialism because it is 'sheer illusion to think that when certain needs of the citizen have become the exclusive concern of a single bureaucratic machine, democratic control of that machine can then effectively guard the liberty of the citizen'. It is sheer illusion partly because, citing Wiles's (1957) 'Property and equality', Hayek (1959: 107) claims that the democratic control of parliament 'is and always has been the merest fairy tale'.

It may be worth noting here that this claim is not necessarily the cynical view of a right-wing ideologue. For example, Britain's New Labour government (1997–2010), during the period 1997–2007, went to war against Iraq, was caught up in a cash for honours scandal, manipulated behind the scenes to ensure the introduction of identity cards, facilitated the 'rendition' of alleged terror suspects and refused to reform the House of Lords – all of which rode roughshod over the wishes and demands of large segments of the electorate. The tendency in sociology and social policy to dismiss neoliberalism out of hand is strong precisely because of its attack on the welfare state, but that attack is not simply an unprincipled rejection of the goals of mutual support. It is, rather, a restatement and reworking of classic liberal principles of individual freedom, independence, choice and self-determination *against* the social democratic principles of social justice, social planning and State intervention.

Looking around at the planned economy of the Soviet Union, the theories of Maynard Keynes – whose economic prescriptions would form the basis for the welfare state in the postwar era – and the collectivist, State-planned socialism of the British Fabians – which was gaining intellectual ground during the 1920s and 1930s – Hayek despaired of what he considered to be a fundamentally flawed approach that would not only be unable to deliver the economic progress it claimed, but would also require an extension of State power that could have dangerous consequences. As Nazism gathered force in Europe during the 1930s and the persecution and murder of Jewish, homosexual, learning disabled and Roma people started to become apparent, Hayek was further convinced of the need to restrain State power. In Hayek's theoretical framework, the market can do everything the State can do, more or less, but more efficiently and with none of the political dangers associated with Nazism and Stalinism. The exceptions are the provision of defence (army, navy and airforce), a basic physical infrastructure and a *residual* welfare system for those in greatest need.

In this way, Hayek proposes an important distinction between two types of society: a 'spontaneous order' (the liberal society) and a 'constructivist', State-directed society (social democratic and communist). The former is considered to be the most efficient means of

organising social life, with the market providing the conditions by means of which overall social welfare is realised.

The market, left to its own devices, is the basis of wealth creation. While Hayek recognises that market processes will generate unpredictable and unequal material outcomes, he argues that the overall benefit outweighs individual disadvantages. The wealth of the richest will ‘trickle down’ to all social groups in society, while the different values and preferences found in modern, pluralist societies can be realised more efficiently in a market system, making innovation and the effective distribution of desired goods and services possible.

Such preferences and values cannot be accommodated in a centrally planned, bureaucratic system that, by definition, has been devised precisely in order to achieve some values and preferences rather than others. Thus, a ‘spontaneous’, liberal, market society is said to uphold the politics of individual freedom and self-determination, innovation and efficiency and a ‘constructivist’, socialist, planned society is said to uphold the politics of collective submission and dependency, economic stagnation and wastefulness.

## HAYEK’S SPONTANEOUS ORDER OF SOCIETY

The starting point of Hayek’s theory of markets is a theory of knowledge. Hayek is a microeconomist who argues against the notion of economics as a predictive, objective science. In discussing the reliance on positivist methods of the social sciences in general, he argues that the belief in science as a neutral, objective force for progress is one of the great mistakes of the (French) Enlightenment philosophies.

Hayek’s (1952, 1979) views on subjectivism and human knowledge led him to reject the claims of macroeconomics to be able to predict economic behaviour through the development of aggregate categories, stressing instead the role of interactions and subjectivity in economic processes (Hayek, 1979). For Hayek, as a subjectivist theorist, the idea that academics, or, indeed, anyone else, could arrive at a knowledge base that would enable governments to steer societies and plan economic activity was impossible. This is because the vast amount of knowledge that exists in the world is too fragmented and dispersed to collect into a statistical model and, moreover, the knowledge that people use in their everyday lives is largely tacit and unspoken and, thus, not amenable to scientific discovery or representation. This tacit knowledge has developed over the course of human history, having an evolutionary function, and has enabled the successful survival and development of human societies, which progressed through millennia of change and development without the help of modern planners. It tends to be transmitted culturally via the family and other social institutions – notably commercial, religious and communal associations – and is dispersed most clearly through the market, where it serves a coordinating function, signalling where materials and skills are needed, for example, and matching prices to rates of pay. Thus, for Hayek, the institutions of the market and the family are highly important because of the role they play in maintaining functioning, orderly societies.

What is crucially important for this theoretical framework, then, is the proposition that all order in the social (and physical) world arises from the spontaneous formation of self-regulating structures. In the course of evolution, tacit knowledge becomes embodied in certain practices and institutions. In turn, the latter are the products of the natural selection of rules of action.

Hayek sees this development as a process of cultural adaptation through competition. That is, of the multiple sets of practices and rules that develop during the evolutionary process, those allowing the most functional adaptation to the external environment become dominant. All evolution is seen as a process of continuous adaptation to unforeseeable events, contingent circumstances that cannot be predicted.

Competition is seen to be a key element in this process because of Hayek's view that the sheer volume of information dispersed throughout society could never be centrally coordinated in an effective way. Competition simultaneously encourages the development of new products for which there is a demand, lowers costs due to the need for efficient production and sees off those products and services that society in general cannot use. Competition, levels of pay and prices within the market system enable a lucid response to the uncertainty of economic activities and social needs as well as the most efficient use of resources in the economic process (Hayek, 1982).

Competition within the market, while allowing for the maximisation of economic production and individual preferences and goals, also secures social solidarity through the interdependence of individuals. Each individual producer and consumer depends on a vast and unknowable network of other producers and consumers for the market to work. Hayek, and neoliberals generally, argue that social life flourishes most strongly and most effectively when the tacit knowledge of individual citizens, rather than the predictive knowledge of scientists, is allowed to thrive.

## PUBLIC CHOICE, COLLECTIVE LOSS

Hayek's sustained reformulation of classical liberalism is concerned to provide a moral and economic case for 'free market' capitalism, considered to be under threat from the development of social democratic structures in the postwar era. He was joined in this critique by Milton and Rose Friedman (1980: 309), who claimed that 'the greatest threat to human freedom is the concentration of power, whether in the hands of government or anyone else'. This 'greatest threat' arises because there is an 'invisible hand' at work in politics that results in individuals who, charged with promoting the *general interest*, actually end up promoting a *special interest* to which they are allied (Friedman and Friedman, 1980: 292; see also Greene, 1987: 81).

This idea of an 'invisible hand' in politics is the subject of work by the public choice school (see Buchanan and Tullock, 1962; Niskanen, 1987; Tullock, 1989). Public choice theory is a field of economics and, while there are various theoretical and empirical foci, as well as ideological variations, within this body of work, notwithstanding these differences, public choice approaches are generally known as the 'economics of politics'. This is because those working within this school apply economic analyses to, in particular, the behaviour of politicians, voters and those who work in State agencies.

Public choice theory considers people's actions and decisions as governed by rational and self-interested motivations and the formal political arena as a marketplace. Applying this view to political processes and institutions, the focus of much analysis is the 'demand side' of the political market and the 'supply side' of bureaucracies.

The political arena is, therefore, understood as a market, with voters being the consumers of policies and political parties 'firms' selling their policies to voters. In this arena, the 'vote motive'

is considered to replace the profit motive. In contrast with normative theories of the democratic process, the public choice school argues that voters have neither the expertise nor the information to select from the range of options presented to them. What voters are offered is a selection of policies put together as a package designed to appeal to a number of different interest groups (Harris and Seldon, 1979) – a process that is inevitable as, in order to be elected, parties have no choice other than to try to appeal to a variety of interests. In consequence, there is an inbuilt bias in the democratic polity towards increasing expenditure (and therefore political control over the economy) by governments. This increasing expenditure then fuels inflation, a situation that can only be avoided by keeping the public sector small and affordable. This also has the advantage of keeping taxation low and, hence, encouraging entrepreneurship.

The supply side analysis challenges the presupposition that is seen as inherent in the works of Fabian socialists – that public institutions will be staffed by neutral, disinterested public servants whose primary aim is to serve the ‘general good’. Working from a model of human activity as rational and maximising utility, the arguments suggest that employees of State bureaucracies have a vested interest in expanding services, which leads to pressure for increasing State intervention and expenditure. This is considered undesirable not only because of its inflationary potential, but also because individual preferences cannot be ensured – the consumer has no control and no redress with regard to the services provided. They are, therefore, producer-orientated, at the expense of consumers.

Public choice arguments, applied to welfare issues, were taken up in the UK by Ralph Harris and Arthur Seldon (1979) at the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA). They studied electoral choices over some 20 years and argued that market transactions are always superior to State action. In all its manifestations, public choice theory challenges the notion that government can correct ‘market failure’ (unemployment, inflation and social need) through the political system, instead focusing on what are seen as the many instances of ‘government failure’. The steady stream of publications from this school in the postwar period posed a serious challenge to the Keynesian economic theory that legitimated expanded State intervention in economic and social life through the nationalisation of key industries, the manipulation of production and consumption through economic policy and the development of comprehensive welfare services, paid for through taxation and delivered via the public sector.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

Elements of these various neoliberal theories began to be taken up by policy-makers and politicians in the 1970s. The general thrust of the views we have described – that the public sector was too big, too bureaucratic, too inefficient and failed to serve those who accessed it in a satisfactory way – seemed to gain legitimacy in the light of a series of problems affecting Western capitalism. In particular, the shift of manufacturing and the heavy extractive (mining) industries to the developing world left high levels of unemployment. The oil crisis of 1973 contributed to rapidly rising inflation, which had reached 26 percent in the UK by 1976.

This combination of high unemployment and high inflation severely undermined the Keynesian economic theory that had underpinned the development of welfare states. Keynes had proposed

that a country could have *either* rising unemployment *or* rising inflation, but not the two together. The phrase ‘fiscal crisis of the State’ began to be used by those on the left of the political spectrum, while, on the right, neoliberal ideas were taken up as a solution to the seemingly intractable problems facing government.

The eventual outcome was the production of a shifting interpretive framework, a neoliberal discourse that came to frame policy programmes in the ‘advanced’ nations (Cameron and Palan, 2004; Clarke, 2004b; McDonald, 2006) and was adopted in global governance institutions that affect domestic policy-making. This marked a change in policy regimes that was to affect most countries and was based on reducing the public sector in order to reduce inflation and taxation. Over time, various aspects of this ambition were developed and we turn now to the ways in which these developments have impacted upon social work services.

A necessary feature of any entrepreneurial, capitalist market economy is competition and, thus, the private, as opposed to the public, ownership of property must be a priority policy goal. One of the ways in which the public sector was reduced and ownership was transferred was through part or full privatisation.

First was the privatisation of the nationalised industries – an ongoing process now enshrined in policy in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and translated into domestic legislation via membership of regional bodies, such as the European Union (EU) or the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) group. Meant to boost Western capitalism, privatisation has also been advocated as a solution to the anticipated ‘crisis’ of an ageing population placing financially unsustainable demands on pensions and health and social care providers.

The effects of privatisation have been felt throughout the welfare state societies (Gingrich, 2011; McDonald, 2006), although the implementation is uneven across countries and displays operational variations. Apart from the wholesale transfer of assets to the private sector in the case of nationalised industries, and the use of private finance initiatives in infrastructure development, the ‘dissolution of the public sphere’ (Clarke, 2004b) and the introduction of the logic of market transactions into public services are effected through the separation of purchaser and provider functions, where service delivery is contracted out to third sector or commercial organisations.

Another way of introducing a market logic is through the aptly named ‘marketisation’ process, where fees are charged for services previously provided free of charge, such as home care, and internal markets introduced in public agencies. Increasingly, welfare agencies operate within networks comprising strategic and commissioning statutory organisations, third sector and commercial service providers. These developments mark a significant shift in policy frameworks that impact upon social work (see Webb, 2006).

An equally significant development has been the introduction of ‘New Public Management’ techniques into the organisation and administration of public services. It is here that we see the operationalisation of neoliberal ideas in social work agency practice. Sweeping changes in the conditions of service delivery, control and accountability have taken place, including the introduction of performance measurement – a mechanism that, together with bureaucratic standardisation, paradoxically enables the central control of service delivery by government. The adoption of a corporate management language and the prioritisation of budget management and control through an intensive ‘gatekeeping’ of access to services (Jones, 2001) limit the role of social workers as they move away from face-to-face work with service users towards the purchasing of care packages for those most in need. The fine balance which



social work has always negotiated between, for example, care and control, rights and obligations has shifted away from the aspirations of care and has turned towards policing (Jones, 2001), as witnessed by the insertion of families experiencing multi-disadvantage into a discourse and practice of criminal justice (Garrett, 2009), and the increased imprisonment of marginalised populations (Pollack, 2010; Wacquant, 2001).

Chris Jones's (2001: 552) research with social workers in the UK employed in the State sector examined the impact of these various changes on the work they did. He writes of:

an interconnecting series of processes which created a new working environment within state social work: a new type of highly regulated and much more mundane and routinized relationship with clients which could not be described as social work, at least not in the terms that they understood it.

This routinisation and regulation, according to John Clarke (1996: 54–5), is, in part, a consequence of the fact that social work has been stripped of many of its humanistic qualities, pushed into the 'interstices between organisations' and made to dance to the tune of private interest.

This rational, calculative quality in service provision alters the experience of frontline work. Social workers and service users become increasingly engaged in economic exchanges rather than reciprocal relationships and what drives their encounters is the value of service packages rather than a collaborative endeavour. It also expands the accounting, monitoring and audit requirements of service delivery and discourages 'free' State provision, except in the most desperate cases, and even here we are seeing significant gaps in service provision. Jones (2001) describes relentlessly growing caseloads, a rise in the proportion of 'heavy end' work – with 'at risk' children, for example – and an increasing sense of desperation about the apparently intractable conditions in which social work's 'consumers' are to be found.

As services are rationed and regulated according to market criteria, consumers of those services are to be found in increasingly desperate circumstances – for a key feature of the neoliberal policy agenda is increasing inequality and immiseration (Harvey, 2006). The aim of creating wealth through neoliberal policies has seen the increased production of poverty throughout the world, with a corresponding increase in inequality and all the attendant social problems that accompany it. In these circumstances, neoliberal pressure on welfare delivery systems results in former public care structures taking on increasing control functions, with the responsibility for caring getting pushed into the private domain.

These strategies for managing public services as though they were commodities lead to contradictory and unintended outcomes, depending on many factors – the culture of a particular organisation, its management structure, tensions between service objectives and the socioeconomic profile of the locality being served, for example (Boland and Fowler, 2002; Hartley and Pike, 2005; Martin and Davies, 2001). In basic terms, the drivers for the development of services and the criteria for success are so different for profit and not-for-profit organisations that perverse outcomes are generated by trying to transform the latter along the lines of the former. Indeed, these strategies generate as many problems as they are intended to solve and many argue that the process of change has, in fact, done a great deal more harm than good. The strategies of privatisation and marketisation, for example, have generated some sharp conflicts in the EU. The passionate argument

generated by the EU's Framework Directive on Services of General Interest, which proposes further commodification of health and social care services, highlights the inherent contradiction between, on the one hand, a neoliberal economic policy objective of developing an entrepreneurial, dynamic, competitive economy and, on the other, the objective of social cohesion and inclusion, of which public welfare is a key expression (Penna and O'Brien, 2006).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The diverse ramifications of neoliberalism for social work practice derive from the structural processes immanent in its global deployment. Neoliberalism is now enshrined in global institutions that affect the domestic policy of all countries. It marks a significant shift away from an ethos of universal social insurance regarding personal and family obligations. The demise of the public sector is now so advanced in so many countries that it is almost impossible to conceive of a return to traditional styles of collective provision for collective risks as a viable alternative. The neoliberal pursuit of individualism and consumerism has formed a rigid discursive grip around the public sector's institutional forms. In these circumstances, the weight of uncertainty is redistributed downwards and increases the cumulative insecurities of the least powerful and most vulnerable in society (Marris, 1996), who tend to be the users of social work services. Of course, social work practice takes place not only in public agencies but also in many settings, but all of them serve a clientele whose material circumstances are set to worsen and whose status is not that which commands the attention of the contemporary captains of neoliberal capitalism.

In conclusion, we have provided an introduction to some of the main ideas in neoliberal philosophy. What happens when the private economic realm is expanded into the arena of public services is that winners and losers invariably emerge, the institutions of welfare find themselves under siege and frontline workers are subjected to incredibly stressful pressures. As eligibility for welfare services in the public sector becomes more restricted, these workers find themselves responsible for citizens with the most intractable problems, but without sufficient resources to meet their needs. While it would be unwise to make broad generalisations across the breadth and variety of services engaged in social work delivery, research in the UK points to the difficulties involved in transferring notions such as 'competition' from the private, commercial sector to the public and not-for-profit sector (see Penna and O'Brien, 2006).

For Clarke (2004a: 92–3), welfare states are anathema to neoliberalism as they 'provide the symbolic and material expressions (however contradictory and limited) of forms of solidarity, collectivism and citizenship'. In other words, they stand against the individual calculation of cost–benefit ratios that characterise economic markets, while the privatisation and marketisation of welfare services are aimed at substituting the client–professional relationship with a buyer–seller relationship. Clarke (2004b: 35) appends, 'That which cannot be financially represented (economically valorized) is ruled inappropriate or irrelevant'. This is the logical outcome when all aspects of social life are expressed through an economic model that is understood as the generic form.

## Study questions

- 1 List and define four key concepts in neoliberalism.
- 2 How has neoliberalism changed the policy-making context?
- 3 What is the relationship between 'New Public Management' and neoliberalism?

## GLOSSARY

**Divine right** The idea that a monarch is enacting God's will on Earth.

**Fiscal crisis of the State** An actual or supposed inability of the State to raise enough tax revenue to pay for its expenditures.

**Residual welfare state** Residual welfare state provision is considered to be a safety net, available only to those defined as being most in need – usually when the market or family is unable to make the necessary provision.

**Social justice** The idea that a society ought to give individuals and social groups good treatment as well as a just and fair share of the benefits of society.

**Theological worldview** A widely accepted assumption that God is the creator of the natural and social worlds.

## FURTHER READING

Besides Penna and O'Brien (2006), we would recommend O'Brien and Penna (1998) and David Harvey (2005) and his (2012) *The Enigma of Capitalism and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Also see Pierre Bourdieu's (1998b) 'The essence of neoliberalism'.

Together these publications provide comprehensive and accessible accounts of the areas covered in this chapter.

# 12

## POSTMODERNISM

BARBARA FAWCETT

### INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism, postmodernity and ‘the postmodern’ are all terms that have been used in a variety of ways. A common thread that runs throughout is the distinction made and the associated distancing from concepts relating to modernism, modernity and ‘the modern’.

This chapter explores the terminology and the many ways in which the associated conceptual orientations have been developed. Given the size of the topic, three main areas are explored. These relate to the operation of knowledge and power, understandings of the ‘self’ and the different interpretations given to concepts associated with unity, fragmentation and contradiction. As a means of making links between modernism and postmodernism, a form of critical postmodernism is developed throughout this chapter and the implications for social work are explored.

### KEY IDEAS

Fiona Williams in 1992 memorably referred to *postmodernity* as a way of referring to the postmodern condition and to *postmodernism* as a means of understanding the condition. This establishes a helpful distinction between postmodernity (and a postmodern era) and postmodernism, which can be seen to encompass a wide range of theoretical perspectives that both influence and inform the era or condition. In a similar way, ‘modernity’ can be regarded as a useful means of referring to the modern condition, with modernism being used to denote a range of theoretical orientations that characterise the modern period.

In relation to the timeframe we can currently be seen to occupy, there is wide-ranging variation and dispute, with arguments and associated terminology veering from modernity to

late modernity to postmodernity with the imposition of the ‘small certainties’ of modernism (Bauman, 1992; Callinos, 1989; Fawcett and Featherstone, 1998; Giddens, 1990; Lyotard, 1994 [1979]).

The relationship between postmodernism and poststructuralism is also contested, with some writers making a clear distinction between the concepts and others arguing that there are so many similarities that a conceptual blurring has taken place. Madan Sarup (1993), for example, maintains that it is difficult to maintain a distinction between poststructural theories and postmodern practices. However, others, such as Andreas Huyssen (1990), insist on a clear distinction being made between the concepts. It can also be argued that to concentrate on definitional issues and associations is to miss the point of the postmodernist project. However, in order to apply concepts as slippery as postmodernism to social work practice, there is a need to forge links and associations, however impermanent these may turn out to be.

As part of the process of applying theoretical concepts to practice contexts, it is necessary, to some extent, to both simplify and generalise. In this, the importance of layering the analysis has to be recognised. Accordingly, there are the outer layers, which, in some instances, may be all that are required. However, there are also further layers that can be uncovered when further interrogation is called for. In this chapter, emphasis is placed on the outer layers, although certain areas are explored in greater depth. As highlighted above, these focus on the operation of knowledge and power, understandings of ‘self’ and the interpretation of concepts such as unity, fragmentation and contradiction.

## MODERNISM

It is useful, although not a prerequisite, to start an exploration of postmodernism by looking at what *modernism* is broadly seen to represent.

Modernism is generally regarded as being characterised by the key ideas and values of the Enlightenment. These rested on strong notions of order and the belief in unity and included an acceptance of the importance and inevitability of progress, the belief that rational scientific objective facts will continue to be revealed and that incontrovertible and essential truths relating not only to science but also to social and psychological phenomena that will continue to be discovered.

Drawing from the work of Zygmunt Bauman (1992) and Sarup (1993), modernism can be seen as being dominated by the operation of grand narratives or ‘big stories’ that are viewed as having a universal application and a universal set of principles, such as liberalism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, economic rationalism, biosocial determinism and structurally orientated analyses. These ‘big stories’, at various points, have claimed infallibility and have provided all-embracing explanations that have tended to ignore the possibility of large gaps or omissions or criteria that simply do not fit. These metanarratives have provided pervasive ways of seeing the world at particular points in time. Although Westernised concepts have dominated, there has also been a tendency to assume a global applicability or relevance. Said (2003), for example, presents the discourse of orientalism as a systematic way of demonstrating how European culture has been able to manage and produce the ‘orient’ politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.

Modernism, as writers such as Michel Foucault (1972, 1979, 1980; see also Chapter 4) have highlighted, is associated with a tendency to privilege certain forms of knowledge. Knowledge and power become intertwined in what Foucault termed ‘expert knowledge’, serving to draw a dividing line between the knowledge of the expert and other forms of knowledge, such as that of the service user, client or consumer. As a result, forms of knowledge, such as experiential knowledge, are ascribed low status and this can be seen in the ways in which, for example, various government documents, such as *The National Service Framework for Mental Health* (UK Department of Health, 1999) published in England and Wales, equates ‘gold standard’ research with the carrying out of randomised controlled trials and relegates research that focuses on the experiences of service users to fifth position. In relation to social work, as in other professional areas, power of position with the accompanying knowledge base can confer the mantle of the expert and can significantly influence which perspectives are regarded as acceptable and which are disregarded or viewed as unacceptable. Clearly, there can also clearly be hierarchies of ‘experts’, with some professional power/knowledge frameworks being ascribed greater significance than others.

With regard to ‘self’, modernist understandings tend to refer to individuals as having a unified or an essentialist core self. As the ‘self’ remains the same in all situations, different essentialist ‘selves’ can be subject to processes of categorisation and classification. This uncomplicated view of ‘self’ also allows personal experience to be referred to in a straightforward and factual manner. The feminist phrase ‘the personal is political’ (see Chapter 7) can be seen to have clear modernist overtones, in that it is accepted that personal experiences have a unique validity that can lead directly to the adoption of political positions.

In a similar manner, language is regarded as comprising fixed meanings that are used to refer to tangible and factual objects and events (Sarup, 1993). However, Ferdinand de Saussure (1974 [1916]), who is seen as the founder of modern structural linguistics, moved away from this interpretation when he developed an analysis that presented language as structuring meaning rather than referring to something real and tangible. De Saussure regarded meaning as socially generated and viewed language as an abstract system comprising signs, made up of a signifier (sound or written image) and signified (meaning). Prior to being combined in language, he maintained that signifiers and signified had no natural connection. However, once a signifier and a signified had been combined, a fixed meaning or a ‘positive fact’ (de Saussure, 1974 [1916]: 120) was produced.

When looking at concepts such as ‘unity’, ‘fragmentation’ and ‘contradiction’, within modernist orientations, there is a marked tendency to make things fit and to ignore or disregard those aspects which do not. As a result ‘unity’ is prioritised and ‘fragmentation’, ‘contradiction’ and ‘gaps’ are downplayed. The production of gendered binaries can be seen to provide one of the most significant examples of this aspect. Here, the unity category ‘man’ is set against the unitary category ‘woman’ and there is a focus on homogeneity rather than heterogeneity. However, one of the key strengths of modernist frameworks also lies in this apparent simplification and it is notable that proponents of second-wave feminism used binary thinking to challenge devalued positionings and to re-examine, reposition and revalue the unitary category ‘woman’ in relation to the unitary category ‘man’. This political use of a modernist form of analysis, which also emphasised rights and inequalities, led to second-wave feminist perspectives becoming hugely influential. As a result the application of postmodern orientations has posed significant challenges.

## POSTMODERNISM

Judith Butler (1995: 35; see also Chapter 5) asked: ‘The question of postmodernism is surely a question, for is there, after all, something called postmodernism?’ This is a pertinent question for there are those who reject postmodernism for its relativism, fluidity and the difficulties involved in weighting criteria to separate ‘the acceptable’ from ‘the unacceptable’. Stevi Jackson (1992: 31), for example, fiercely opposed poststructuralist critiques of radical feminism, stating that ‘Women are being deconstructed out of existence’. Similarly, Christine Di Stefano (1990) raised concerns as to whether or not feminism could survive without an essentialist subject and some kind of standpoint. She drew attention to becoming ‘another amongst others’ (1990: 77) in a pluralist world. However, there are feminists who have embraced forms of postmodern feminism and their work will be considered later in a discussion of ‘critical postmodernism’. These matters aside, a key question to address at this point echoes the one posed by Butler above: what is postmodernism?

A range of authors (e.g. Best and Kellner, 1992; Dickens and Fontana, 1994; Fawcett, 2000, 2008; Fawcett and Featherstone, 1998; Featherstone and Fawcett, 1995b; Howe, 1994; Parton, 1994a) have looked at the ways in which postmodernism has placed emphasis on areas such as deconstruction, plurality, relativity and anti-foundationalist methodology generally. Although, as highlighted, attempts at definition can be regarded as a modernist enterprise, postmodernism can be characterised broadly by an emphasis on deconstruction, or the questioning and taking apart of taken-for-granted assumptions and accepted theoretical frameworks. This lends itself to dominant understandings – clinical psychiatric criteria, for example – being deconstructed and interrogated. Accordingly, questions are asked about how, at a particular point in time, clinical psychiatry became the dominant discourse, with ‘discourse’, drawing from Foucault, understood to mean the way in which, at specific historical junctures, power, language and institutional practices come together to produce taken-for-granted or accepted social practices.

Postmodern critique emphasises that all knowledge claims – no matter how powerfully they are embedded in social, political and individual ways of viewing the world – have to be opened up for critical questioning. It also means that, to continue with the example given, opening up dominant discourse to critical scrutiny is not simply a question of mental health survivor perspectives replacing clinical psychiatric understandings. Postmodern perspectives place emphasis on there being a wide range of understandings operating at any one time. However, a key point to restate is that, as a result of everything being viewed in plural terms, postmodern orientations render it impossible to give one perspective greater weight than another as all have claims to validity and all are relative. A consequence is that it becomes difficult to take a political, moral or ethical position and separate out what might be regarded as the unjust from the just or the acceptable from the unacceptable. Similarly, in relation to modernist notions of ‘expert knowledge’, postmodern orientations draw attention to the way in which such forms of knowledge operate and dismantle the corresponding power relationships. As all knowledge is regarded as relative, it is no longer possible for one individual or group to claim particular expertise or justify their dominance.

It is, however, also important to note that postmodern orientations cannot claim a monopoly on deconstructive forms of analysis. Critical theory, for example, focuses on deconstructing

accepted or taken-for-granted tenets, such as the claims made by economic rationalists or proponents of neoliberal managerialist frameworks. The difference is that Critical theory aims to uncover the *truth* of a situation or what is *really* going on (Harvey, 1992), while, as far as postmodern orientations are concerned, there is an absence of a central core, and only an endless series of layers.

With regard to understandings of the ‘self’, postmodern perspectives replace a modernist ‘core’ unitary self that remains the same in all situations, with a fluid and fragmented ‘self’, which is continually constructed and reconstructed by social practices and the interplay of dominant discourses. This tends to result in a view of ‘self’ that is continuously being constructed and where individual agency or will is limited. This conceptualisation has been subject to considerable modernist critique. From a feminist perspective, for example, Seyla Benhabib (1995) notably argued that postmodern concepts of subjectivity are not compatible with feminist politics. She differentiated between *strong* and *weak* postmodern analyses, equating *strong* positions with ‘the death of the autonomous, self-reflective subject, capable of acting on principle’ (Benhabib, 1995: 29). However, she did regard *weak* analyses, those that deconstruct to reconstruct, as being amenable to a form of feminist critique.

Language, similarly – drawing from Jacques Derrida’s pivotal (1978) work on deconstructionism – is never fixed, not even when signifier and signified are combined. Rather, by means of what he called the concept of *différance*, meaning can only be produced by the never-ending juxtaposition of signified and signifier in discursive contexts. Accordingly, meaning and meanings continually change and are always in process, with the person producing the sound or written image playing no part in the creation of meaning. To give an example, the combination of ‘hallucination’ and ‘psychiatric’ temporarily produces one set of meanings, while the juxtaposition of ‘hallucination’ and ‘spirituality’ temporarily produces another. In short, within postmodern analyses there is no essentialist or immutable connection between language and meaning and both are in a constant state of flux.

## CRITICAL POSTMODERNISM

Zygmunt Bauman (1992: viii) asserted that:

It seems sometimes that the postmodern mind is a critique caught at the moment of its ultimate triumph: a critique that finds it ever more difficult to go on being critical just because it has destroyed everything it used to be critical about; with it, off went the very urgency of being critical.

The notion of critical postmodernism draws from postmodern feminisms and those writers who have sought to apply postmodern perspectives to policy and practice. A selection of writers whose work has contributed to making links between modern and postmodern orientations include, in chronological order, Graham McBeath and Stephen Webb (1991), Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1993), David Howe (1994), Nigel Parton (1994a), Brid Featherstone and Barbara Fawcett (1995b), Barbara Fawcett and Brid Featherstone (1998), Fiona Williams (1996), Barbara Fawcett (2000), Jan Fook (2002), Patrick Bracken and Philip Thomas (2005) and Barbara Fawcett, Zita Weber and Sheila Wilson (2012).



What critical postmodern perspectives do is to draw from both modern and postmodern orientations to produce forms of critical analysis that critique, interrogate, deconstruct and reject foundational underpinnings for particular conceptual frames, yet facilitate the identification of inequalities and the mounting of effective challenges in particular contexts.

Modernism and postmodernism are not opposite sides of the same coin. Postmodernism cannot be explained by simply looking at modernism and formulating antithetical positions. Critical postmodernism is about drawing from *both* orientations to produce a form of analysis that makes links and explores tensions (Fawcett, 2000). Accordingly, with regard to modernism, the universal 'big stories' based on rationalist foundations are rejected and claims related to the automatic privileging of expert knowledge are dismissed. With regard to postmodernism, the emphasis on relativism, pluralism and anti-foundationalism is challenged, as it becomes impossible to ground ideas or make distinctions between what is acceptable and what is not. As has been highlighted, within postmodernism all ideas and actions are plural and relative and, as a result, none can carry more weight than another, leaving power imbalances and oppressive forces, such as sexism, racism and 'disablism', to be dismissed as irrelevant.

When looking at knowledge and power and the ways in which *critical postmodernism* differs from *postmodernism* it is possible to place emphasis on a number of key areas and to pose a series of questions. Drawing from Fook (2002, 2009), Thompson and Thompson, (2008) and Fawcett et al. (2012), these can be adapted and framed as follows:

## KEY AREAS

- Thinking about how we view knowledge.
- Looking at why some forms of knowledge are valued over other forms at particular points in time.
- Critically exploring how we have acquired knowledge and what has informed this process.
- Focusing on our own values and those of our professions and questioning their universal and particular relevance.
- Taking account of our emotions and those of others.
- Actively learning from experience and creating dynamic practice experience.
- Examining context and making intercontextual connections.

## QUESTIONS

In any situation, planning a strategy which incorporates asking:

- What is currently happening?
- What are the different assumptions operating?
- What are the strengths as well as the problems associated with these different assumptions?
- What do we (used inclusively to refer to all those involved) want to do or not do?
- How are we going to operationalise this?
- How are we going to evaluate the outcomes?
- How do we learn from this process?
- What might we have done differently?
- How might we transfer this learning to other contexts? (Fawcett et al., 2012)

The use of these considerations and questions serves to deconstruct and dismantle accepted tenets and knowledge/power configurations. In terms of weighting criteria and addressing structural inequalities and social divisions, critical postmodern perspectives ensure that this is still possible, but only in specific contexts or in particular situations (Fawcett, 2000; Fraser and Nicholson, 1993; Williams, 1996). This is important and is where critical postmodern perspectives differ most markedly from postmodern orientations. Accordingly, a social worker using a critical postmodern perspective – and addressing the questions outlined above – would acknowledge the operation of competing power and knowledge frameworks. He or she would do this by drawing attention to information that is being privileged and responded to and information that is being downgraded and ignored, in a particular context or situation. The multiplicity of meanings an event can have for a person at a particular time and the ways in which understandings between participants can vary are another area to attend to as social workers and service users may not be making similar connections or sharing meanings. Similarly, in any interaction, both the social worker and the service user draw from a variety of underpinning conceptual frames – for example, from medicalised or social models of disability, from varying child protection and welfare discourses and from strengths-based or from deficit-orientated understandings – and all of these have to be fully acknowledged.

With regard to ‘expert knowledge’, Howe (1994) used a postmodern perspective that, in its application, can be regarded as similar to critical postmodern orientations. He rejected the modernist view of professionals as experts or agents, uniquely equipped to determine meanings and prescribe solutions. He (1994: 150) stated:

If there are no privileged perspectives, no centres of truth, no absolute authorities in matters of taste and judgement, then all truths become working truths and relative truths. The full participation of all those involved in decisions about what is going on and what should be done is the only way to define non-oppressive, culturally pertinent truths and working practical judgements.

This quote can be seen to contain a critical postmodern emphasis in that it highlights the importance of negotiation and inclusion. Critical postmodernism focuses on decision-making being context specific with all voices being heard and weighted and all outcomes being negotiated.

In relation to language and constructions of ‘self’, critical postmodern perspectives move away from modernist orientations where individual experience tends to be regarded as unique and the ‘self’ remains the same in all situations or contexts. It also revises the postmodern view of ‘self’ as being fluid, fragmented and continuously constructed with individual agency being limited. Critical postmodern perspectives reframe postmodern analyses and although the ‘self’ is regarded as having many different facets, to use the analogy of a kaleidoscope, although the facets or the pieces change every time the kaleidoscope is turned, there is a temporary fixing of facets or pieces between turns. This means that there is a temporary fixing of ‘self’ in specific situations and, although the self is positioned by social practices and discourses, in any one situation or context, individual agency can be exercised (Fawcett and Karban, 2005). To give an example from the arena of mental health, in one situation an individual may be constructed as a ‘schizophrenic’, in another he or she may position him or herself as a ‘voice hearer’ and, in yet another, as a ‘mental health survivor’. Links can also be

made between situations or contexts and intercontextual or intersituational comparisons can be formulated.

With regard to concepts associated with terms such as ‘unity’, ‘fragmentation’ and ‘contradiction’, as discussed earlier, modernism is about making things fit and creating a whole out of fragmented parts. This results in those symptoms that match a particular diagnosis, for example, being emphasised or those factors that fit a particular argument being privileged, with those aspects that do not correspond being ignored or ascribed secondary status.

Postmodernism, in turn, by means of ongoing processes of deconstruction, explores those aspects that do not fit, drawing attention to gaps, contradictions and omissions. Anne Wilson and Peter Beresford (2002), for example, critique the categorisation and classification of mental distress. They maintain that their experience of mental and emotional distress does not fit neatly into psychiatric DSM-IV categories of criteria for psychiatric syndromes and that what is most important to them is often left out and ignored.

Postmodern perspectives turn a critical gaze on the gaps and omissions of modernist constructions, but critical postmodern perspectives draw attention to the utility of contradictions. Rather than gaps or omissions being seen to be a problem, as is the case with modernism, the highlighting of these areas – with attention being drawn to the resulting contradictions and paradoxes – is seen to be productive. Bracken and Thomas (2005), for example, both psychiatrists, draw from what could be regarded as critical postmodern conceptualisations in their development of ‘postpsychiatry’. They critique adherence to the belief that science and technology can resolve human and social problems and question the unthinking prioritisation of medicalised approaches. They regard ‘postpsychiatry’ as providing the opportunity for doctors to redefine their roles and responsibilities and they challenge the notion that psychiatric theory is neutral and objective. Like Beresford (2005), they maintain that psychiatry has to engage with the perspectives of service users and consumers and they emphasise the importance of these views shaping the culture and values of those working in the arena of mental health. In particular, they highlight the need to pay full attention to social and cultural contexts, to place ethics before technology and to minimise the medical control of coercive interventions. They also fully acknowledge the need to avoid Eurocentric notions of dysfunction and healing and, while recognising the pain and suffering involved in severe mental ill health, regard an uncritical reliance on Westernised frameworks as unhelpful. Their exposition of ‘postpsychiatry’ prioritises the promotion of positive citizenship, which they define as freedom from discrimination, exclusion and oppression. Positive citizenship also confers freedom on individuals to define their own identity in a number of different ways (Bracken and Thomas, 2005; Fawcett et al., 2012).

Within modernist perspectives, as has been highlighted, there is an emphasis on looking at the world in either/or, or binary modes – for example, rational/irrational, culture/nature, mind/emotion, sanity/insanity and able-bodied/disable-bodied. These either/or binaries are regarded as having either/or implications. A binary that is often used in relation to disability, which has been critiqued in detail by Jenny Morris (1996) and Michael Oliver and Bob Sapey (2006), is that of ‘carer and cared for’. Within modernist orientations, the terms ‘carer’ and ‘cared for’ tend to be used to divide people into two distinct groupings, with the meanings associated with each being ascribed universal applications. A positioning in the ‘carer’ category carries with it the assumption that the carer is able-bodied and possesses the physical and conceptual capacity to ‘care’. The location of an individual in the ‘cared for’

part of the binary brings with it a different set of associations. These are those of dependence and incapacity.

As emphasised, postmodern perspectives reject such ‘either/or’ positions and look at different conceptualisations of ‘self’. Accordingly, women and men, whatever their perceived ‘problems’, ‘impairment’ or ‘incapacity’, can be seen to occupy a wide range of caring positions and be involved in a diverse number of caring relationships and interrelationships.

Critical postmodern perspectives, in turn, take this further by placing emphasis on ‘both and’ and by relating this to context. As a result, an individual can be seen to have many different identities, relationships and caring interactions, with different relationships and identities being produced and prioritised in different situations.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

Debates and controversies surrounding postmodernism – and the critical distinction between modernism and postmodernism – emerged in social work in the early 1990s. McBeath and Webb’s seminal paper, published in 1991, set the tone for much of the discussion that followed in the work of writers such as David Howe, Jim Ife and Nigel Parton (see Hugman, 2001).

The implications of this rich debate for social work have been considered throughout this chapter. However, in terms of application, rather than an emphasis being placed on producing a particular model or approach, attention is drawn to how critical postmodern perspectives provide conceptual frameworks that can be used to critique, guide and inform policy and practice considerations. These include never taking anything for granted and questioning all knowledge claims, no matter how powerfully presented or embedded they appear to be, including those of the social worker or agency.

There also has to be an acceptance that in different situations, meanings and presentations of the ‘self’ differ. A social worker cannot expect a service user to be rational, consistent and present in the same way in all situations. Similarly, the responses of the social worker will vary from situation to situation. This results in meanings having to be continuously negotiated and renegotiated with emphasis placed on collaboration as no one view can be regarded as being privileged. Within a particular situation or contexts, all can be seen to have a contribution to make and all a part to play.

Critical postmodern perspectives also reject a ‘one size fits all’ concept or practice model. Universal theories, with universal applications – particularly those that operate in a top-down or expert-orientated way – have no place. Accordingly, any social work theory, policy or practice that claims to have a global applicability is regarded as unworkable. Rather, emphasis has to be placed on process and on what is viable in a particular context, although intercontextual links and associations can be made.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

With regard to social work practice, postmodern orientations have been criticised for promoting fragmented rather than unified and coherent analyses. They have shifted the focus away from the big canvas of modernism and concerns with global poverty and inequality

and have instead concentrated on relative and competing claims about small and, some would argue, insignificant and disconnected facets. However, the continuing importance of postmodernism, particularly critical postmodernism, can be seen to lie in the emphasis placed on context and process.

In modernist analyses, there is an element of the taken-for-granted with regard to unquestioned underlying tenets or ‘truths’, expert opinion and the power and authority of established institutions. Postmodern perspectives question and deconstruct all prevailing power/knowledge frameworks, so that none can be attributed a privileged position or regarded as ‘right’, enduring or incontrovertible. As a result, nothing can be viewed as fixed and ‘everything’ has to be regarded as fluid and transitory. However, critical postmodern perspectives make context-specific links between modern and postmodern orientations and provide the conceptual tools to interrogate and deconstruct knowledge and power dynamics and understandings of ‘self’. Critical postmodern orientations draw attention to all aspects of a situation and focus on inclusion and negotiation, the weighting of criteria in context and the making of intercontextual links. These attributes can be seen to have an ongoing relevance for social work and its commitment to constructive critique, theoretically nuanced practice and the need for social workers to continuously differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable social practices in a variety of complex situations.

### Study questions

- 1 What are the opportunities and constraints posed by modernist, postmodernist and critical postmodernist perspectives for social work?
- 2 What are the main negotiatory strategies that you would employ in particular contexts?
- 3 Address the considerations and questions on page 152. Identify the ways in which these could inform social work practice.

## GLOSSARY

**Critical postmodernism** Perspectives that can be seen to make links between modern and postmodern orientations and emphasise the importance of context.

**Modernism** A range of theoretical orientations that characterise the modern period and focus on progress, ‘truth’ and metanarratives.

**Postmodernism** A range of theoretical orientations that emphasise relativity, plurality and deconstructive forms of analysis.

## FURTHER READING

Recommended reading is Fawcett et al. (2012), Fook (2002), Fawcett (2000), Howe (1994), Parton (1994b), McBeath and Webb (1991), Foucault (1990) and Nicholson (1990).

# PART III

## PERSPECTIVES FOR PRACTICE



# 13

## COGNITIVE-BEHAVIOURAL APPROACH

ERIC L. GARLAND AND BRUCE A. THYER

### INTRODUCTION

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) is a highly influential practice model in social work. Although many social work practitioners continue to engage in other forms of practice, the cognitive-behavioural model has made major inroads into social work to the point that surveys of practitioners reveal it is the most frequently used approach among US social workers (Pignotti and Thyer, 2011). Behavioural methods have long been a significant part of social work intervention theory. For example, early on, Robinson (1930: 83–4) claimed, ‘Two dominant schools of thought may be recognised as differentiating case work approach and treatment at the present time; behavioural psychology and psychiatric interpretation’. In his influential book *The Theory of Social Work*, Bruno (1934: 197–8) stated:

Behaviorism may be described as the theory that learning is the association of a new impression with the circumstances present at the time of receiving it. It has several obvious merits. It integrates emotion and intellect in a manner which realistically reproduces actual experience. It is socially acceptable, in the main, as it places such a large faith upon capacity to learn . . . behaviorism affords a first class technic, without specializing in the abnormal. . . . It is invaluable for the social worker in his efforts to understand the conduct of his clients, because it refers him back to the past experiences in which are to be found the particular circumstances which have determined the attitude or habitual responses for each individual. Thus behaviorism opens up endless possibilities for social work. It is also of value in treatment, for some of the most interesting work of the behaviorists has been in the field of what is called reconditioning.



In the UK some key advocates of a behavioural approach to social work have been Derek Jehu, Barbara Hudson, Geraldine Macdonald and Brian Sheldon (e.g. Hudson and Macdonald, 1986; Jehu, 1967; Sheldon, 1982). Jehu (1967: viii) noted, for example, 'social work . . . constitutes a learning experience, which might be made more effective therapeutically by deliberately exploiting it in accordance with learning principles'. Battye and Slee (2008) represent a recent article describing CBT principles that has appeared in the Australian social work literature.

The ubiquity of the behavioural model likely derives from two main sources: (1) simply put, CBT has amassed the largest and most robust evidence base of any practice model in the history of psychosocial intervention; and (2) the cognitive-behavioural model rests upon a theoretical foundation that is itself well supported empirically and congruent with aspects of contemporary philosophy of science. This chapter first elucidates the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the CBT model, and then offers a description of how CBT approaches may be integrated into social work practice.

The CBT model originated in several distinct theoretical frameworks, respondent learning theory (Thyer, 2008), operant learning theory (Wong, 2008) and observational learning (Bandura, 1977; Fyling et al., 2011) frameworks associated with scientists such as Ivan Pavlov, John B. Watson, B.F. Skinner and Albert Bandura. In the latter part of the twentieth century, a number of clinicians, such as Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck, added elements of cognitive psychology to the existing behavioural model, slowly changing the field from a purely behavioural approach to the more widely adopted and contemporary cognitive-behavioural model, which is the focus of the present chapter. It is important to distinguish the philosophy of science perspective known as behaviourism (Thyer, 1996a) from the collection of practices collectively called CBT. A person may be a philosophical behaviourist and not a clinician who uses CBT, and similarly a clinician may practise CBT and not subscribe to the philosophy of behaviourism.

The respondent learning theory element of CBT focuses on the antecedent environmental conditions which have come to automatically evoke certain simple motor behaviours and physical reactions. Operant learning theory focuses on understanding how the consequences which have followed behaviour in the past have served to shape a person's actions, and how these consequences come to strengthen or weaken the probability of one's future similar behaviour. Observational learning focuses on how one can acquire new behaviours by witnessing how the behaviour of others is followed by reinforcing or punitive consequences, and thereby influences the future actions of the observer. Each of these processes is well established as fundamental mechanisms mediating how all animals, including humans, learn and thereby experience normal development and exceptional behaviour, ranging from what has been called being a genius to the highly dysfunctional.

The historical focus of these behavioural perspectives, collectively called social learning theory, has been on how one's lived environment (from conception until death) influences one's actions. This approach is thus very compatible with social work's much-lauded 'person-in-environment' perspective (see Chapter 14). While early behaviourists like Watson contended that only overt, publicly observable behaviour was the proper focus of scientific enquiry, this limited perspective was considerably broadened by the operant analysis of B.F. Skinner, who contended that *all* functions of the body could be subjected to the experimental analysis of behaviour, including private unobservable events, such as pain, thoughts, wishes,

attitudes, hallucinations, delusions, beliefs and so forth, bodily functions which Skinner labelled as private events. For Skinner and other operant-oriented behaviourists, the toothache is just as real as the tooth (or chewing) and equally susceptible to scientific enquiry. Saying a poem, whether one is loudly speaking, whispering or silently rehearsing it – all are equal grist for the behaviourist's theoretical mill. This more comprehensive definition of behaviour (e.g. whatever the body does, regardless of whether it can be seen) greatly extended the value of this approach to the practice of social work, given that so much of what is of concern to social work clients consists of private events (e.g. beliefs, obsessions, hallucinations, delusions, poor impulse control, cravings for food, drugs or alcohol, anger and so forth).

Theoreticians and practitioners, such as Ellis and Beck, accepted the fundamental nature of respondent, operant and observational learning, but chose to expand their focus into the internal processes believed to mediate the relationships between a person's environmental experiences and her or his subsequent actions. As Hilgard and Bower (1966: 122) asserted:

The stimulus affects the organism, and what happens as a consequence, depends upon the organism as well as upon the stimulus. . . . What goes on within the organism we have to infer, and in the course of making these inferences we postulate certain intervening variables or symbolic constructs.

The expansive aim of these more cognitively oriented clinicians 'was to discover and to describe formally the meanings that human beings created out of their encounters with the world, and then to propose hypotheses about what meaning-making processes were implicated' (Bruner, 1990: 2).

As such, the cognitive-behavioural model is grounded in a stream of thought with historical roots extending back two millennia, arguably to the Stoic philosophy of ancient Greece and even earlier to the teachings of Gautama Buddha in India. This second stream of thought is known as *constructivism*, the notion that humans construct their own experience of reality out of the interaction between their perceptions and ideas about the world. From this perspective, humans do not solely encounter an objective world, but also experience a phenomenological world constructed of appraisals, beliefs and feelings. Marcus Aurelius, a central Stoic philosopher, encapsulated the constructivist thesis with his famous quote, 'The whole universe is change, and life itself is what you deem it' (Meditations, Book IV). If life is what one deems it, it follows that one's experience of life can be improved by altering the appraisal of one's life situation. Conversely, certain ways of viewing the world may result in suffering. Epictetus emphasised this notion in his famous quote, 'Man [*sic*] is disturbed not by things, but by the views he takes of them' (Enchiridion, verse 5). Thus the emphasis on altering thought patterns in cognitive-behavioural therapy is an outgrowth of this constructivist foundation of the cognitive-behavioural model.

This perspective that attempts to encompass the intervening variables of human experience paved the way for the cognitive-behavioural model of practice. This model combines the core ideas of behaviourism and techniques of behaviour therapy with theoretical notions and clinical approaches drawn from research on information processing in human cognition. This practice orientation is actually comprised of a wide array of therapeutic approaches. Two major exemplars of CBT are Aaron Beck et al.'s (1979) *Cognitive Therapy of Depression* and Albert Ellis's rational emotive behaviour therapy approach in *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy* (1962).

In fact, the earliest social work book dealing with behavioural methods described the application of Ellis's model of CBT, originally called rational emotive therapy and later changed by Ellis to rational emotive behaviour therapy (Werner, 1965). This was soon followed by Jellison's (1967) more purely behavioural text titled *Learning Theory and Social Work*. While there are key differences between these forms of treatment, they share many core commonalities. As such, we discuss these shared common concepts and techniques in the section that follows.

## KEY IDEAS

### INFORMATION PROCESSING IN COGNITION AND EMOTION

The cognitive-behavioural model is grounded in the notion of information processing, the notion that cognition works by way of computation. Human experience accesses an interconnected, undivided universe, a holism that, upon analysis, reveals infinite layers of data. Our sensory organs register an interconnected world with 'the structure of ever-receding levels of detail that blend into a nonspecific background' (Varela et al., 1991: 147). Although our everyday human experience can potentially access an infinitely complex universe, an individual can only process a limited set of data as information at any one moment. Thus human information processing is selective and involves attention, that is, the function by which certain subsets of data gain preeminence in the competitive processing of neural networks at the expense of other subsets of data (Desimone and Duncan, 1995).

According to this theory, during the computational process, when humans encounter the world, the human sensory registers (visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, taste and interoceptive) channel information about the world as codes or representations into working memory, a limited-capacity, short-term storage system. Through repetition and rehearsal, representations stored in working memory become established in long-term memory, where they are less subject to decay.

Because the human information processing system is of a limited-capacity nature, humans cannot process an unlimited amount of information. As such, the individual must select a subset of the available information to store in working memory. Thus, attended stimuli govern behaviour, insofar as they receive preferential information processing. Attention can be driven by reflexive, stimulus-driven factors (e.g. as the brightness of an object or the loudness of a sound) or by reflective, strategic processes (Corbetta and Shulman, 2002). Thus, it is contended that the salience, goal-relevance or higher-order meaning of the object can guide attention to select and distinguish it from the environmental matrix in which it is embedded (Koivisto and Revonsuo, 2007). Although attention is the means by which information is channelled as representations into memory, this process is truly bidirectional. Information stored within working memory and long-term memory can influence and direct attention. In this way, as William James (1890: 402) asserted, 'My experience is what I agree to attend to'.

Thus, the human brain is not merely a passive receptor of sensory information which reacts in an input-output fashion, but rather, an active agent that *selects* information and *appraises* this information for its contextual meaning or value. Emotion arises from these selection and

appraisal processes. According to appraisal accounts of emotions (Ellsworth and Scherer, 2002; Lazarus, 1991), the emotional quality of any given circumstance springs from the locus of attention and subsequent patterns of interpretation. Furthermore, people interpret the meaning of the objects of attention by ascribing to them conceptual categories according to their memories of past experiences within particular sociocultural contexts. These memories are held to be deeply embedded as schemas.

## SCHEMAS

Schemas are theorised to be cognitive structures that actively organise knowledge about past experience (Bartlett, 1932). Schemas are templates or rules for information processing that begin in early childhood and are shaped by a wide range of influences, such as encounters with parents, peers, formal education, traumas and experiences of success (Clark et al., 1999). According to Clark et al. (1999), schemas manifested as *intermediary assumptions* or *core beliefs* have a strong influence on self-concept and behaviour. Intermediary assumptions often take the form of *if-then* statements, such as ‘If I try hard, I will succeed’ or ‘If I trust other people, I am bound to be hurt’. Core beliefs are global, overarching, absolutist statements about self or world, such as ‘I’m unlovable’, ‘I’m worthless’, ‘The world is a dangerous place’ or ‘I am a good person’. Schemas encode information in a self-reinforcing manner, such that novel data that are incongruent with the extant schema are ignored or assimilated, leading to its further entrenchment (Lerner and Keltner, 2000). As such, schemas operate automatically to guide thought and behaviour by shaping information processing. In the process of influencing the way in which information is channelled and stored, information processing biases may occur.

## INFORMATION PROCESSING BIASES

As templates for organising knowledge, it is contended that schemas filter subsets of data from the set of all available information. Consequently, knowledge may become biased from this filtering process. People evidence *attentional* and *memory biases* towards emotionally salient stimuli and events, through which they more rapidly detect, recall and elaborate mood-congruent material over mood-incongruent or neutral material (Mathews and MacLeod, 2005). For example, depressed or anxious individuals may be biased towards cognitive processing of objects, persons and events that they construe as disappointing, upsetting or frightening, while neglecting what is beautiful, affirming or pleasurable. Threatening stimuli automatically capture the attention of anxious individuals (MacLeod et al., 1986), which they then attempt to strategically avoid (Cisler and Koster, 2011). However, anxious individuals exhibit difficulty disengaging from threatening objects and events (Fox et al., 2002). Depressed individuals tend to remember more negative than positive self-relevant information (Teasdale and Dent, 1987) and ruminate on negative thoughts, feelings and memories (Mineka et al., 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Similarly, persons with substance use disorders exhibit addiction attentional bias, that is, an automatic attentional orienting

towards and difficulty disengaging from substance-related cues like a bottle of liquor or a crack pipe (Field and Cox, 2008). Moreover, addiction attentional bias is amplified by stress (Field and Quigley, 2009), associated with craving (Field et al., 2009) and can increase alcohol consumption (Field and Eastwood, 2005). Hence, information processing biases exert consequential and deleterious effects on mood, and behaviour, further perpetuating and reinforcing dysphoria, fear and self-destructive habits.

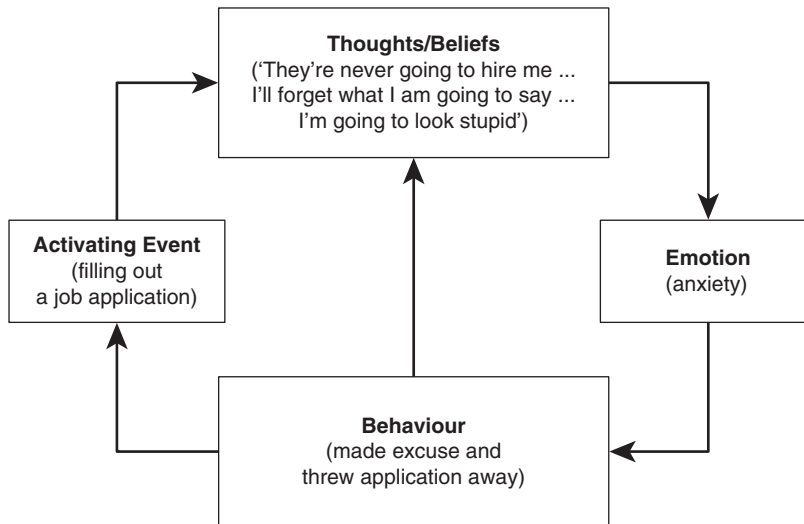
Information processing may also become biased by errors in logic, or *cognitive errors*. Beck et al. (1979) identified a number of cognitive errors that often influence emotion and behaviour, such as selective abstraction, overgeneralisation, magnification and minimisation, personalisation and dichotomous thinking. In *selective abstraction*, a conclusion is drawn from a small portion of the available information, and information that would otherwise be incongruent with that conclusion is screened out. In *overgeneralisation*, a conclusion is drawn from an isolated incident and then applied globally to many areas and situations. In *magnification and minimisation*, the significance of an attribute or event is exaggerated or minimised. In *personalisation (or negative internal attribution)*, external events are attributed to the self without an adequate basis for making such an attribution. In *dichotomous (or all-or-nothing) thinking*, evaluations about self or others are placed into absolute categories (e.g. all bad or all good, either a total failure or a complete success). These cognitive errors are often expressed in the form of automatic thoughts.

## AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

Automatic thoughts are mental contents that are constantly streaming just below the surface of the conscious mind that often go unspoken while we are in the midst of navigating life situations or reflecting on past experience. While a person is not usually aware of his or her automatic thoughts, the simple act of introspection or reflection can reveal their presence. Although everyone has automatic thoughts, persons suffering from emotional problems such as depression and anxiety often experience overwhelming floods of maladaptive automatic thoughts that can result in painful emotions and dysfunctional behaviour. According to the cognitive-behavioural model, events trigger automatic thoughts which then lead to emotions and behavioural responses. This cycle is depicted in Figure 13.1.

## ABC MODEL

The cognitive-behavioural cycle depicted in Figure 13.1 can be modelled using the acronym ABC. In the ABC model, A stands for the activating event or trigger, B stands for beliefs or thoughts about the activating event and C stands for the consequences (emotional and behavioural) of those beliefs or thoughts. When an individual encounters a given event, he or she appraises the event for its meaning or personal relevance. As such, the event activates schemas, often in the form of core beliefs, which then produce automatic thoughts. In turn, automatic thoughts elicit emotions and lead to behavioural responses, which may arise spontaneously out of habit or result from an intentional process of reflection and decision-making. Although



**Figure 13.1** Cognitive-behavioural cycle

this process has been depicted in a linear fashion for ease of comprehension, in actuality, it is wholly bidirectional, recursive and circular: emotional and behavioural reactions influence the activating event, as well as modify thoughts and beliefs about that event.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

CBT represents a genuine person-in-environment (PIE) orientation and, since the PIE perspective is seen as a distinctive aspect of the view social workers are said to bring to their work, the congruence between social work's PIE and the learning theory foundations of CBT are both obvious and relevant (see Chapter 14). The following quotes are from important social work theorists and clinicians in the USA, which illustrate the central elements of the PIE orientation:

A basic assumption . . . is that human behavior is the product of the interactions between the individual and environment. (Northen, 1982: 63)

The human being and the environment reciprocally shape each other. People mould their environments in many ways and, in turn, they must then adapt to the changes they created. (Germain, in Bloom, 1992: 407)

Both person and environment can be understood fully in terms of their relationship, in which each continually influences the other within a particular context. Ecological thinking examines the exchanges between A and B, for example, that shape, influence, or change both over time. A acts, which leads to a change in B, whereupon the change in B elicits a change in A that in turn changes B, which then changes or otherwise influences A, and so on. (Germain and Gitterman, 1995: 816)

Person-in-environment perspective . . . an orientation that views the client as part of an environmental system. This perspective encompasses the reciprocal relationships and other influences between an individual, the *relevant other* or others, and the physical and social environment. (Barker, 2003: 323, emphasis in original)

Compare these central social work views with those maintained by behaviourism:

Men [*sic*] act upon the world and change it, and are changed in turn by the consequences of their actions. Certain processes which the human organism shares with other species, alters behavior so that it achieves a safer and more useful interchange with a particular environment. When appropriate behavior has been established, its consequences work through similar processes to keep it in force. If by chance the environment changes, new forms of behavior disappear, while new consequences build new forms. (Skinner, 1957: 1)

Behaviorism's environmentalism does not imply that the organism passively reacts to the environment. The relationship between the organism and the environment is interdependent and reciprocal. . . . That is, although the organism interacts with its environment, its reaction also changes the environment. The organism is then influenced by an environment changed by its own behavior, behaves again, changes the environment again, and so on. Thus the organism's relationship to its environment is one of mutual influence. (O'Donohue and Ferguson, 2001: 57)

Most behavioral science emphasizes the power of the environment; it sees environment as constantly controlling behavior, and it sees behavior as constantly affecting the environment. Indeed, the point of most behavior is to affect the environment. (Baer and Pinkston, 1997: 1)

We believe that the relevance of the theory underlying CBT is both obvious and compelling. As noted earlier, according to surveys of practising social workers in the USA, CBT is among the most highly utilised practice perspectives. Also the approach has widespread implications and applications to social work education (Thyer and Wodarski, 1990), and embraces practice from clinical social work to the design and analysis of social welfare policies at the state or national levels (Thyer, 1996b).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

### COLLABORATIVE EMPIRICISM, CASE CONCEPTUALISATION AND GOAL SETTING IN COGNITIVE-BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY

CBT is a structured, directive approach to practice. The cognitive-behavioural social worker engages the client in a collaborative relationship, in which the client and clinician participate in the co-creation of therapeutic goals and activities designed to reach those goals. This relationship is marked by an attitude of *collaborative empiricism*, that is, one in

which the clinician encourages the client to use a scientific approach to test the validity of his or her own thought processes and beliefs. This approach may be said to be scientific in that it should be based on evidence rather than intuition, facts instead of feelings. A typical course of CBT lasts between 8 and 20 sessions. Clients are asked to participate in therapeutic activities *during* and *in-between* therapy sessions. These in-between session activities, or therapeutic homework assignments, are critical ingredients of the therapy process. Through the use of these assignments, clients generate material that can be brought back to the therapy session for processing by the clinician. Corcoran (2005) reflects one current resource illustrating the use of CBT homework assignments in social work practice, as does Dobson and Dobson (2009).

Unlike the standard social work biopsychosocial assessment, a CBT assessment is oriented towards identifying negative automatic thoughts, maladaptive schemas, information processing biases and history of learning or reinforcement contingencies that undergird the presenting problem. Once these key elements have been identified, a clinician practising from the cognitive-behavioural orientation develops a 'working' hypothesis to explain how these processes interact to produce the presenting problem. The clinician conceptualises the case in terms of the working hypothesis. This hypothesis is then continuously revised throughout the course of therapy as the clinician learns more about the cognitive and behavioural processes underlying the client's problems. The more behaviourally oriented clinician will actively assess the consequences which follow selected client behaviours in everyday naturalistic settings; while the cognitively oriented practitioner will conduct more of an office-based discussion with the client of what they said to themselves before, during and after events of interest in the client's daily life.

After a thorough biopsychosocial assessment, the cognitive-behavioural social worker should work with the client to establish one or more goals for therapy. These goals should be specific, measurable, concrete and time-limited in nature. Once the client and clinician have agreed upon the goals for therapy, they may progress to a more active stage of intervention. CBT offers a wealth of techniques that can be used for assessment and treatment purposes. The most central of these techniques are presented below.

## ASSESSING AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

In order to identify maladaptive automatic thoughts to be targeted in CBT interventions, clients are asked to describe a recent situation when they experienced a painful emotional response. The social worker enquires about what activating events may have triggered this emotional response, and what the client was thinking about at that time. If the client is unable to recall any automatic thoughts, the social worker should use a guided imagery approach, in which the clinician uses situational details provided by the client in describing the activating event to be imagined by the client. As the clinician guides the client to imagine this scenario, the clinician should encourage the client to recall his or her emotional response, and then notice what thoughts, images and memories pass spontaneously through the client's mind. These mental contents often contain negative automatic thoughts that may be targeted by cognitive restructuring.



## DOWNWARD ARROW TECHNIQUE

Schemas can be accessed using another tactic, known as the downward arrow technique. When a client expresses a negative automatic thought, such as 'Nobody is ever going to want to hire me', the clinician can ask, 'If that thought were true, what would it mean about you as a person?' Typically, the client will then express a deeper automatic thought, one that is more reflective of schemas, such as, 'I'm not good at anything'. The clinician can then use the downward arrow technique again, asking, 'If that thought were true, what would it mean about you, as a person?' Often, the client will express a core belief at this point. In this example, the client might state, 'It would mean that I am worthless'. If not, other phrasings can be used, for instance, 'If that thought were true, what would it say about you?' When working with clients who have difficulty recognising, admitting or expressing their own painful schemas, phrasing the question from a third-person perspective can be useful: 'If you knew someone who thought X, what would it mean about that person if that thought were true?'

## COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING

The core intervention in CBT is cognitive restructuring. This technique consists of: (1) seeking evidence and counterevidence for automatic thoughts or core beliefs; (2) using logic to challenge cognitive errors; and (3) generating new, more adaptive cognitive appraisals based on evidence. This technique is delivered using Socratic questioning, that is, a form of dialogue in which the social worker engages the client in a process of reflective enquiry. During Socratic questioning, the social worker avoids giving direct advice or 'spoon feeding' the client. Instead, the clinician uses leading questions to guide the client towards challenging and changing their own maladaptive cognitions. By engaging in this active process of learning, the client internalises the realisations stemming from the dialogue and this results in a more fundamental reorganisation and reassociation of automatic thoughts and schemas.

When a client expresses a maladaptive automatic thought, the social worker can ask the client to provide evidence for and against that thought. Evidence and counterevidence can be culled from the client's own life experience, from the lives of friends, family, co-workers, acquaintances, or even from the experience of persons who the client has only heard about but never met in person. For example, in the case of a person suffering from intense anxiety that has prevented him or her from applying for a job, the social worker could ask the client to provide evidence for and against the thought that, 'Nobody is ever going to want to hire me'. Evidence for this thought might include the fact that the client was denied a job the last two times he or she applied for one. Evidence against this thought might include the fact that the client has held three jobs in the past, the fact that the client has training and experience in computer database programming, and the fact that the client's uncle was on the job market for five months before finding another job. The clinician could ask the client to generate a number of alternative explanations for why a person might not get a job besides 'not being good at anything'. Such a line of questioning would challenge the cognitive error of *personalisation* or *negative internal attribution*. Lastly, the social worker could ask the client to consider the evidence for and against the negative thought, and then generate a new, more reasonable or

helpful thought about the situation. In this example, in response to this directive, the client might generate the new adaptive thought, 'It's a tough job market out there but just because one company doesn't hire me doesn't mean that no one will. I do have some marketable skills'. After generating this new thought, the social worker could ask the client to reflect on how his or her mood state has improved as a result of this more reasonable or adaptive mode of thinking. Several key questions can be used to facilitate the cognitive restructuring process:

- 1 What is the evidence that supports this thought? What is the evidence against this thought?
- 2 Is there an alternative explanation? What are some other ways that I could view this situation?
- 3 What is the effect of my believing the automatic thought? What could be the effect of changing my thinking?
- 4 Go back in time and think like your old self. What alternatives would your old self see that your current (problem) self has ignored?
- 5 How would your old self, friend, advisor, teacher, wise or successful person advise you to think about this situation?
- 6 What would I want my friend to believe if he or she were in the same situation?
- 7 What are the positive aspects of the situation?
- 8 How can dealing with this situation make me a stronger person?

## GENERATING NEW ADAPTIVE SCHEMAS USING A POSITIVE DATA LOG

Insofar as schemas are said to serve as templates for information processing, screening or filtering out data that is inconsistent with the schema, they may be especially resistant to cognitive restructuring by way of examining the evidence. When a clinician asks the client to describe the evidence against a negative automatic thought, the client may be unable to identify any such evidence due to the past operation of attentional or memory biases. Moreover, efforts to assist a client in developing an adaptive schema, such as the belief 'I am a competent, capable person', may also be undermined by information processing biases that prevent the client from accessing information to support the new positive belief. In this case, it is often useful to ask the client to keep a positive data log, recording events and accomplishments that may provide counterevidence to negative automatic thoughts and evidence in support of the veracity of the new adaptive schemas (Padesky, 1994). In implementing this technique, clients often have difficulty identifying the type of information that should be included in the positive data log. Clinicians can assist in this process by helping the client to review recent experiences and taking note of events or happenings that the client may have omitted due to information processing biases.

## IMAGERY TECHNIQUES

Clinicians practising from the CBT model also employ imagery techniques to facilitate exposure, allow for rehearsal of cognitive and behavioural skills and modify dysfunctional automatic thoughts schemas. During *imaginal exposure*, the clinician guides the client to experience a

feared situation, by providing the client with key sensory details designed to evoke an emotional response. The clinician calibrates the intensity of the feared stimulus according to the readiness of the client using the client's own personalised exposure hierarchy. A specialised form of imaginal exposure known as *imagery rescripting* (Holmes et al., 2007) goes beyond mere re-experiencing of an emotionally difficult happening or event by guiding the client to actively transform the image in a therapeutic direction. For example, in the case of using imagery rescripting to resolve a childhood trauma, the clinician may guide the client to imagine her or his adult self being interjected into the trauma memory, where the adult self can then protect the younger self from the abuser or correct distorted beliefs about the trauma (e.g. 'It was not your fault'). Although both imagery rescripting and prolonged exposure therapy result in significant post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom reduction, half as many clients participating in imagery rescripting drop out of treatment as those participating in exposure therapy (51 percent compared to 25 percent, respectively) (Arntz et al., 2007). Originally pioneered as a treatment for adult survivors of child sexual abuse (Smucker et al., 1995), imagery rescripting has also shown promise as a treatment for combat-related nightmares (Long et al., 2011) and even depression (Holmes et al., 2007; Wheatley et al., 2007).

## THIRD WAVE OF COGNITIVE-BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY AND MINDFULNESS

Recent developments in the cognitive-behavioural model have led to what has been termed the 'third wave' of behaviour therapy (Hayes et al., 2006). Third wave therapies, such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), are rooted in constructivism rather than positivism, and are founded on the notion that humans have no special access to an objective reality outside their own phenomenological experience (Hayes et al., 1999). As such, rather than developing realistic beliefs, third wave therapies aim to help clients develop useful or functional responses. Thus, the operative question from a third wave perspective is not 'Is this belief correct?' but rather 'What is the consequence of holding this belief?' (Ciarrochi and Bailey, 2008). Moreover, third wave therapies focus on the context and functions of mental phenomena, not just their content, and therefore emphasise techniques designed to induce contextual and experiential change in addition to didactic approaches (Hayes et al., 2006). In other words, rather than focusing on changing the content of a given negative automatic thought like, 'I'm never going to go anywhere in life', a third wave approach would help the client experience this thought as a transitory mental event rather than a reflection of reality.

One means of effecting such contextual and experiential change is through mindfulness. Mindfulness refers to a set of practices as well as the psychological state and trait produced by such practices. The state, trait and practice of mindfulness may be broadly characterised by a present-oriented, non-judgemental awareness of cognitions, emotions, sensations and perceptions without fixation on thoughts of past or future (Chambers et al., 2009; Garland, in press). The *practice* of mindfulness, which involves repeated placement of attention onto an object (e.g. the sensation of one's breath) while alternately acknowledging and letting go of distracting thoughts and emotions, is thought to engender the *state* of mindfulness, which, when

repeatedly engaged over time, is believed to promote the development of *trait* mindfulness (Garland et al., 2010; Lutz et al., 2007). Numerous experimental and quasi-experimental studies have provided mounting empirical evidence of the role of mindfulness in reducing stress and improving clinical outcomes across a wide range of biobehavioural issues (Chiesa and Serretti, 2010; Greeson, 2009; Ludwig and Kabat-Zinn, 2008).

From a cognitive-behavioural perspective, mindfulness may reduce the impact of potentially distressing psychological content through the mental operation of ‘stepping back’ from thoughts, emotions and sensations known as *decentering* (Segal et al., 2002). This set-shifting function may involve a second-order rather than a first-order change, a shift in mental process rather than in contents (Hayes and Wilson, 2003). Shifting from the contents of consciousness to the process of consciousness is thought to lead to an objectification of or disidentification from fixed or schematised beliefs about self and world, which results in cognitive and behavioural flexibility (Shapiro et al., 2006). As such, mindfulness may promote the restructuring of cognitions and the generation of new, positive appraisals of life situations (Garland et al., 2009). Although this hypothesis remains to be tested experimentally, findings from two prospective, observational studies of participants enrolled in mindfulness-based interventions indicate that the clinical benefits of developing trait mindfulness are partially mediated through increases in positive reappraisal (Garland et al., 2011; Huston et al., 2011).

The CBT approach encompasses a wide range of assessment and interventive methods. This approach has been used in social work since the 1930s, and it is now the most frequently relied upon theoretical framework and practice model used by social workers in the USA, as already noted. We have seen that it is based upon a strongly empirical orientation, being particularly predisposed towards evaluating the validity of its theoretical premises and the effectiveness of its practice procedures. As such it has accumulated a substantial degree of empirical support, to a greater extent than any other approach to practice. Comprised of the social learning processes of respondent, operant and observational conditioning, and of cognitive learning theories, CBT has been effectively applied to a very wide array of client issues and problems, including virtually all of the so-called mental disorders and other dysfunctional behaviours, such as child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, the reduction of racism and prejudice, the alleviation of poverty and the promotion of physical health. CBT can be applied in all the practice settings in which social workers are engaged, including hospitals, outpatient clinics, schools, rehabilitation centres, public and private agencies, substance abuse treatment facilities, public housing projects and welfare offices. Social learning theory should be an essential element of social work course content related to human behaviour in their social environments, and CBT methods of assessment and intervention a central focus of practice education.

## Study questions

- 1 What are the origins of CBT theory and practice?
- 2 Describe the potential application of the ABC model to a recent event occurring in your own life.
- 3 What is meant by the third wave of CBT?

## GLOSSARY

**ABC model** A theory that an *Activating* event (something that happens to us) triggers a *Belief* or thought about that event, which results in emotional or behavioural *Consequences*.

**Automatic thoughts** Mental contents that are said to be constantly streaming just below awareness, but which can be recalled upon reflection.

**Behaviourism** The theory that the antecedents and consequences which have surrounded certain behaviour in the past influence the future probability of that behaviour occurring in the future.

**Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)** A comprehensive theory that integrates elements of respondent, operant and observational learning with principles drawn from cognitive psychology.

**Cognitive restructuring** Assisting clients to seek evidence and counterevidence related to their automatic thoughts, and using logic to challenge any detected cognitive errors, and to generate more adaptive thoughts.

**Imagery techniques** Techniques involving the clinician guiding the client to vividly imagine emotional experiences and to transform their fantasised reaction to that situation into a more adaptive one.

**Information processing biases** Templates for organising knowledge. Schemas filter subsets of data from the set of all available information. This can result in biased judgements and conclusions.

**Mindfulness** A set of practices attempting to develop a present-oriented, non-judgemental awareness of cognitions, emotions, sensations and perceptions. It also refers to the state of being fully focused on one's present experiences.

**Schemas** Hypothesised cognitive structures that actively organise our knowledge about our past experiences.

## FURTHER READING

Bandura's (1977) *Social Learning Theory* set the stage for much of the developments leading to CBT. This work sets forth his attempt to integrate traditional behavioural theory with elements of cognitive psychology.

In *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*, Beck et al. (1979) provide the earliest fairly complete account, in CBT terminology, of a complex clinical condition. From this book emerged additional applications of CBT to many other areas of clinical practice.

Ellis's (1961) influential book *A Guide to Rational Living*, oriented to a lay audience, described the general model of Ellis's early form of CBT then known as rational emotive therapy.

Skinner's (1953) earliest and most comprehensive book, *Science and Human Behavior*, outlines the applications of operant theory to a wide range of human activities, including personal, social and group behaviour, in settings such as schools, the government, in psychotherapy and in religion, and to inner phenomena, such as thinking and self-control.

Werner's (1965) *A Rational Approach to Social Casework* was the earliest book outlining the applications of one form of CBT, rational emotive therapy, within the field of social work.

# 14

## ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

FRED H. BESTHORN

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, social work has sought to distinguish itself from other helping professions through reliance on ecological and systems theory and the central metaphor of person-in-environment. In the USA and Canada, ecological systems social work gradually emerged out of a turbulent ideological legacy characterised by reoccurring struggles to realistically conceptualise a dual and balanced obligation to both person and environment. Weick (1981: 141) noted that social work's commitment to attend equally to individual persons in the context of their immediate environments has all too often resulted in a problematic 'ideological seesaw'.

Alternating attempts to find common ground between individual responsibility and social circumstance date back to the very beginning of North American social work. It can be seen from the very earliest years of the profession, especially in the often stark dissimilarity between the individualistic and moralistic *friendly visiting* of Charity Organisation Societies (COS) and the situational and contextualised *in-place* social change efforts of the Settlement House Movement (SHM). COS friendly visitors were tasked with investigating the circumstances surrounding the indigent's need and to instruct the poor in ways to better manage their personal lives (Lubove, 1971; Trattner, 1989; van Wormer and Besthorn, 2011). The belief that individuals were morally responsible for their own circumstances was unambiguous. On the other hand, Settlement House efforts were not that of friendly visiting, but rather, were infused with a genuine desire to bridge class differences and to develop a more contextualised and less patronising form of charity (Trolander, 1987). The environment, not the individual, was the locus of change for the settlers. The problematic tension between person and environment remained an intermittent point of contention in North American social work for the first half of the twentieth century.

## GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY

The search for ways to characterise the relationship between person and environment took on new vigour in the 1950s and 1960s as social work theorists began to explore emerging ideas in systems theory (Greene, 2009a; Kemp et al., 1997). Much of modern systems theory evolved out of the work of North American sociologist Talcott Parsons' (1951) Social Systems Theory and Austrian-born biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy's (1968) General Systems Theory. Parsons' intellectual interests were wide-ranging and he was a prolific scholar and researcher in his almost 50 years at Harvard University. Undoubtedly, however, he is best known for analysing the complex interrelational subtleties that characterised the structure and function of human societies. He worked for decades at refining a description of the action and corresponding interactional dynamics of society's members within various social systems (Robertson and Turner, 1991). For Parsons, human social systems have a highly subjective dimension, making them distinct from other physical systems. Because humans reason, plan, remember, create, self-motivate and emote, the study of human social systems is of a different order of magnitude than that of physical systems. Human action can only be understood in conjunction with a thorough reckoning of human desire, purpose, will and motivation. Human development cannot be reduced to simply a byproduct of competing psychological, biological and economic forces (Camic, 1991).

Von Bertalanffy began developing General Systems Theory (GST) in the early 1920s. Building on a background in biology, over the next 50 years von Bertalanffy attempted to define an alternative to conventional models of systemic organisation which tended to view system interchange as static, closed and resistant to change. He is credited with developing the concept of *open systems*, which for him was a far more accurate description of how interactions actually took place within and between living systems (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Von Bertalanffy was especially interested in applying his theory to the intricacies of human systems. He was critical of conventional atomistic and reductionist models of system exchange which posited sealed, single-loop interactions but which left little room for dynamic growth, differentiation, creativity and transformation over time (Greene, 2009b; Robbins et al., 2006). For von Bertalanffy, conventional ideas may have fostered better understanding of physical, non-sentient systems but they completely failed to describe the complexity of human systems. Von Bertalanffy's original ideas have had a profound staying power and the influence of his General Systems Theory can be seen in almost every scientific discipline including psychology, biology, physics, anthropology, engineering, sociology, economics, political science and social work (Davidson, 1983).

Core principles and key ideas from the evolving, multidisciplinary scholarship in systems thinking was first introduced to social work by Gordon Hearn (1959) in the late 1950s. Hearn and several other social work theorists over the next decade (Germain, 1968; Hartman, 1971; Hearn, 1969; Meyer, 1970; Pincus and Minahan, 1973; Siporin, 1975) had sensitised North American social work to 'both the need, and a (partial) explanation for a holistic understanding of people and interactions' (Lloyd, 1983: 4, cited in Robbins et al., 2006: 34). The holistic and interconnectedness language of systems theory seemed to offer social work a rigorously conceptualised and coherent framework with which to explain the complexity of human behaviour. It assisted the profession in knitting together a unitary theoretical structure thus

helping to ameliorate the historic tension between the profession's dual, but frequently unrealised, concern for both person and environment.

While embraced by many within the profession, systems thinking was not destined to become the *raison d'être* of either social work theory or practice. Professional reaction to general systems theory as a beacon for social work practice ranged 'from enthusiasm, to caution, to resistance, to downright hostility' (Hartman, 1970: 467) and, as Kemp et al. (1997: 41) note, those dimensions of general systems theory most troubling to social workers were 'its level of abstraction, the range of competing perspectives within systems theory, and the mechanistic, nonhuman nature of much of its language'.

## ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

In a further attempt to clarify the abstractionism of general systems theory and its perceived lack of practical application for frontline social work practice, several social work theorists began to introduce ideas from the field of ecology into social work theory (Germain, 1968, 1973, 1978; Germain and Gitterman, 1980; Gitterman and Germain, 1976; Meyer, 1970, 1973, 1979). Ecological theories had been popular for some time in the fields of sociology, anthropology and psychology prior to their introduction to social work. One of the most significant influences on social work's nascent ecological perspective was the work of developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1973, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory posited five types of nested systems which are in constant interaction with one another and which, together, powerfully shape human development. Bronfenbrenner described these interrelated elements as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. Bronfenbrenner sought to sort out and explicate the common principles of both ecology and systems thinking in a manner having application across various social scientific disciplines. For Bronfenbrenner, people are active participants in their development and the way they perceive their environments is often as important as the way they actually experience their environmental contexts (Rogers, 2011).

Carel Germain (1973) first introduced her Ecological Perspective to social work in part to address criticisms of general systems models and in part to acknowledge the growing trend to conceive of human development and deteriorating social and biophysical conditions in holistic and ecosystemic terms. Germain understood that in order to fully enhance human well-being the physical and social environments of persons must be assessed concurrently. Germain argued persuasively 'that ecological thinking presented an organic worldview, relevant to living systems and closer to human experience, and thus more compatible with the value base of social work than general systems theory' (Kemp et al., 1997: 42).

Later, Carel Germain collaborated with colleague Alex Gitterman (Germain and Gitterman, 1980, 1996; Gitterman and Germain, 1976, 2008) to elaborate on her earlier ecological perspective. Their Life Model of social work practice attempted to explicitly apply ecological principles to direct practice. The life model, while going through several iterations over the last decades (Gitterman, 2011), recognised the importance of a *goodness-of-fit* between people and their environments which allows both to reciprocally respond and adapt to one another. The life model relies heavily on ecological concepts and metaphors to emphasise the



transactions between people and environments. These are complex processes which emerge, change and evolve over time. Persons and environments never stand in static relationship to each other. The life model conceives of problems in living as a result of stress associated with inadequate fit between people and their environments. These problems revolve around stressful life transitions, maladaptive interpersonal processes and unresponsive environments. For Germain and Gitterman (1980: 137):

The environment is dynamic and complex. It comprises many kinds of systems, each with its characteristic structure, level of organization and spatial and temporal properties. The *social* environment comprises human beings organized in dyadic relations, social networks, bureaucratic institutions, and other social systems including the neighborhood, community, and society itself. The *physical* environment comprises the natural world of animals, plants, and land forms, and the built world of structures and objects constructed by human beings. The social and physical environments are related to each other in complex ways.

Carol Meyer (1979, 1983) introduced a variant of Germain's ecological perspective called the Ecosystems Perspective. Her work was an explicit attempt to find a unifying framework to guide practice which combined elements of both general systems and ecological theory. Meyer conceived of her ecosystems perspective as a conceptual framework – a kind of metamodel – rather than a fully operationalised theoretical position. She suggested that the ecosystems perspective 'offers social work practitioners/clinicians a way of thinking about and assessing the relatedness of people and their impinging environments: it does not specify the what (problem-definition) or the how (methodology) of practice' (Meyer, 1983: 29). Similar to Germain's earlier ecological perspective, the ecosystems perspective drew the profession's attention not only to persons in environments but also to the dynamic interactions of persons and environments. These interactions are constant and non-linear and, from an ecosystems perspective, no simple cause-and-effect explanation can ever serve to understand the complexities of the human condition.

The ecological perspective, life model and ecosystems perspective have had profound staying power in the theoretical life of social work. These ecological systems perspectives have shaped the emergence of what many have come to commonly call ecological social work (Greene, 2009b; Hutchinson, 2011; Payne, 2002; Robbins et al., 2006; Rogers, 2011). They have become conventional wisdom for much of social work practice. Their influence on social work, both in North America and around the world, cannot be underestimated. They ushered in a new integrative paradigm for a profession that had struggled for decades to conceptualise its obligations to both person and environment. Together, these frameworks build upon and complement each other while sharing common systemic and ecological metaphors. As van Wormer and Besthorn (2011: 19) note, 'no other conceptual frame of reference since the introduction of Freudian psychology has had as significant an impact on mainstream social work thinking as have the ecological and systems formulations'.

One of the persistent criticisms of social work's conventional ecological systems perspectives, however, has been their rather narrow interpretation of the environmental construct. Despite the rhetoric of persons and environment in dynamic interaction, the environment was still often interpreted as a relatively static background space that persons either adapted to or learned to negotiate. Consequently, ecological social work in practice fell back upon the

profession's historic tendency to heavily emphasise individual function in an environment that was resistant to change and was likely to impinge upon optimal coping capacity. Thus, in recent years, a number of social work theorists have attempted to expand the original parameters of ecological systems social work to include a broader definition and more profound understanding of person and environment.

Due in large measure to the emergence in the 1980s and 1990s of the worldwide environmental movement, an expanded form of ecological social work began to take shape. A new generation of theorists began to recognise conceptual problems with social work's conventional ecological systems frameworks (Gutheil, 1992; Hoff and Polack, 1993; Saari, 1992). While social work spoke the ecological and systems language of environments in interaction, in reality the focus was mainly on individual behaviour in static environments. This severely limited the profession's capacity to engage critically with those structural barriers marginalising oppressed groups and, most importantly to this new generation of ecological social workers, it prevented a response to a deteriorating natural environment and its catastrophic impact on clients' lives.

Beginning in the 1980s and early 1990s several social work scholars (Berger and Kelly, 1993; Hoff and Polack, 1993; Resnick and Jaffee, 1982; Soine, 1987) began to argue that the core values of social work and its conventional ecological systems models must be extended to support the new realities of the importance of the natural world and the impending environmental crisis. But, it was not until the release of Maria Hoff and John McNutt's (1994) edited anthology that social work had its first well-organised and thoroughly reasoned statement of principle, premised on the ideal that ecologically minded social work could not fully realise its stated commitment to person-in-environment until it seriously considered the inseparable link between human well-being and the well-being of the planet.

Since then there has been a flowering of published works on the interrelationship between the natural environment and the theory and practice of social work. A growing core of social workers from North America, Europe and Australia began to speak compellingly concerning the importance of incorporating the natural environment into the profession's theoretical formulations and practice modalities (Besthorn, 2001, 2002, 2008, 2011; Besthorn and McMillen, 2002; Borrell et al., 2010; Coates, 2003, 2005; Coates et al., 2006; Dominelli, 2012; Gray and Coates, 2011; Hawkins, 2010; Jones, 2006, 2010; Lysack, 2007, 2010b; Mary, 2008; McKinnon, 2005, 2008; Molyneux, 2010; Muldoon, 2006; Rogge, 2008; Rogge and Combs-Orme, 2003; Rotabi, 2007; T. Shaw, 2006, 2008; Ungar, 2002, 2003; West, 2007; Zapf, 2008, 2009). In an attempt to differentiate it from social work's conventional ecological systems frameworks, this alternative ecological perspective of social work has been referred to in several different ways (e.g. environmental social work, deep-ecological social work and eco-spiritual social work). For its advocates, this alternative ecological perspective is not just about applications to assessment and intervention, but rather embodies a holistic value perspective and ethical framework that is increasingly relevant for social workers in an era of diminishing resources and increasing social and economic upheaval (Besthorn, 2011; Gray and Coates, 2011). It better positions a profession often conspicuously absent in the emerging international consensus that Earth's ecosystems and its capacity to support life are in deep trouble. Indeed, until the profession began to take seriously the importance of the natural world in its understanding of ecological social work, social work could not fully realise its core commitment to person and environment.

## KEY IDEAS

It would be beyond the scope of this chapter to describe in detail all the key ideas which make up social work's ecological, systems, life model, ecosystems and, recently, its alternative environmental or deep-ecological perspectives. Each has unique formulations while sharing many common elements. In general, ecological systems thinking focuses on the relative importance of systems – but each from a slightly different viewpoint. Systems thinking tends to focus on the roles that individual constituents play in maintaining system equilibrium or balance whereas ecological thinking takes a broader perspective and tends to look at the unique settings or environments where constituents play out their roles and the influence of those settings on individual functioning (van Wormer and Besthorn, 2011). For proponents of a deep-ecological social work, the environmental construct is expanded to include the natural world.

A key idea common to ecological systems thinking is the belief that it is impossible to fully comprehend the complexity of the human condition in linear, atomistic and mechanistic terms. In broad relief, each perspective offers a wide-ranging, more holistic framework suggesting how individual parts fit and function within the larger whole. This whole/part distinction works to operationalise the complex 'idea that the universe is made up of systems that are all wholes in and of themselves with their own subsystems and also, simultaneously, part of larger systems' (van Wormer and Besthorn, 2011: 17). This idea of parts being wholes as well as being parts of a whole is referred to as holons (Schriver, 2011). It is this interrelated connectedness between whole/parts – the holonic nature of systems – which provides one of the most useful qualitative descriptors of ecological systems thinking.

A second key idea of ecological systems thinking is the belief that systems strive for homeostasis or equilibrium. From an ecological systems perspective, systems are thought to be orderly and coherent while aiming to retain a relatively stable state or condition. Each part of the system serves an essential role or function in maintaining the coherence of the whole system. The functions of the various parts of the system work in a coordinated pattern to produce a balanced and orderly system whole.

A third key idea of ecological systems thinking is the emphasis on the adaptive nature of systems. To maintain integrity, systems have built-in mechanisms which allow them to cope with and adjust to constantly changing environmental circumstances. Since systems seek to maintain stability over time, perturbations in the environment activate processes and mechanisms which work to bring the system back to relative stability. From this perspective, changes happen gradually over time as the system integrates and accommodates positive or discordant feedback and adapts to new realities.

A fourth key idea, especially for proponents of a deep-ecological perspective, is the belief that conventional ecological system approaches have a very narrow understanding of environment (Besthorn, 2002, Coates, 2003; Ungar, 2002). The environment is seen as a relatively static social setting, thus focusing attention on the person and her or his ability to negotiate and accommodate encumbering environmental conditions.

This inhibits conceiving of the natural environment as anything more significant than data to be studied or a resource to be procured or regulated. Social work's application of the adaptive component of ecological systems thinking creates a state of consciousness which

suggests that individuals exist on a plane of deep division between themselves and their place in the larger environment. Person-in-environment becomes a kind of euphemism for what is in reality the person living in an environment which is wholly separate and distinct from her or him. Deeper understanding of identity with nature is then excluded and becomes an abstraction which leads to concepts and actions that cannot be reconciled with either the health of persons or of nature. Living in nature, on the other hand, suggests a complex relationship melded together over time through patterns of value, memory, familiarity, love and respect.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

Throughout much of its recent history, social work has sought innovative ways to conceptualise the relationship between the individual and environmental contexts of human functioning and how professional practice engages with those dimensions. The profession's ecological systems perspectives are relevant to its work in that they provide a comprehensive, multidisciplinary and holistic framework within which the complex and interrelational elements of persons' lives can be connected and understood. Ecological systems thinking ushered in the first meaningful attempts to integrate the psychological and sociological dimensions of social work practice and supported a conceptual 'shift in social work practice from a static to a dynamic view of the environment' (Kemp et al., 1997: 41). Social work has, to a greater or lesser extent, always been concerned with situational determinants of human functioning, but until the evolution of ecological systems perspectives the profession found it easier, and often more expedient, to address personal functioning. The environment seemed just too amorphous and the task of changing it, too daunting.

As early as the 1960s, some social work scholars had become critical of the profession's conceptualisation of environment (Stein, 1963). In particular, Stein identified three major misconceptions associated with the concept. First, he noted the tendency to regard the environment as very narrowly related to immediate contexts such as housing, jobs, families, face-to-face relationships. Second, he identified the inclination to view environment as external to the individual who 'stands alone, an isolated complex of intra-psychic processes' (Stein, 1963: 68). Third, Stein noted the tendency to view the environment as static, unchanging, background clutter. From these perspectives, Stein argued that social work's efforts with environment were restrictive and merely a second-rate activity compared to the more important skill of psychological treatment.

The evolution of ecological and systems theory and, later, deep-ecological perspectives has changed the profession's interpretation of environment and reinvigorated interest in the potential of the environment as a site for intervention and change. Ecological systems thinking presented an organicist worldview which regarded both people and environments as living systems in dynamic interaction with each other. Social workers could, if they wished, enter into this organic milieu and pursue intervention strategies that either helped change or removed environmental obstacles or which enhanced personal growth and adaptive capacity.

As with any effort to conceptualise standards of practice, there are problematic dimensions with social work's ecological systems metaphors. One of the basic issues is that ecological

systems perspectives have no organised methodology with which to systematically apply or test the propositions of the theory relative to practice. They lack significant explanatory power to illuminate the character, strength and changeability of causal processes. Wakefield (1996: 11) notes that social work's ecological systems perspectives are:

essentially just a collection of concepts and a general assertion that the concepts are applicable to all social work practice situations. . . . By placing no constraints on the application of the connectedness principle, the perspective's claims become overly universalistic and implausible, and its concepts become useless for making critical distinctions.

In addition, conventional ecological systems' heavy emphasis upon adaptive processes within the context of environmental constraints tends to perpetuate a decades-old social work proclivity to discuss environment while at the same time concentrating predominantly upon individual agency. The core focus of ecological systems theory is, according to Saleebey (1992: 113), 'on how individuals adapt to environmental demands'. It focuses on how an 'individual's needs, capacities, and opportunities for growth and the individual's ability to adapt to changing external demands are met by, provided for, and challenged by the environment'. It assumes that individual human agency has the capacity to overcome external environmental obstacles when, in reality, the individuals may have little ability to exercise their will, especially in response to institutional oppression (Lichtenberg, 1990).

Conventional ecological systems perspectives have also been criticised for their lack of a critical perspective, which, in the end, tends to support conformist norms and the status quo (Kondrat, 2002). Again, Saleebey (1990: 11) notes that 'the realities of power, conflict, oppression, and violence, so central to the survival of many groups, are given a curious and unreal patina by the adaptation perspective'. While there is talk of changing environments, the message of conventional ecological systems approaches in general is that, in most cases, 'it is the client(s) who will have to adapt' (Saleebey, 1990: 10). The individual determinism so characteristic of conventional ecological systems theory's preoccupation with adaptation increases the likelihood that other important, and often oppressive, factors related to human development and well-being will be disregarded.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Over the last decades, dimensions of ecological systems theory have been utilised in social work research, education and practice, mainly in North America but also in the UK and Australia (Houston, 2002b; Jack, 1997, 2000, 2010; Payne, 2002, 2005; Schweiger and O'Brien, 2005). One will also find extensive discussion of ecological systems theory in many social work practice and human behaviour textbooks (Greene, 2009b; Hutchinson, 2011; Rogers, 2011; Schriver, 2011; van Wormer and Besthorn, 2011). One would be hard pressed to find a significant number of social workers who do not, at some level, ascribe to at least the basic tenets of ecological systems or deep-ecological frameworks. The purpose of social work practice from the standpoint of ecological systems perspectives is, in the main, to enhance the goodness-of-fit between individuals and their environments, including the

human and natural environment, and by so doing increase personal and social capacities either to find resonance with, or to influence or change environmental factors (Payne, 2005; van Wormer and Besthorn, 2011).

The primary value of ecological systems and deep-ecological perspectives is that they can be incorporated into many levels of practice. Whether at the level of assessment, individual, community, organisational or political practice, ecological systems and deep-ecological perspectives provide an intelligible framework for viewing person-and-environment interaction as well as the prospect for better outcomes associated with comprehensive multidimensional interventions. Social work's ecological systems and deep-ecological metaphors have 'broadened and deepened and continue to provide the lens for viewing the exchange between people and their environments' (Gitterman, 2011: 281).

### Study questions

- 1 Describe some of the basic concepts of Carel Germain's Ecological Perspective. In what way(s) did it intend to improve upon the earlier evolution of systems theory?
- 2 Describe some of the basic concepts of Germain and Gitterman's Life Model of social work practice. How did their language of *goodness-of-fit* help social work look more carefully at the interactional effect of person and environment?
- 3 Describe a key idea associated with social work's deep-ecological or new environmental perspective of social work theory and practice.

## GLOSSARY

**Charity Organisation Societies (COS)** An early twentieth-century social service delivery worldview which emphasised moral support and friendly visiting to poor and immigrant populations.

**Deep-ecological theory** A version of ecological systems perspectives which suggests that all phenomena are interconnected with and interdependent on the cyclical and restorative processes of nature.

**Ecological theory** A theory that attempts to explain development by describing and focusing upon aspects of both organism and environment and the interaction between the two.

**Holon** A descriptive term from ecological systems thinking suggesting that system parts are wholes as well as being parts of a whole.

**Homeostasis** The proclivity of a system to maintain a relative stable or balanced state of existence.

**Life model** A practice-focused version of ecological systems perspectives developed by social workers Carel Germain and Alex Gitterman.

**Person-in-environment** A social work theoretical and practice perspective based on the notion that an individual cannot be understood fully without consideration of the various interactive aspects of each person's environmental contexts.

**Role** A socially and culturally sanctioned behaviour expected of a person in any given social or cultural setting.

**Settlement House Movement (SHM)** An early twentieth-century social service delivery worldview which emphasised in-place provision of concrete services rather than moral encouragement for poor and immigrant populations.

**System** A set of elements or phenomena which are orderly interrelated to one another in such a manner as to make a functional whole.

**Systems theory** A theory emerging in a number of different disciplines that views interaction between and among various systems dimensions as the primary descriptive metaphor for understanding human and non-human functioning.

## FURTHER READING

The revised and updated version of Alex Gitterman's and Carel Germain's (2008) seminal work on the life model of social work practice is essential reading for students' understanding of the historical evolution and applications of ecological systems perspectives to social work.

Coates (2003) offers a relatively short but concise overview of social work's recent embrace of environmental issues and concerns as core dimensions of effective social work practice.

Also recommended is an older but still excellent overview of Carol Meyer's (1983) ecosystems perspective of social work, utilising contributions from scholars and practitioners in various different arenas of research and practice.

# 15

## SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

DEIRDRE M. KIRKE

### INTRODUCTION

The social network perspective has developed over the past 80 years in various disciplines across the world. Linton Freeman's (2004) excellent history of social network analysis gives details of the development and change in network research over time, from the use of simple network ideas to the complex science that network analysis has become (Hummon and Carley, 1993). He attributes some of the earliest uses of social network ideas to John Almack (1922), who studied homophily among schoolchildren, Beth Wellman (1926), who recorded which children played with each other, Helen Bott (1928), who refined the methods of recording interaction data for children, and Jacob Moreno (1932, 1934), who developed the sociometric approach to data collection and used the concept 'network' in the sense that it is currently used in social network research.

Freeman (2004) suggests that, over this time, numerous theorists and methodologists have developed different aspects of what has become integrated, at this point, into an organised paradigm for research. He outlines the four features of social network analysis as being:

- motivated by a structural intuition based on ties linking social actors;
- grounded in systematic empirical data;
- drawing heavily on graphic imagery;
- relying on the use of mathematical and/or computational models.

The first of these features relates to the theoretical and conceptual aspects of modern social network analysis, while the other three relate to methodological aspects.

Social network analysts adopt a distinctive approach to examining the social world: the theoretical approach is relational, the data are relational and the statistical tests focus on relational properties of networks, such as density (Wasserman and Faust, 1994).



Researchers from multiple disciplines are engaged in social network research, but the sociological approach to social network analysis is probably closest to the interests of social workers and it is the one I use.

Social structure is at the core of sociological enquiry, but it is examined quite differently in mainstream sociology and social network analysis. Like other sociologists, social network analysts assume that individual action can be explained by the social structures in which individuals are embedded and the processes at work in those structures. Generally, sociologists' methodological approach to this question is to examine individuals and their attributes, treat those individuals as if they were independent units, group the individuals by their attributes and relate those groupings to the individuals' behaviour, attitudes, political preferences and so on. This approach is, according to Barry Wellman and S.D. Berkowitz (1988), more psychological than sociological because it produces explanations that are based on aggregating individual motives for action, and not on the patterned connections between individuals that affect individual action or provide access to scarce resources.

Problems that social network analysts see with the individualistic approach are that it treats individuals as independent units when researchers know that they are likely to have relational ties, and as if they were randomly connected when research shows that they are clustered in networks. Explanations are given based on similarity in attributes. This leads sociologists to accept behaviour as normative, or deviant, based on similarity in attributes rather than on the relational ties individuals share.

## KEY IDEAS

In contrast, social network analysts directly examine the social structure involved, collect data on the relational ties between the individuals in that structure, examine how those relationships are patterned and examine the individuals' behaviour in the context of the social structure in which it is embedded. They will usually also examine individual attribute data, but analyses of the structural connections between the individuals in the networks take precedence, while similarities between the attributes of individuals are examined within those networks.

Thus, relational ties are at the core of the social network perspective (Freeman, 2004). Repeated interactions between individuals result in the formation of relationships. Such relationships can be based on transactions (any exchanges), communication, boundary penetration (such as interlocking directorates), instrumental (using ties to get a job), sentiment (friendship), authority, power or kinship and descent (Knoke and Kuklinski, 1982). As these relationships become linked with others, they form networks.

The concept 'social network' is used in social network analysis to describe a finite set of actors and the relationships between them (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Social networks can vary enormously in size and type, from dyads to triads, from partial to complete networks, and their structure – that is, the pattern of the ties in the network – may change over time as new ties are formed or broken. While the relational ties will usually be between individuals, network analysts also study the connections between groups, organisations, communities or other units of different types that are connected.

Social network analysts examine social networks in order to explain how the social networks in which they are embedded affect individuals' actions, beliefs or attitudes, but they also examine how individuals' actions form, change and affect the social networks in which they are embedded. They are also interested in how resources flow through networks (Coleman et al., 1957; Valente, 1995, 1996) and how networks can be used to search for resources (Granovetter, 1974). The social networks that have been of particular interest to social workers have been *social support* networks. Developments in social network thinking have ranged across three dimensions: theoretical, conceptual and methodological.

## THEORETICAL APPROACH

The theoretical belief permeating network research is the idea that the structure, or pattern, formed by the relational ties between individuals in social networks is central to our understanding of the social world. The principal aspects of this theoretical approach have been outlined by Barry Wellman (1988) as follows:

- structured social relationships are a more powerful source of sociological explanation than the personal attributes of system members;
- norms emerge from location in structured systems of social relationships;
- social structures determine the operation of dyadic relationships;
- the world is composed of networks, not groups;
- structural methods supplement and supplant individualistic methods.

Randall Collins (1988) confirms the value of network theory to sociological explanation, pointing out that it can explain network effects on individual action and belief, social exchange, intergroup integration, social mobility and economics. Those of most relevance to social workers may be network effects on individual action and belief, in which network theorists have developed concepts of cohesion and structural equivalence to explain behaviour (see Glossary at end of this chapter). Thus, for example, network research has demonstrated that cohesive networks tend to have homogeneous beliefs and behaviour (Kirke, 2006; McPherson et al., 2001; Wasserman and Faust, 1994), individuals in cohesive networks tend to have better social support (Collins, 1988; Wellman and Wortley, 1990) and those with better social support will have better physical and mental health (Brugha, 1995; Oakley, 1994; Putnam, 2000).

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Although social network analysts have not been very active in developing network theory, they have been in clarifying concepts, which has been of direct relevance to network theory. The advantage is that social network researchers use the same concepts and share the same meanings for those concepts.

John Arundel Barnes (1972) drew together various network concepts, such as ‘reachability’, defined them clearly and discussed the difference between the metaphorical and applied use of network concepts.

Social network concepts that may be of relevance to social workers’ research and practice are listed at the end of this chapter with their current definitions (see Glossary).

## METHODOLOGY

The major emphasis in social network analysis has always been the methodological dimension. There were huge challenges. Researchers from disciplines as diverse as sociology, psychology, mathematics, statistics and computer science have worked together to overcome these challenges. The result is a very well-developed methodology, appropriate statistical techniques, mathematical models and computer programs, including the graphical imagery of networks, which are constantly undergoing development to answer changing questions. These researchers – from numerous disciplines, but sharing a common perspective – are members of the vibrant International Network for Social Network Analysis (INSNA), started in 1977 by Barry Wellman (see [www.insna.org](http://www.insna.org)).

Newcomers to social network analysis will be pleased to know that it is used with all the conventional data collection methods, including survey research and ethnographic and documentary methods. The vital difference is in collecting information on relationships rather than solely on individuals and their attributes. Examples are Claude Fischer’s (1982a) scheme for collecting social support data, which asked respondents questions such as who would take care of their home if they went out of town, with whom had they recently engaged in social activities and with whom had they discussed personal worries. The answers were combined to form a person’s social support network. Fischer’s scheme has been widely used in research on social support and personal networks (Campbell and Lee, 1991; van der Poel, 1993).

Some important aspects of social network methodology that mark it off from conventional methods are its emphasis on the structure and units on which it is dwelling and on the boundary it places on its structure. Thus, for example, in Deirdre Kirke’s (1996) study, the *structure* is the complete network of teenagers in one community, the *units* are the teenagers and the *boundary* is both geographical (must live within the community chosen) and age related (14- to 18-year-olds only).

Other major advantages of social network methodology are that it enables researchers to work at different levels of analysis singly, including personal networks, dyads, triads, partial and whole networks, and, more recently, to do longitudinal and multilevel analyses (Snijders et al., 2005). More recently, researchers have been developing mathematical models to model the social networks that arise in a variety of social contexts. These developments have been outlined in a special edition of *Social Networks* on ‘Advances in Exponential Random Graph (p\*) Models’ (*Social Networks*, 2007, 29 (2)) and may be valuable to social work researchers who wish to examine the types of informal caring networks likely to arise in a community. These developments are exciting, but mathematically complex, and social scientists are likely to need the support or teaching of an expert to apply them. I have used these models, with the help of such experts, in a recent paper to examine the process of clustering that occurred in a community of teenagers (Kirke, 2009).

The social network analysis of data is different from conventional data analysis. The basic unit of analysis in social network research is the dyadic tie between units and each of these is coded separately with any associated data. Thus, each friendship tie is coded separately and associated data, such as when the friendship started and the strength and closeness of the friendship, are coded alongside it. Attribute data can be added for each individual in the friendship. Social network analysis programs, such as PAJEK (Batagelj and Mrvar, 2003) and UCINET (Borgatti et al., 2006), are then used to identify the networks, measure their size, structure and network properties, such as density, distance, reachability, centrality and structural equivalence, and apply appropriate statistical techniques. Social network analysis programs also provide graphic imagery of the networks (see also Freeman, 2000b).

A number of social network methods textbooks elaborate on the various analyses used, as well as the appropriate statistical measures, depending on the needs of the researcher (Scott, 1991; Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Lists of further reading and appropriate software are available from the INSNA website ([www.insna.org](http://www.insna.org)) and the researcher interested in keeping up-to-date with recent developments should consult the *Social Networks* journal.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

Social workers have been showing some interest in social network analysis for about the last 30 years. When the first edition of *Connections* was published in 1977, just four people from the discipline of social work were listed as members of INSNA: Diane Pancoast and Harry Wasserman from the USA and Mike Pennock and Harvey Stevens from Canada. Pancoast had published a paper, 'Natural helping networks', with Alice H. Collins in 1976, while Wasserman's research was recorded as 'doing studies of the Havurah phenomenon in Los Angeles Synagogues' (*Connections*, 1977: 11, 15).

Pennock's research interests included the analysis of social service delivery systems, while Stevens's were the development of recordkeeping systems for private social service agencies (*Connections*, 1977).

A social network-related social work paper by John Garrison and Sandra Werfel dates from the same time. They discussed the use of the 'network session' in clinical social work, describing it as one in which social workers counsel a client in the presence of his or her natural social network in order to help the individual client and strengthen his or her network (Garrison and Werfel, 1977). Thus, they assumed, as current social network analysts do, that resources exist in an individual's network that may be drawn on for the individual's benefit. An extensive social support and, more recently, social capital literature has grown out of this simple idea.

Despite such evidence of some positive applications of a social network approach in social work, Elizabeth Timms (1983) and Graham Allan (1983) wrote papers a few years later expressing caution about professional social workers becoming involved in creating, or supporting, the development of informal caring networks for their clients. Such informal caring networks are what are currently known in the social network literature as social support networks.

Just a few years after these shaky beginnings, Philip Seed (1987, 1990) supported the use of social network analysis in social work research and practice and clarified how such tools

should be applied in social work. Many social workers have embraced the social network perspective since then.

## USE AND CRITIQUE BY SOCIAL WORKERS

The principal application of the social network perspective in social work has been in the area of social support. I will use examples from this literature to demonstrate the use of social network analysis in social work. These examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive. While social support refers, more generally, to the support available to individuals from their informal social network, it can, of course, also include the support provided by a formal network of professionals, such as social workers, doctors, nurses, psychologists, psychotherapists or occupational therapists. Professional social workers have been using a social network perspective to examine social support networks that are informal caring networks only or a mix of formal and informal caring networks.

## INFORMAL CARING NETWORKS

Research on informal support networks has ranged across topics such as mental illness, homelessness and immigrants in the USA and working mothers in China.

Joseph Walsh (1994) examined clients with severe mental illnesses who were being provided with rehabilitation services in their natural environments. He found that, although there were no differences between males and females in the size of their personal networks or in their perceptions of the adequacy of the social support they received, they differed in the support they received from different people in their networks, which Walsh described as different clusters. Based on these findings, he suggested that social workers should review male and female clients' social networks by clusters before making interventions to improve their networks.

Another example relating to psychiatric clients is Eric Hardiman's (2004) examination of the social support received by adults with psychiatric disabilities from consumer-run mental health agencies. In particular, the agencies provided the participants with peer-focused networks of caring that were otherwise unavailable to them. Hardiman suggests that service providers, including social workers, should take note of this way of encouraging the natural support of psychiatric clients in a community setting. Related reading would be Traolach Brugha (1995), who demonstrated the value of social support networks in psychiatric illness.

In a study examining gender differences in support structures, frequency of support and satisfaction with support from parents, peers and other adults, Lisa Colarossi (2001) found that male and female adolescents differed in the proportion of supportive friends and adults they had and their satisfaction with that support. The implications of these findings for social work are that social workers may be able to help adolescents to identify which network members are most helpful for particular kinds of problems, thus enabling them to use the different kinds of support available to them more effectively.

In a study of social support in homelessness, Karin Eyrich et al. (2003) directed similar advice to service providers. Those who experienced shorter- (12 months or less) and longer-term

(more than 12 months) homelessness had different support networks. The authors suggested that service providers should, therefore, aim at different sources of support for the shorter- and longer-term homeless.

Other interesting examples from the social support literature include two papers on Chinese mothers in China and Korean immigrants in the USA.

Having examined the social support networks of Chinese working mothers in Beijing, Angelina Yuen Tsang (1999) demonstrated that these mothers' support networks were communal in nature and differed from the support networks normally found in the West. She pointed out that social work interventions in Chinese societies should, therefore, adopt a whole network – rather than a personal network – intervention strategy.

Confirming the importance for social workers of being aware of cultural variations, Eunju Lee's (2005) paper on Korean immigrants in the USA highlights the need for social workers to be aware of the cultural differences between their Korean immigrant clients and other communities of clients. In Korean immigrant communities, marital conflict – stemming in large part from cultural differences in the role of women in society – is a serious problem. She highlights the need for social work to reduce marital disharmony through culturally sensitive interventions, including education.

## LINKING FORMAL AND INFORMAL CARING NETWORKS

Social workers have also been involved in expanding and improving clients' networks by linking the formal care provided by professionals with that provided by family, friends and neighbours.

By far the best example I have found of the formal and informal systems combining to provide social support for families in need is 'Wraparound'. This system, which developed to link the various forms of social support, formal and informal, needed by a family with children with special needs, is described very touchingly by a mother of such children (Hesch, 1998). The extensive, and appropriate, support provided by 'Wraparound' was directly geared to meeting the needs of families benefiting from the programme. The formal system provided the required professional care to the child and family that funding and time allowed, while the informal community support system filled in the gaps, providing the continued support over time that the formal system could not give.

The social support system described by Karen Hesch (1998) was originally developed in 1991 in Ontario, Canada, as a support cluster model for individuals with complex needs (Ochocka and Lord, 1998). Joanna Ochocka and John Lord evaluated the support cluster approach in 24 clusters and demonstrated the effectiveness of linking formal and informal support for individuals with complex needs. The support clusters effectively acted as a 'bridge' between the formal and informal support systems and between developmental disabilities and mental health. Their findings demonstrate the value and potential of a multidimensional approach to support that involves citizens, families and service providers working together on issues rather than clinical interventions only.

Another example of social workers' efforts to create networks between the formal and informal is described by Caroline Cantley and Gilbert Smith (1983). They record how social

workers attached to a psycho-geriatric day hospital played a leading role in establishing a 'Relatives Support Group'. Monika Henderson and Michael Argyle (1985) also found that friends were the most important source of support for divorced and separated women, while Margaret Bell (2007) reported that families who experienced interprofessional collaboration in providing parenting programmes in a community setting found it helpful.

In a recent paper Fuller et al. (2007) have used the social network computer programme UCINET v6 to map the extent to which a range of agencies in one town in New South Wales were linked by ties of information exchange about the provision of help, ties created by client referrals or ties formed by the agencies working together. This was a pilot project which demonstrated the value of using a social network approach to map the network of connections that existed between agencies dealing with mental health and well-being issues for farmers and to highlight where improvements could be made in the future in such rural mental health service networks.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

As shown above, social network concepts have been used by social workers in their research and practice. However, they have not used social network analytic techniques when measuring social support networks. Researchers have usually discussed the size of the networks, but have not used social network techniques to examine the social structure of particular support networks in graphic detail, nor have they compared the impact of different structures on measures of density or cohesion.

Concepts, such as 'bridge', have been used (Ochocka and Lord, 1998), but, if researchers had drawn more closely on the social network literature, other insights into their role could have been provided – for example, Mark Granovetter's (1973) theory that strong ties create cohesion and weak ties reduce fragmentation in a community.

Another important insight is that 'bridges' can give individuals access to resources that are not available to them in their own network. This is important to social workers because it opens up the possibility of linking quite diverse networks to support their clients.

There is considerable evidence in network research that strong ties provide the most social support (Wellman and Wortley, 1990), that various types of support are provided by different people in a person's network and that women are the main providers of support to both women and men (Fischer, 1982a; Oakley, 1994; Wellman and Wortley, 1990).

These findings suggest that researchers in the area of social support should take account of the strength of the ties of potential, or actual, supporters as well as the role of gender. Although social work researchers have examined the role of gender in social support (Colarossi, 2001; Walsh, 1994), the relative strength of ties does not appear to have been examined directly. While strong ties are likely to be the most supportive, social work interventions may target weak ties, which can provide access to different types of support (Granovetter, 1973).

Research has usually focused on the personal networks of individuals with particular needs, but social workers might do well to examine networks that reach beyond the personal, to interlocking personal networks and whole networks. Research on 'support clusters' (Ochocka and Lord, 1998) may appear to do this, but it focuses on bringing together the significant

people in personal social networks. Whole network research, however, would allow social workers to examine the natural clustering of family, friends, neighbours, co-workers and professionals that occurs in a community. This would enable them to build on community resources rather than solely on individual resources. Whole network research would also allow social workers to place their clients in the context of the networks in which they function. Yuen Tsang (1999) pointed to the importance of doing this in Chinese communities because of the different cultural emphasis on communal networks in which individuals pooled and shared their resources.

The social support literature is geared primarily to demonstrating the *positive* aspects of social supports, but there can also be a negative side. For example, teenagers have been shown to support friends in their networks to use drugs (Kirke, 1995) and network members will share drug injection equipment with others, resulting in higher rates of HIV infection among those most involved in this risky behaviour (Curtis et al., 1995). Social work interventions may, therefore, sometimes need to focus on breaking network ties that carry such negative influences rather than building ties carrying positive influences. This suggests that social workers may, in such cases, need to intervene in the network of ties rather than just with individual drug users.

Closely allied to the social support literature is the social capital literature, to which social network analysts have made considerable contributions in recent years (Kadushin, 2004; Lin, 2001; Lin et al., 2001). Essentially, *social capital* is the social resources available in an individual's personal network or in a community setting. It is useful, therefore, to use social network techniques to examine research questions relating to social capital. As social capital has been shown to be particularly advantageous to people's health and well-being (Putnam, 2000), this may be a suitable topic for future social network-related social work research.

Future researchers in social work need to build on the achievements of their predecessors who have used a social network approach in research and practice. Useful directions would include being aware of the conceptual developments in social network analysis, moving beyond the metaphorical to the applied use of network concepts and using current social network techniques to measure these concepts.

About 20 years ago, Seed (1987) set out procedures for applying social network analysis in social services research and practice using social network ties to represent links between people, places, activities or events. More recently, Susan Murty and David Gillespie (1995) set out clear procedures for incorporating social network analysis into the social work curriculum. In an excellent short paper, they define network concepts and discuss their relevance to the social work curriculum.

Professional social workers are in a better position than I am to check the extent to which social network analysis has been incorporated into social work curricula, research and practice. If it has been incorporated I have not found evidence of the widespread use of social network analysis in social work either through the presentation of papers at the annual conferences of INSNA or through published papers in the *Social Networks* journal. The time seems right for social workers to build on the tentative steps taken by others in their own profession to apply a social network analytical approach to social work research, education and practice.

The application of social network analysis can be quite technical and new users would benefit from courses being built into the curricula of social work departments. In the absence



of such courses, postgraduate students should be encouraged to attend the annual international social network conferences and to take some of the introductory workshops in social network techniques available at those conferences.

Social network analysis is relevant if ties of any kind are being studied between individuals or diverse groups. Social workers can do such research within their own profession or in collaboration with social network analysts in INSNA. In this way, they can be involved in the further development of social network analysis to suit the needs of their profession and the social network community more generally.

### Study questions

- 1 Discuss the relative value of focusing on clients' personal networks or whole networks in social work practice.
- 2 Compare the different resources which strong and weak ties provide to social work clients.
- 3 Should social workers be involved in the formation of informal caring networks to support their clients?

## GLOSSARY

**Bridge** A bridge is a line – relationship – the removal of which would disconnect – break – the network into parts.

**Centrality** Relates to the extent to which an actor in a network is involved in relationships. Ties can be directed in to the actor or out from the actor. Alternatively, they may be undirected.

**Cohesion** Individuals become alike as a result of socialising bonds of interaction – for example, through ties of friendship. Cohesive subgroups are subsets of actors who have relatively strong, direct, intense, frequent or positive ties.

**Complete network** See under 'Whole network', below.

**Composition of network** Refers to measurements of factors relating to actors in a network, such as gender.

**Density** The ratio of the actual number of lines in the graph – network – to the number that would be present if all the points were connected to all the others.

**Direct tie** This is a tie linking two individuals – usually indicated by a line linking two nodes, which represent the individuals.

**Distance** The length of the shortest path between individuals in a network. Direct and indirect ties are counted to measure distance.

**Dyad or dyadic tie** This refers to a relationship between a pair of individuals.

**Ego-centred network, egocentric network or personal network** Comprises a focal actor, termed ego, a set of actors who have ties to ego and measurements relating to the ties between these actors.

**Egocentric network** See under 'Ego-centred network', above.

**Indirect tie** This is a tie that links two individuals who do not have a direct tie with each other, but who *do* have direct ties with one other individual (indicated by three nodes or individuals linked by two lines).

**Link** This is a tie or relationship between two individuals, or nodes.

**Multilevel analysis** This refers to the combination of data at different levels of analysis.

**Network structure** See under 'Structure of network', below.

**Partial networks** These are networks of various sizes between the triad and the complete network, such as a peer group.

**Path** Refers to direct and indirect ties that are used to trace the links between individuals in a network. The term also relates to distance, meaning the length of the shortest path between individuals in a network (see 'Reachability', below).

**Pattern or patterning of ties** See under 'Structure of network', below.

**Personal network** See under 'Ego-centred network', above.

**Prestige** The extent to which an actor is the recipient of relationships. Only relationships directed in to the actor count. See also under 'Relationship', below.

**Reachability** A measure of the extent to which the individual can establish indirect contact with other members of a network. Individuals are reachable if there is a path between them. See also under 'Path' and 'Distance', above.

**Relationship** A tie or link between individuals. The specific set of ties to be investigated depends on theoretical considerations.

**Size of social network** This refers to the number of nodes, or individuals, who have ties in a social network.

**Social network** Comprises a finite set of actors and the relationships between those actors.

**Strong ties** Usually defined as those ties we have with family, relatives and friends, but the definition in any one case depends on theoretical considerations.

**Structural equivalence** Individuals who are structurally equivalent have identical ties to and from all other actors in a network.

**Structure of network** This is the pattern of the relational ties in the network and includes present and absent ties.

**Triad** These are ties between three nodes, or individuals.

**Undirected ties** The direction of the tie is not taken into account. It is sufficient that there is a tie between the two nodes.

**Weak ties** The definition in any one case depends on theoretical considerations. Weak ties are usually defined as those we have with people less close to us than family, relatives and friends. Examples include workmates and acquaintances.

**Whole network or complete network** A network in which all the relationships existing between all the actors within a particular population are identified.

## FURTHER READING

A marvellous little book, David Knoke and James Kuklinski's *Network Analysis* (1982) defines numerous social network concepts, including network structure, egocentric networks, partial networks, whole networks and many more.

Further clarifications are given in a major social network methods textbook by Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust (1994), *Social Network Analysis: Methods and applications*. In this book, novice network researchers can find all the relevant concepts, their meanings, and how they are applied in social network research while the serious student of social network analysis might find the discussion of the methods used helpful. This discussion is quite mathematical for the novice to social networks.

I like students working on social support to read Fischer's (1982b) paper 'What do we mean by "friend"?' because it gives the list of questions Fischer devised for collecting data on the kinds of support received by respondents. Later social support studies adapted Fischer's list to suit their needs and current students can adapt it further.

Freeman's article 'See you in the funny papers' (2000a) is one of my favourite teaching tools for providing students with an introduction and explanation of many complex social network concepts in an easily accessible format.

Freeman (2004) provides the student with an interesting history of the development and application of social network analysis in various disciplines over the years.

Granovetter (1973) is one of the most widely cited social network and sociology papers. It provides the student with an insight into the theoretical ideas underlying the relative importance of strong and weak ties.

Students who are interested in working with clients with substance use problems may find Kirke (2006) useful in giving them insight into how a social network approach can be used to demonstrate how teenagers' peer networks are formed and, in turn, influence their substance use.

Scott's *Social Network Analysis* (1991) is a small book which provides a good introduction to social network ideas.

Valente's (2010) book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in social networks and health issues.

Since informal support networks are of particular interest to social work students, Wellman and Wortley's (1990) well-written paper 'Different strokes from different folks' is a must read for those seeking an insight into which social ties provide which types of support.

# 16

## ETHNOGRAPHY

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### INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses how ethnography and social work practice have common assumptions and methods. We broadly define ethnography first, describing its two primary features – holistic and inductive. Second, we compare ethnography with social work methods as it is argued that they have parallel traditions, both placing emphasis on the importance of context or environment. Third, illustrations of the use of ethnography to study social and mental health services are provided. Indeed, investigators from many disciplines have found ethnographic methods useful when studying topics of primary concern to social work. Fourth, we use an example of ethnographic research to demonstrate that practice research and sociohistorical research on social work can benefit from comparing social work’s written narratives (such as case records and progress reports) with the in vivo work of oral narratives. Fifth, the inductive component of ethnography provides the opportunity to identify in social work the relationship between theory and practice, or what we call the phenomenological practice gap. Finally, we briefly discuss what it means when the social worker is ethnographer and practitioner, both the advantages and disadvantages.

### KEY IDEAS

Ethnography is a holistic and inductive method for studying people, places and processes (Creswell, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It is most commonly associated with anthropology, but also has deep roots within sociology (Bernard, 2002). With regard to its *inductive* meaning, researchers ‘do’ ethnography in an attempt to capture, through description, experience and

analysis, the bottom-up, lived experience of individuals (Agar, 1996; Burawoy, 1991; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Inductive also means getting near the experience, as opposed to staying distant by seeing individuals through deductively derived (theoretical) categories. The *holistic* component of ethnography is its focus on placing the inductively derived experience in the context of social, historical and cultural phenomena. These ideas are quite similar to social work's signature concept: person-in-environment (see Chapter 14).

Although participation and observation over time are the cornerstones of ethnographic research, ethnographers often draw from a deep toolbox of research strategies. These can include interviews, ranging from formal to informal, structured to unstructured; charts mapping community systems, such as kinship and/or hierarchy; survey-based research; the collection of life histories; the review of community texts and records; and the development of relationships with 'key informants' within a community. Similarly, ethnographers use multiple strategies for recording their data, including audio recording, filming, photography and, especially, copious field notes. Ethnographers combine the data gathered via these techniques with their direct observations to create an inductively derived, holistic representation of their objects of enquiry. Social workers too rely heavily upon first-hand observations and interviewing to collect information about clients.

Indeed, a convenient way to think of this range of ethnographic strategies is to recognise that participant observation (a term often used interchangeably with the ethnographic method) means that the ethnographer might participate alongside an individual's everyday routines, while, at other times, only observe the routines. Many factors, practical and theoretical, determine why the ethnographer chooses some combination of participation and observation over another. However, whichever combination is applied, ethnography and participant observation mean:

going out and staying out, learning a new language (or new dialect of a language you already know), and experiencing the lives of the people you are studying as much as you can. Participant observation is about stalking culture in the wild – establishing rapport and learning to act so that people go about their business as usual when you show up. (Bernard, 2002: 324)

They are both:

a humanistic method and a scientific one. It produces the kind of experiential knowledge that lets you talk convincingly, from the gut, about what it feels like to plan a garden in the high Andes or dance all night in a street rave in Seattle. (Bernard, 2002: 322)

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

In several ways, the aims and methods of ethnography and social work are parallel. As a method, ethnography investigates how people live in their natural environment and the conditions and circumstances – both internal and external – that shape experience. This requires that the ethnographer goes to where the people live, purposively participating in and observing daily life in vivo and in open systems.

Ethnographers strive to suspend moral judgements about the negative or positive aspects of experience. Instead, the aim is to examine local belief and practice as normative within a specific cultural context. Philippe Bourgois (2002), for example, shows how crack-cocaine dealers functioned according to economic principles not unlike those governing formal economies.

When physical, social and mental health experience are the objects of enquiry, ethnographers seek to explain why one group or culture views behaviour as disorder, disease, dysfunctional or abnormal (that is, a problem to be solved) while another experiences the same behaviour as conventional (Kleinman, 1988) or even normal (that is, as something to be understood, not solved). This approach resembles social work practice, which unfolds in open social systems, in the community, and aligns with social workers' aims, which are to identify individual, group, family or community problems, solutions, needs and strengths. Social workers design interventions that help the client by starting with a careful analysis of where the client 'is', which means giving due regard to the client's views of the 'problem', the 'need' and the 'solution'; and most important, viewing the client as integrally connected to their environment. Indeed, the skills that produce good ethnography also produce good social workers: the ability to ask, observe, listen and even to participate in community life (see Bohannan and van der Elst, 1998 for how anthropology approaches these skills). The practice of both ethnography and social work has been characterised as an art with the people practising as artisans. (For social work, see Unrau et al., 2007; for ethnography, see Bernard, 2002; Wolcott, 2001.)

Even the criticisms of ethnography and social work are similar. Social workers' active approach to problem-solving has sometimes been characterised as an attempt to police and regulate the poor, vulnerable and deviant (Margolin, 1997; Odem, 1995). In a similar way, ethnographers, particularly anthropologist ethnographers, have been criticised for 'otherising' (i.e. primitive versus civilised) the 'natives' they describe or 'inventing' the culture of a group. Just as the objectivity-subjectivity debate has plagued the social work encounter, ethnographers have struggled with the issue of a personal voice in their accounts of fieldwork (Clifford and Marcus, 1986).

## ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE HUMAN SERVICES

The use of ethnography to explore human services has provided fertile ground for interdisciplinary research among occupational therapists, anthropologists, nurses, sociologists, social workers and others in educational, medical and social service settings. The range of subjects for these investigations is broad, including child welfare (Aarre, 1998; de Montigny, 1995), homelessness (Connolly, 2000; Desjarlais, 1997; Wagner, 1993), drugs in the urban context (Bourgois, 2002), rural community life (Christensen et al., 1998), individuals with disabilities (Davies, 1998), substance abuse (Alverson et al., 2001), treatment for drug dependency (Carr, 2010; Skoll, 1992) and the effects of the policy of deinstitutionalisation for those with chronic mental illness (Rhodes, 1991; Townsend, 1998; Weinberg, 2005).

Some researchers have concentrated their efforts on investigations of service provider perspectives and/or organisational cultures present in the human services (Baldwin, 1998; McCourt, 1998; Trevillion and Green, 1998; Warren, 1998). For example, anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann

(2000) used ethnography to investigate the training of psychiatrists in the USA, analysing the dominance of biological explanations and cures for mental illness in mainstream psychiatry. Others have investigated the lived experience of clients and other vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. An example of this is Sue Estroff's classic (1981) ethnography of the lives of psychiatric clients enrolled in a programme of assertive community treatment, which provides startling insight into 'living with' mental illness in the larger community. In a more recent study, Hoyt Alverson et al. (2006) have, similarly, used participant observation to explore job seeking for people with severe mental illness. Similarly, through participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews, Tom Hall (2003) gives the reader the feeling that he or she is travelling through the daily lives of homeless adolescents in Britain.

Researchers have also used ethnography to develop meaningful, standardised measures in mental health services research. Norma Ware and colleagues (1999) used ethnography to investigate and define the common practice construct, the 'continuity of care'. Their work also highlighted the relationship ethnography can have with other methods, both qualitative and quantitative. Ian Shaw (2011: 82–3), in *Evaluating in Practice*, highlights the use of ethnography in social work assessment, planning, practice and evaluation. He writes, 'dimensions of place and space are deeply embedded in all social work practice'. For Shaw (2011), ethnography is both a source and model for social work practice. Harry Ferguson (2011: 1100) studies child protection services with a unique eye for studying how space is utilised:

what I call practice by looking around homes, walking towards children to properly see, touch, hear and walk with them to ensure they are fully engaged with and safe, here and now, on this home visit, or in this clinic or hospital ward.

Ethnography (of both practices and institutions) is particularly useful in the study of human services because service provision is a process, occurring in open systems where circumstances, variables and experiences cannot be manipulated or controlled. Evaluations of service provision policies are particularly enlightening: how do policies actually play out in everyday practice settings? Ethnography can give voice to patient and provider perspectives by bringing us the local and experience-near conditions affecting service provision. Institutional ethnography (IE), in particular, is an ethnographic method that treats the web of interrelated relationships of a given socially organised field of work (i.e. child welfare, mental health, juvenile justice and ageing) as the ethnographic 'field' or object of enquiry (Longhofer et al., 2012; Smith, 2006). Elizabeth Townsend (1998) has used IE to identify the limitations of community support programmes for the disabled. Using this method, a researcher or practitioner maps the social relations that structure the practitioner–client relationship.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Ethnographic methods might be used to evaluate social work by investigating differences between practitioner theory (that is, the conventional) and its application in practice (that is, the actual). How can ethnographic methods be used to understand the client's perspective about a problem? How does their in vivo experience frame the very problem itself? These

questions frame ethnography as a means of evaluating in practice (Shaw, 2011). However, one could easily use ethnographic methods to investigate how a theory-to-practice gap occurs in particular client environments, leading to a nuanced understanding of how an overall theory (ethnography as a source) works in actual practice (Floersch, 2004b).

While written narratives, such as case notes, often reflect conventional institutional philosophies, oral narratives tend to be less restrained, revealing the creativity and flexibility regularly employed when providing services. Unfortunately, because many of the more intuitive aspects of helping in social work go undocumented, case records are often open to the criticism that they objectify the clients (Townsend, 1998). Case records have been viewed by many scholars as a mirror of what social workers ‘do’ to clients (Floersch, 2002).

Ethnographic methods can be used to overcome such difficulties by holistically investigating practice in context:

- its technical–rational or disciplinary knowledge – a prescribed theory dictating and defining normal, appropriate and successful management practices;
- its particular understandings of the client–consumer condition – situated knowledge or knowledge-in-action, which ‘refers to the strategic, contextual, or practical’ (Floersch, 2004a: 80).

Ethnography can thus illustrate how social workers perform different kinds of work, drawing on different types of knowledge.

Jerry Floersch (2002) observed and followed case managers providing social support services to individuals working with severely mentally ill clients. Within the institution, a ‘strengths’ model of case management was mandated and the majority of the managers observed had completed specialised training designed to ‘assist people, who we will call consumers, to identify, secure, and sustain the range of resources, both internal and external, needed to live in a normally interdependent way in the community’ (Floersch, 2000: 173).

In the spirit of ‘going native’ (ethnographers immerse themselves in the community they are studying), Floersch attended trainings, learning the strengths lexicon for ‘assisting people [the consumers] to get what they want’ (Floersch, 2000: 173).

Having identified the key constructs of the dominant disciplinary, technical–rational knowledge used at the centre, Floersch collected both oral and written narratives of strengths case management events. In the context of both formal meetings with the team and staff psychiatrist and more informal hallway conversations and office chatter, the case managers used several routine phrases to describe their work with clients: ‘doing for’, ‘doing with’, ‘gets it’, ‘high and low functioning’, ‘do him’ and ‘natural consequence’. Interestingly, none of these phrases correlated with the principles and language of the mandated strengths model. Instead, these situated diagnostic languages (examples of knowledge-in-action) evidenced a kind of intuitive, but nevertheless shared, measure of client progress. For example, in a team meeting, four case managers (abbreviated to CM1, CM2 and so on below) described their interaction with a client as follows (Floersch, 2002: 449):

*CM1:* Did the cleaning crew get over there?

*CM2:* No.

*CM1:* They’re supposed to go today.



CM3: Who has got his daily med drop?

CM4: I do him today at 1 p.m.

CM3: OK, he's covered.

CM1: What are we going to do about the damage to the bathroom ceiling?

CM2: He's pretty good at repair work. Get him to do the research about the cost of the repairs.

CM1: What happens if he doesn't do it?

CM2: We can do it.

CM1: No, we shouldn't.

CM1: What about using the apartment maintenance workers?

CM2: What if tomorrow I do a goal plan and fix the holes *with him*? I don't mind helping him. I like the idea that he would fix it himself. If he knows he has to pay for it, then maybe he will do it.

A conversation between two case managers about cleaning the apartment was observed a few days later (Floersch, 2002: 119):

He amazes me how he doesn't catch that apartment on fire. I would like to see the cleaning crew go through it. I think we should give him the *natural consequences* about that because we co-subsidize the apartment.

In these oral narratives, the client was seen as a person with an illness and accompanying needs; the possibility of an irrational subject was acknowledged.

However, in the written narratives, the client was represented as a community member who possessed the 'strength' to be independent and even 'normal'. For instance, the medical chart listed the client's monthly goals as (Floersch, 2002: 113):

- 'I want to handle my money';
- 'I want to feel better emotionally';
- 'keep my apartment clean'.

The written narrative tended to confirm the policy of deinstitutionalisation, reinforce the return of mentally ill patients to the community and the rational, strengths-based approach of assisting clients to get what they wanted.

In collecting these two forms of narrative of practice, ethnography allowed Floersch to see this example of strengths-based community mental health in context. In practice, things were not so clear-cut and the invented clinical language – or knowledge-in-action – of the oral narrative was needed to provide case managers with a medium through which they could discuss the difficulties of service provision that were not acknowledged by the strengths model of case management and the policy of deinstitutionalisation. In short, studying case managers' fixed written narratives without also placing the oral narrative alongside them would have reified the practice model (that is, made it into something more real than it was).

A more holistic and nuanced account of social work practice must therefore include practitioners' oral narratives and observations of *in vivo* practice events. Ethnography provides a vehicle for obtaining such accounts. Ethnographic investigations of this kind shed light on the openings that occur when 'theory fails to account for some part or all of the [practice] experience and where practice is open to influence outside of theory' (Longhofer and Floersch, 2004: 485). Jeffrey Longhofer and Jerry Floersch (2004) call these creative openings 'phenomenological practice gaps' and propose that studying such gaps provides insight into both the practical and intuitive knowledge base of practitioners and the limitations of leading theoretical perspectives and social policy.

## PHENOMENOLOGICAL PRACTICE GAPS

Ethnography is especially suited to the study of open systems. What is meant by open systems? A good example of such a system is the human services sector.

Let us take the example of a young and single mother who enters a welfare office. Immediately she is confronted with a range of practices aimed at producing effects for her and her child. They may be aimed at income support, housing, education or employment or at supporting, promoting or regulating maternal and child health. This young mother, however, exists in an open system with many determinants, including race, class, kinship, gender, sexual orientation, neighbourhoods, housing and educational opportunities. She has, as well, her own experience of these social forces and her own unique internalisations of these social worlds. Moreover, because the system is open, its qualities and characteristics cannot be stipulated in advance (*a priori*) – it can only be known as it unfolds through time (that is, with human agents and institutions in constant and dynamic interaction). Also, because the system is open, even from moment to moment or day to day, she and her child are constantly engaging these many and overlapping social forces, with one often cancelling out the effects of another, even during the course of a single day. Further, because she and her child are volitional, they may be engaging the system in such a way as to alter the very nature of the system and its determinants. Ethnography is a method that is suited to the production of knowledge in open systems such as the one in the example above. It is a method aimed at understanding dynamic interactions as they unfold through time. It is radically different from the experimental method, which operates in a closed system, where the variables can sometimes be controlled and manipulated.

Each practice the young mother encounters with her child has a stated aim or objective – most often mandated by regulatory and governmental agencies. As well, most practices are driven by theories or models (such as, strengths or empowerment). The distance one travels (the practitioner and the recipient of a practice) between the stated aim of a practice (a theory or model of practice) and the actual practice we have called a phenomenological practice gap.

We call it 'phenomenological' for several reasons. First, it is in the gap that everyday practices are lived. Second, every practice derives its meaning from related practices and resistances to them in unfolding webs through time. Third, we strive to understand the whole,

not the part, and it is through understanding the relationships between the model and actual practices that this is accomplished.

Because practice unfolds in open systems, all models will, of necessity, produce gaps of varying dimensions with different consequences. Indeed, if there were no gaps, we would find ourselves in either artificially closed systems or situations where a practice is imposed without due consideration for the historical and cultural contingencies of human experience. Moreover, it is in these gaps where new knowledge can be generated and paradigm shifts are possible. It is also possible, however, that political and ideological commitments can close gaps where they should be maximally open.

We argue that ethnography is a method ideally suited to the study of the various conditions that produce, maintain and transform practice gaps. Indeed, using ethnographic methods, it is possible to discern the factors mediating the dynamic between model and practice, between the theory and realities of street-level practitioners and the recipients of their actions. Also, it is in the gap where street-level practitioner and the recipients of services push back against the model to open up a space for resistance, novel practice, transformative action (Shaw, 2011) and the emergence of new theory.

In conclusion, Russell Bernard (2002) summarised the central criticism of ethnography, noting that participant observation does not mean the ethnographer has a privileged standpoint that offers up a final or absolute understanding of the people studied. It is, therefore, important to comment here on the special meaning ethnographic research has for practising social workers, their agencies and the recipients of their services.

It is not uncommon to find social workers employed in agencies or settings where they also conduct research, thereby enjoying a unique kind of *entrée* and 'participation'. While in this duality of roles social workers may offer useful skills to institutional research, they may also produce potential conflicts. Bernard would call such social worker ethnographers 'observing participants' because they are employed as social workers (for an example, see Connolly, 2000). Unlike other observing participants, however (such as anthropologists trained as prison guards), social worker ethnographers may find themselves having to strictly monitor their observing so as not to violate the confidentiality of peers and clients (Bernard, 2002).

Floersch (2004a) noted that, in mental health research, clinician ethnographers have an insider position that enables access to actual practice because they are either licensed or have agency permission to be present during practice events. Indeed, the advantage of occupying practice and researcher roles is that it helps with the practical issues of ethnographic work, such as gaining trust, access and having insider knowledge of where to look and for what.

Does the combined role of social worker and ethnographer mean, however, that social worker ethnographers occupy a privileged 'insider' position with which practice can be authentically 'seen' or understood? We would answer this question in the negative: they do not have the authentic view of social work, as opposed to the inauthentic view of non-practitioner researchers or social scientists. Practitioner researchers will always have biases and they should be reflexive about their findings, never assuming that practitioners will necessarily be better positioned to understand practice than non-practitioners.

## Study questions

- 1 Discuss examples of social work practice where the inductive method of gathering information is common. What aspects of the ethnographic method make it particularly well suited to the study of human services? Describe social work settings where you think ethnography would help in understanding human behaviour in context.
- 2 Think about your own practice experiences. Are there particular circumstances where textbook theory and prescriptions for practice are ill-equipped? If one were to conduct an ethnography of your field setting, what kinds of invented, situated knowledge might be revealed?
- 3 Find a journal article that has used ethnography to study a subject related to your social work practice. First, access an electronic journal database. Sage, for example, offers a free online search engine (see [online.sagepub.com](http://online.sagepub.com)). Second, search a journal, or an entire database, for 'ethnography' and your topic of interest: 'child abuse', 'substance abuse', 'homelessness', 'child protection', 'welfare policy', 'immigration' or 'poverty'.

## GLOSSARY

**Ethnography** A research method wherein researchers collect data while in the natural environment of the object of study (e.g. neighbourhood, clinic, household, organisation, community, hospital, school, gang).

**Experience-near** In most of ethnography, this term refers to everyday life experience that is characterised in the first person. For example: 'After taking my anti-anxiety medication, I feel relieved'; 'I am searching for words to describe how I feel'.

**Holistic** In social work, this usually means viewing the person-in-environment, that is, seeing the internal (mind) and external (environment, culture and society) worlds simultaneously.

**Inductive** For social work, this means starting 'where the client is'. Ethnography is inductive by collecting real-time data by seeing, observing and asking about individual experiences (in historic and cultural time). Both traditions assume that a deductively derived theory cannot fully explain or describe a specific reality. Both traditions assume that deductively derived theories capture bottom-up experience, so, instead, ethnographers and social workers want their theories to be built from the ground up – they want the theory to be near the experience. Social work assumes that this method will help keep practitioners ethical because it is committed to empowering clients rather than using deductive theory to exert power over clients.

**In vivo** A Latin phrase meaning 'within the living' and referring in social science research to data collection that takes places in real time, live and within the worlds of research subjects or partners.

**Institutional ethnography** A research method similar to ethnography; however, institutional ethnography, developed by sociologist Dorothy Smith, describes a detailed account of institutional processes that structure and organise everyday experience.

**Knowledge-in-action** Refers to the strategic, contextual or intuitive theories of social workers; knowledge that is derived from particular practice events or activities.

**Objectivity and subjectivity** The uncertain separation between one's personal observation and perception of external 'fact' and one's internal state, including thoughts, feelings, interpretations and cultural beliefs.

**Open system** Referencing the multiple determinants that may or may not affect processes as they occur in the natural environment and everyday life, such systems can be contrasted with the closed systems of the laboratory.

**Participant observation** A research strategy involving active observation of and involvement in the lives of the people one is studying, the purpose being to gain direct experience of everyday life and culture as it occurs in a natural context. A cornerstone of participant observation is meeting people where they function regularly, meaning researchers go to the people or place they are studying.

**Phenomenological practice gap (PPG)** This concept refers to the role of our experience in coming to know phenomena in our various worlds of practice, that is, between the knower, the practitioner and the known, the client. And it assumes that the theory or model of practice will never perfectly fit the world of practice, therefore a gap, of some size, will always exist.

**Technical-rational knowledge** A prescribed theory dictating and defining normal, appropriate and successful social work practice, which is usually produced in a 'scientific' milieu.

## FURTHER READING

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) and Agar (1996) offer introductory books. Foote Whyte's ([1943] 1993) *Street Corner Society* is a classic, offering a glimpse into the ways ethnography has been used by urban sociologists and anthropologists as well as an engaging example of how ethnographic research can be presented.

Particularly useful when thinking about cultural competency in social work, Bohannan and van der Elst's (1998) introduction demonstrates that ethnography requires asking and listening skills that assist in placing individuals in a cultural context.

Of interest to social workers are several book-length investigations of social services (Edgar and Russell, 1998) and the intersection of psychiatry, social work and anthropology (Carr, 2010; Connolly, 2000; Estroff, 1981; Floersch, 2002; Hall, 2003; Longhofer et al., 2010; Luhrmann, 2000; Rhodes, 1991).

Two journals that publish studies using ethnography are the *British Journal of Social Work* and *Qualitative Social Work*. A few relevant papers published in these journals are Burke (2007), White et al. (2009), McNamara (2009), Fenge and Jones (2011) and Pösö (2010).

# 17

## ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

GERALD DE MONTIGNY

### INTRODUCTION

Ethnomethodology (EM) originated in the creative work of Harold Garfinkel, who combined Talcott Parsons' (1937) voluntaristic theory of social action with the phenomenological sociologies of Alfred Schütz (1962) and Aron Gurwitsch (1964, 1966). Garfinkel developed his distinctive reworking of Parsons' (1937) 'problem of social order' by adopting a phenomenological attention to the 'lifeworld' (Husserl, 1970). This allowed him to draw out the relations between a taken-for-granted presence of an everyday world and the practical, situated and lived forms of social action whereby that world comes to be.

The publication of *Seeing Sociologically: The routine grounds of social action* (2006), which Garfinkel had written as a thesis proposal in 1948, clearly reveals his debt to the phenomenological sociology of Schütz. Anne Rawls (2006: 6), who convinced Garfinkel to publish the long-abandoned text, explains: 'Seeing sociologically, in Garfinkel's view, requires a focus on the routine details that comprise the coherence of activities, not a focus on the beliefs and motives of actors: seeing in new ways – seeing society anew – and in details'.

Harold Garfinkel, who died in April 2011, was born in 1917 and grew up in Newark, New Jersey. He began his studies in accounting at the University College of Newark, and then migrated south to the University of North Carolina where he completed his MA in 1942 before he was drafted into the army.

Following his discharge, he studied for his PhD at Harvard, where he was supervised by Talcott Parsons until its completion in 1952. From Parsons, Garfinkel took up the structure–agency debate in sociology – that is, whether attention should be given to so-called structural determinations or to individual and group actions.

Garfinkel, along with others in the postwar environment, shifted attention from generalised structures and rules towards people's practical activities for ordering their everyday lives. He believed that Parsons had dealt with 'action' only incompletely (Heritage, 1984; Hilbert, 1992)

and, as a result, he turned away from a functional analysis of norms and values as underpinning social structures to examine instead ‘experience structures’ of actors in lived situations (Garfinkel, 1988: 104; Heritage, 1984: 9; Hilbert, 1992: 10).

Garfinkel’s new sociology relied on Parsons’ (1937) attention to the Hobbesian problem of order (Buxton, 1985). Thomas Hobbes (1958 [1651]: 186) in *Leviathan* saw people as natural pursuers of individual wants (competition, diffidence and glory) and believed that, in an unregulated state of nature, the life of man is ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short’. Hobbes reasoned that there must be a sovereign power to rein in people’s passions in order to ensure cooperation and social stability. Parsons countered that Hobbes incorrectly subordinated reason to the passions and proposed, instead, a distinctly modern and American ‘theory of action’, wherein social order was achieved as a population voluntarily adhered to social norms and morals. Parsons presented his social theory, which synthesised rational (utilitarian) means and ends with ‘action systems’, as the culmination of social philosophy and sociology that began with Hobbes and Locke in the seventeenth century and proceeded to Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim and Weber in the nineteenth century.

For Parsons, writing in the 1930s while at Harvard, in a democratic (North) America, it was clear that the ‘common power’ to maintain social order and peace could not be a sovereign king or queen. Equally distasteful were the forms of Nazism, fascism or communism he saw evolving in Europe. When Parsons wrote *The Structure of Social Action*, (North) America was not only suffering its own internal social disruptions caused by the Great Depression but was witness to the breakdown of social order across Europe. For Parsons, the solution to the problem of order rested in people’s ‘voluntary’ adherence to norms and values that promoted social cohesion and cooperation (Buxton, 1985; Hama, 1999).

Garfinkel directed his attention not to action as an abstraction, but as actually effected in the mundane work of people in the day-to-day course of their lives. For Garfinkel, writing in the postwar USA, order was ubiquitous and mundane. Order emerged as stable, lived, worked and congenial forms of life evidenced in people’s everyday public and private routines. Order was all around him as people lined up for buses, drove to work, passed through the checkouts at supermarkets or conducted classes at a university. While Garfinkel began with Parsons’ concern with the problem of order, he believed that the ‘problem of order’ was no problem at all.

Garfinkel (1991: 11) argued that order was a palpable fact of what he would later call ‘immortal, ordinary society’. People through their congregational activities produce social order continuously day after day. For people who live in an everyday world, there is ‘no time out’, no interruption and no escape from life as a member of a society. Garfinkel’s (2002: 254) description of society as ‘immortal’ signals that a society comes to be because it is continually ‘staffed’ or performed by members whose work creates various orders that will be there ‘after the local staff leaves to be replaced by those who succeed it’.

Garfinkel’s development of a method to unfold the routine accomplishment of ‘immortal, ordinary society’ is derived from Alfred Schütz’s sociological phenomenology. Schütz (1973: 218–20) recognised that ‘ordinary society’ or what he called a ‘world of daily life’ is an ‘intersubjective world’ in which ‘we grow older together’. His phenomenology differed from Edmund Husserl’s (1962) as Husserl proposed a philosophical disconnect or bracket of the ‘natural attitude – that is the taken-for-granted domain of daily life, while Schütz argued that, because experience comprises ‘multiple realities’, ‘specific shock’ experiences could disturb our

paramount reality. Multiple realities include such things as falling asleep into a world of dreams, drama and stage plays, a painting that fills our visual field and participation in the fiction of a joke. Schütz's attention to 'shock experiences' provided Garfinkel with the insight to develop 'breaching exercises' to disrupt taken-for-granted routines.

In breaching exercises, Garfinkel (1967: 42) instructed students to enter the familiar scenes of their daily lives and undertake actions that would 'breach' the 'stable structures' of those settings. For instance, students were 'to engage an acquaintance or friend in an ordinary conversation . . . and to insist that the person clarify the sense of his commonplace remarks'; to spend time 'in their homes viewing its activities while assuming that they were boarders in the household' (1967: 45); 'to engage someone in conversation and to imagine and act on the assumption that what the other person was saying was directed to hidden motives' (1967: 51); or to 'bargain for standard priced merchandise' (1967: 68–9). Garfinkel reported that for students these assignments created anxiety, awkwardness and discomfort, and for others anger, dismissal and confusion.

## KEY IDEAS

### DISTINCTIVENESS OF ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

To the novice, EM – and, in particular, Garfinkel's writings – often seem to be noticeably strange or odd. Further, unlike other contemporary theoretical giants, such as Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Bourdieu, Garfinkel does not present an 'encyclopaedic range of . . . investigations', nor does he 'attempt . . . large-scale theoretical synthesis' (Heritage, 1984: 3). Richard Hilbert (1995: 158) notes that, unlike other sociologies:

To its everlasting credit, ethnomethodology has been remarkably free of . . . syntheses and groundings in tradition. Indeed, early characterizations of ethnomethodology specifically contrasted it with everything that had gone before, all of it, glossed into the general category not ethnomethodology i.e., 'traditional sociology'.

In contrast to other sociologists and social theorists who engaged in grand theorising and model production, Garfinkel, in *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967), turned his attention to practical and mundane matters, such as decision-making by jurors, 'passing' and achieved sex status in a transsexual male to female and good reasons for the production of 'bad' clinical records. Garfinkel (1967: 32) explained:

Procedures and results of water witching, divination, mathematics, sociology, whether done by lay persons or professionals, are addressed according to the policy that every feature of sense, of fact, of method, for every particular case of inquiry without exception, is the managed accomplishment of organized settings of practical actions, and that particular determinations in members' practices of consistency, planfulness, relevance, or reproducibility of their practices and results, from witchcraft to topology, are acquired and assured only through particular, located organizations of artful practices.



Whether it is the work of mathematicians, witchdoctors or social workers, the methods of EM lead us to examine the actual coordination of interactions as a practical matter. For social workers, EM methods make remarkable the taken-for-granted performance of the orders of our work as files, reports, assessments, waiting rooms, interviews and so on.

At first blush, social workers might misunderstand Garfinkel's (2002: 115) claim that EM and formal analysis (FA) – the type of work that social workers do when assessing, diagnosing and treating clients – are 'simultaneously incommensurably different and unavoidably related' as a potential criticism of professional practice. Yet, a close reading reveals that Garfinkel, although committed to EM, refuses to engage in a critique or to claim analytic superiority for his discipline. Rather, he recognises that, always and everywhere, people, including himself, engage in ordinary moments of practical theorising, generalising and explanation (essentially the procedures for doing FA) and the essential reflexivity of such activities becomes taken for granted as background. Attention in EM to the 'essential reflexivity' (Lynch, 1993) of practice brings into focus the relations between taken-for-granted social forms and members' situated work. Uncovering Garfinkel's view of the FA–EM relation requires a subtle reading that is sensitive to the enormous contribution of EM to reveal the 'instructed' features of action.

Rawls (2006) explains that Garfinkel believed that learning to do EM demanded more than just reading texts. To learn to do EM, Garfinkel developed 'tutorial problems', or exercises for his students, that disrupted the taken-for-granted routines of everyday life. In a similar fashion, Garfinkel, by seeming to erect a divide between EM and FA, forces those who are interested in doing EM to figure out how to 'get to the other side' of the taken-for-granted everyday world. That they can get there is not in dispute, but what is of interest is *how* they get there.

Garfinkel argues that all people are potential ethnomethodologists as they are already continuously engaged in the mundane performance of sensible and accountable actions and orders. Now this is important for social workers, as it turns out that EM has practical or praxeological utility as a method practitioners can use to explicate exactly how they went about congregationally enacting the various forms of their work such as interviews, investigations, reports, case conferences and so forth. EM can provide a detailed analysis of how such work comes to be 'in and as lived doings' (Garfinkel, in Rawls, 2006: 43).

Garfinkel (2002: 116) explains: 'The achievements of formal analytic theorizing and investigations are always accompanied by ethnomethodological alternatives, and they are accompanied everywhere. Wherever in an actual investigation one is found the other is also found'. Social workers can recognise that, as they work in mental health, child protection, family counselling, alcohol and drug rehabilitation or a local welfare office, they work up or insert the myriad inchoate and ineffable details of clients' lives into at-hand, albeit formal, institutional categories. Social workers can recognise the artfulness of their practical work which accomplishes the sensibility, order and organization of 'social work', the 'agency' and 'helping'.

In *Ethnomethodology's Program* (2002), Garfinkel provides a clear definition of EM's relation to FA. He affirms that EM is concerned with 'remedial expertise' and that it does have something 'to promise or deliver', though he insists that 'its remedial transactions are distinctive to EM expertise'. He adds (2002: 114), 'EM's remedial expertise is indifferent to the use of policies of generic representational theorizing and methods of constructive analysis'. For Garfinkel, EM is concerned with the ways that generic representational theorising (or, as in our case, social work theory) as a practice gets done by members as their practice, as their work of dealing with practical matters at hand, as their day's work. Clearly, it is very

much to the advantage of social workers to understand just how it is that they and their colleagues actually go about producing the everyday orders of their work. Such understandings draw to attention the ‘essential reflexivity’ of practice and product.

Garfinkel’s (2002: 171) caution ‘not to decide in advance what the phenomenon consists of on the basis of prior formal analytic studies’ should be canonical for social workers. This direction leads social workers to question and explicate their own taken-for-granted methods for producing the order and sense of their accountable and warranted day-to-day work with clients. EM directs social workers to attend to the detailed, mundane and actually accomplished forms and shapes of their work and clients’ lives before leaping into theory. By using EM, social workers can examine the ways that their work produces a taken-for-granted organisation, whether a child protection agency, a mental health office or a homeless shelter in the local sites where such services emerge. EM forces social workers to go beyond the traditional recognition that ‘agency function’ shapes social work practice (Robinson, 1949; Smalley, 1967; Taft, 1944) to grapple with how their practices accomplish the organisation and its functions. EM allows social workers to recognise the ‘essential reflexivity’ (Lynch, 1993, Watson, 1987) of practice and product with the result that agency function is revealed to be a congregationally produced effect of members’ actual work.

Rawls, in her introduction to *Ethnomethodology’s Program* (Garfinkel, 2002: 19), claims that the purpose of EM is:

to bring sociology from the realm of conceptual theorizing into the hands of practitioners, in order that we may understand and improve upon both the quality of individual human experience and the possibility of providing high-quality lives for all human beings. Social change requires, first and foremost, an understanding of social processes.

The claim that EM is motivated by a desire for high-quality lives for all human beings is consonant with social work. Through EM, social workers are instructed to attend to their own and others’ actual practices, coordinated social relations and, ultimately, to the individual and collective responsibility for enacting everyday forms of social order. EM provides tools which reveal that a client’s problems, concerns and stories must be made sense of as accountable productions of work with a social worker. The coherence of client accounts arises in and through (albeit not exclusively) the interactional work of the client and the worker. This is in situ and face-to-face work for producing coherent and ordered accounts. The emergence of ‘candidate correct’ (Pollner, 1974: 40) categorisations is recognised as satisfying practical and at-hand purposes, rather than universal, decontextualised truths.

## NATURE OF ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

John Heritage (1984: 4) explains:

The term ethnomethodology . . . refers to the study of a particular subject matter: the body of commonsense knowledge and the range of procedures and considerations by means of which the ordinary members of society make sense of, find their way about in, and act on the circumstances in which they find themselves.

At root, EM is quite simply about studying how people – that is, you and I – go about producing a taken-for-granted, relied on and accountable order as a cogent and sensible everyday world. It is about how we, together with others, ‘shop’ in a supermarket, queue up at cash registers to pay for our groceries, bag our groceries and leave the store to return to our homes. It is about how we find a place on a bus, how a social worker ushers a client into her or his office and does an interview and how, through ceaseless and endless repetition of such practical activities, the coherence and sense of our lives, our society and our nations arise. Behind ‘ethnomethodology’ is the simple idea that that which is familiar, taken-for-granted, commonsense, routine and expected in our everyday worlds arises from a series of ‘procedures’ or methods by which all of us, in concert, congregationally achieve those features as our working and workable routines and orders.

During the 1970s Garfinkel’s interest in everyday activities coincided with those of Harvey Sacks, who developed methods for close and detailed analysis of recorded talk between people in normal conversations, face-to-face or over the phone. By turning to talk Sacks was able to unfold people’s deployment of standard devices for accomplishing the sensible forms of conversations. Sacks’s work, although clearly rooted in EM concerns, evolved into a distinct type of study known as conversation analysis (CA). Michael Lynch (1993) notes that the original ethnomethodological project became transformed into two closely related but different branches: EM studies of work, carried on by Garfinkel and those around him, and CA, as developed by Sacks.

Studies of work stimulated broad-based research into both formal and informal forms of action (see, for example, Baccus, 1986; Garfinkel et al., 1981; Girton, 1986). Garfinkel initiated this tradition with his analysis of good organisational reasons for ‘bad’ clinical records; Don Zimmerman (1976) followed with studies of the intake process and recordkeeping in a welfare office; and Egon Bittner studied the effects of policing on people on ‘skid row’, people with mental illness and young people (Bittner, 1967a, 1967b, 1976).

## CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

Sacks developed CA through early engagement and collaboration with Garfinkel (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970). Although CA has evolved into a distinct field of study, it remains affiliated with EM. Sadly Sacks died in a car accident in November 1975. His lectures however, dating from 1964, survived. These were published posthumously (1995) and reveal Sacks’s abiding interest in the ways people use talk to get work done.

Sacks’s interest in talk culminated in the 1974 paper that he wrote with Schegloff and Jefferson entitled ‘A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation’. Lynch (2000b: 527) calls the paper a ‘landmark’, both in the introduction of a new technology or format of detailed transcripts of ‘naturally occurring conversations’ and for the argument ‘that its findings were intrinsic to the data and not imposed by the analyst’. The paper took up the seemingly simple question of how turns are distributed between participants to a social occasion – an economy of turns – and proposed the examination of what the authors called the ‘turn construction component’ – use of sentences, clauses and phrases – and ‘turn allocation components’ (Sacks et al., 1974: 702–3) – whereby one speaker selects the next speaker or self-selection for the next speaker occurs.

Through the presentation of transcribed segments of naturally occurring conversation, the paper demonstrated how people practically and interactively produced not just the order of a conversation but also the social order, accountability and warrant of an occasion. The paper launched research that led analysts to look beyond language and the problems of talk and meaning, to examine the ways people use talk-in-interaction to produce social occasions as such. CA studies turned away from the classic and respectable study of ‘language’ – de Saussure’s (1983) *langue* – towards the disreputable, chaotic, random, non-systematic use of ‘talk’ or ‘conversation’ – *parole* – and its productive functions in everyday life.

Just as EM and CA have become increasingly differentiated, CA has itself become internally differentiated, with some interested in analysing everyday or ordinary conversations and others focusing on ‘institutional talk’.

Despite the emergence of such a division, the attention to ‘institutional talk’ has led to important clarifications of CA’s foundations. Of note is Emanuel Schegloff’s (1992) demand that categories establishing the member’s identity – or, more properly, identities – be demonstrably derived from and relevant to the participants in the talk. He insists that analysts should forswear asserting that the conversation has this form because Joe is male, white, middle-aged, conservative and Catholic, unless they can show, ‘from the details of the talk or other conduct in the materials’ (Schegloff, 1992: 110), that such identities are relevant and relied on by the parties to the talk. Schegloff (1992) extends this directive, stating that he is against the promiscuous use of identity categories and the rather common reliance on ‘context’ as explanation. He argues (1992: 111), in a fashion resonant with EM, that analytic work must ‘show how the context or the setting . . . in that aspect, is procedurally consequential to the talk’.

Despite differences in approach and attention between EM and CA, at the root of both methods are fundamental commitments to explicating the interactive practices that produce forms of social order, coherence and accountability as practical and at-hand matters. Thus, both EM and CA unite in affirming that there is ‘orderliness at all points’ (Sharrock, 2000: 536). Whether the production of order is pursued through detailed analysis of practical activities for sensemaking or detailed attention to talk-in-interaction, then, the objective is to create knowledge that is deeply attentive to members’ practices. In both EM and CA, analysts eschew imposing analytic order through the application of scientific categories and forms. Whether the interactional object for analysis is a family supper or a social work interview, both EM and CA are committed to explicating just how such forms come to be produced by and for members.

## ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL OBSERVATION

What is ethnomethodological observation? What does it mean to ‘observe’ ethnomethodologically? Is observing ethnomethodologically different than observing in ‘normal’ social science, that which Garfinkel (2002) calls formal analysis? Such questions raise a host of complex problems, which can only be touched on here. However, it needs to be noted that to do EM studies we begin with the principle of ‘unique adequacy’. That is, we follow the instruction that to do an EM study we must be intimately familiar with and share members’ knowledge. For social work students, the possibility of doing EM studies conveniently overlaps with the challenges they face learning how to conduct themselves and to understand practice as a

‘social worker’. Students have an advantage taking up EM as they often recognise their own, and others’, confusions, inconsistencies, differences, disjunctions, lacunae and taken-for-granted (but not necessarily recognised) understandings and practices. From the turmoil of ‘learning to do’ students are well positioned to observe and to recognise just how it is that members go about producing putatively coherent accountable professional orders day-after-day.

If we begin with the instruction for the ‘unique adequacy’ of EM accounts, we recognise that whatever counts as ‘observation’ for members must ‘in most ways’ count as observation for anyone wanting to do EM. It cannot be otherwise. Simply stated, to do EM one must be able to see the world as members see it. Fortunately, for social workers, that which we want to ‘observe’ and study, we already ‘observe’ either as members or as participants to an occasion, e.g. a shelter, a child protection office, a court hearing and so on. Garfinkel (2002: 168) ‘observes’:

It is Ethnomethodological about EM studies that they show for ordinary society’s substantive events, in material contents, just and only in any actual case, that and just how vulgarly competent members concert their activities to produce and show, exhibit, make observably the case, demonstrate, etc., coherence cogency, analysis, detail, structure, consistency, order, meaning, mistakes, errors, coincidence, facticity, reason, methods, – locally, reflexively, naturally accountable phenomena – in and as the haecceities of their ordinary lives together.

To observe ordinary local orders, and the practices for producing their materials, whether social work assessments, interviews, counselling sessions, referral letters, reports, office meetings and so on, demands relying on members’ knowledge. It means working, interacting and observing as a competent member.

Yet this insight, while foundational, only gets us part way towards understanding ‘observation’ in EM. Students of EM are right to ask, ‘Are we there yet?’, and the answer is ‘not yet’. For it seems that ‘there’ is something else that informs ethnomethodological work. Lynch (1993: 80) provides an indication of what this is when he suggests that to do EM requires paying attention to the unremarkable and mundane ways that people actually go about doing ‘observation, description, replication, testing, measurement, explanation, proof, and so on’. It follows that the extra-bit that is ethnomethodological ‘observation’ is achieved in the attention to just how it is that members actually go about producing a working, workable and worked sense of the ordered properties of an occasion. This extra-bit is a recognition of the essential reflexivity of orders and the indexicality of meanings and accounts members produce inside an occasion.

EM might best be understood as emerging in a nexus of fractured attentions, and the recognition of the fractures that arise for members in their occasioned practices. To do EM is to be curious, and to ask just how it was that those people, that we, our gang went about producing the coherent, accountable and ordered features of this or that local setting? To do EM is to be committed to discovery through engagement, and participation in practical activities.

Yet students will still worry, ‘how will I know that I am doing EM properly?’ Unfortunately, there really isn’t an easy answer. I am not sure that anyone ever arrives, and indeed, I suspect that any claim to doing EM properly would itself not be proper to EM, as it would suggest that the link between daily life and EM had somehow been breached. It would suggest that although ordinary accounts are ‘incommensurably different’ from EM accounts,

that they had somehow ceased to be ‘specifically related’ (Garfinkel, 2002: 116). Any such a claim would require turning EM attention back onto the work of making the claim itself.

For many of us interested in doing EM studies, I suspect that we spend our lives worried about, struggling with and seeking to resolve the puzzles and conundrums of our relations with the taken-for-granted ways of the world in which we are embedded. As someone who is a social worker, I ask, what sorts of ways of working do I need to engage in that might be properly identified as EM? Yet, in this question I return to the foundational question, and turn it back onto myself, to ask: What counts as EM, and who is counting it? Of course, in such moments I cringe with embarrassment as I detect a seemingly endless recursive spiral that forces me back onto myself, my practices and those of my colleagues, from which there is no escape, and from which, as Garfinkel (2002) observed, there is ‘no time out’.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

The relevance of EM for social workers arrives along two primary trajectories. First, social workers in the daily routines of their work – home visits, street outreach and counselling sessions – struggle to understand the ordinary, experienced worlds of their clients. Second, historically, social workers have viewed ‘practice’ as a professional foundation.

Clearly, the focus of EM on people’s quite practical, mundane and everyday activities resonates with the core concerns of social workers. Social workers are deeply interested in just how people make their lives into families, friendships, work relations, neighbourhoods and so on. They are not indifferent to the mundane, ordinary and everyday ways and mores of clients’ actions and interactions and, in this, their attention overlaps – albeit, often not recognised as such – with that of EM. The necessary curiosity of social workers with the taken-for-granted, commonsense, ordinary and everyday matches that of those who do EM. Further, the core social work values of respect and ‘nonjudgmental attitude’ (Biestek, 1957) synchronise with the EM demand for ‘indifference’, as this directs us to account for the occasions or situations of people’s lives by paying an abiding and deeply respectful attention to the art, skill and complexities of their everyday life making social practices.

By recalling Garfinkel’s breaching exercises and the experience of discomfort they created for his students, we can better understand the experience of many social work students when they move from the familiar worlds of their families and friends to enter into the alien worlds of their clients’ lives. Unlike Garfinkel’s students, who sought to become strangers in familiar worlds, social work students find that they are strangers in unfamiliar worlds. The difference between their worlds and those of clients is especially augmented as they are often obliged to enter those worlds not only as strangers but also as agents of extra-local (Smith, 1990) policies, legislation and codes. While social workers may appear to be ‘present’ in their work with clients, they are also continuously orientated towards hidden or invisible background contingencies, expectations and agendas (Hak, 1995) in the forms of organisational mandates, policies and procedures which characterise their work environment.

The effect of social workers’ positions is that the need to understand, and to learn just how it is that people go about producing the sense, understanding and social relations in which they live with others is an urgent matter. EM, by providing a direction for close attention, and

honouring the need for that attention, offers to provide social workers with an affirming supplement to their assessment and helping practices.

Therapy, counselling, psychiatry, medical practice, diagnosis and social work were of considerable interest to the first generation of EM and CA sociologists: Roy Turner (1972) studied 'therapy talk'; Don Zimmerman (1976) examined routines in a welfare office; Howard Schwartz (1976) explored the reliance on practical reasoning in psychotherapy; D.R. Watson (1981) took up the problem of use of 'proper' names in counselling; Gail Jefferson and John Lee (1981) analysed convergences and differences between ordinary 'troubles talk' between friends and 'troubles talk' in 'service encounters'; and Miller and Silverman (1995) examined 'troubles talk' in counselling discourse.

The interest in such matters continues into the present, as Ian Hutchby (2005) has examined active listening and eliciting 'feelings talk' in child counselling; Douglas Maynard and John Heritage (2005) have examined doctor-patient interaction; Ilkka Arminen (2004) has looked at stories told at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings; and Charles Antaki (2006) has explored the use of idiomatic expressions or clichés in work with mental health clients.

In recent years, a number of counsellors and social workers have reciprocated by taking up the tools of EM and CA. Increasingly research is being developed that applies tools taken from CA to the examination of practice domains. For example, Anssi Peräkylä (1998) has analysed doctor-patient interactions and the accountable nature of the delivery of a diagnosis. Michael Forrester and David Reason (2006: 40) have examined psychoanalytic sessions to explore whether or not CA could be a useful tool to explicate 'the conduct of the psychoanalytic therapeutic interaction'. Michelle O'Reilly (2005) has examined therapy with children to provide a fascinating look at differences between adults and children in their use of onomatopoeia, while Karin Osvaldsson (2004) has focused on the use of laughter in a Swedish youth detention home.

CA has also been used to examine specific practice tools, including empathy (Wynn and Wynn, 2006), talk about feelings (Forsberg and Vagli, 2006), use of self-disclosure (Antaki et al., 2005), workers' management of their own moral evaluations (Kurri and Wahlström, 2005), helping clients to be self-directed (Vehviläinen, 2003), active listening, use of authority, managing emotions and so on. In these studies, the attention to the detailed analysis of talk moves analysis past idealisation and generalised theory on to the empirical examination of actual practices.

In recent years, social workers in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Tampere in Finland and at Huddersfield in the UK have combined social work concerns with CA. Particularly noteworthy is their text *Constructing Clienthood in Social Work and Human Services* (Hall et al., 2003b). Throughout the text, detailed transcripts are examined to develop analyses of fundamental puzzles and problems in the delivery of child welfare. For example, a chapter by Christopher Hall et al. (2003a) examines the tension between a social worker's attribution of inadequacy to a mother whose children are in care, and the mother's attempts to project personal moral integrity. Similarly, Stef Slembrouck and Christopher Hall (2003) examine parents' deployment of devices that 'make out' that they genuinely care for their children, but are unable to cope.

After more than 40 years since the inception of EM and CA, some social workers have begun to apply tools from these disciplines to analyse their practice (de Montigny, 2007). Any social worker can record to audio or video his or her work and, by reading some excellent

but simple primers on CA (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Psathas, 1995; Schegloff, 2007; ten Have, 1999), he or she can learn the basics of how to transcribe and analyse interviews. Indeed, for some years, I have had students complete CA assignments in my practices classes. Although there are predictable complaints about the amount of time it takes to do a proper transcription, students who work at the exercise and approach talk-in-interaction with a sense of curiosity find that they can begin not only to learn a great deal about the art of talk but also to grasp and explore the essential reflexivity at the heart of practice. Students are able to make novel discoveries about the constituents of interaction and, hence, how turns in talk work; how a speaker signals readiness for another to take the next turn; how listeners use response tokens such as *uhm*, *yah*, *okay*, *mm*, *ahum* to shape a speaker's talk; how gaps, pauses and tone are used; and so on.

If a student says to me, 'I recorded a chat with my friend', the questions I might pose are, 'What did you do interactively that made this occasion a "chat" rather than an interview, a debate, a lecture, a discussion, an appearance in court, and so forth?' and 'What can you see that helps you to understand how you and X went about doing "friendship"?' Such questions force an explication not only of familiar concepts but also of taken-for-granted practices.

For EM and CA, talk-in-interaction is not simply about words or about language. Rather, what is at issue is how people interactively accomplish sense and order. By making ordinary ways of working topical, the unnoticed becomes noticed and, in this way, social workers and their clients will benefit.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

So what are the implications for social workers of using ethnomethodology for their practice? First, by adopting the orientation and techniques of EM social workers approach their clients with a fundamental curiosity and respect. They will be curious about the mundane and seemingly trivial, but nevertheless essential details of clients' lives. They will want to know just how clients go about producing the everyday orders of their lives: how they get ready for work, prepare their breakfast and arrange to eat it, interact with their children before they send them off to school, discuss difficult issues with a spouse and so on. As respectful social workers, they will recognise, following Garfinkel, that people are not 'dopes'. People are not labels, disorders or the objects of professional categories. Rather, people are agents, and, as such, are active co-creators of their everyday worlds and lived orders.

Second, by adopting attention to 'reflexivity' social workers will recognise that what counts as an account about a client is fundamentally an expression of situated and lived work processes. They will turn their attention to their own work, and just how it is that they go about creating, with others, accountable orders as instances of social work practice. By adopting EM techniques, social workers are obliged to abandon an Archimedean standpoint and turn their critical gaze onto 'objective' and 'objectifying' practices, and recognise the 'essential', that is, inescapable and unavoidable, quality of 'reflexivity' in their practice.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, EM techniques, by focusing on actual, socially organised, interactive practices of real people, that is, real clients, real colleagues, real supervisors and real funders, allow social workers to 'bracket' a largely taken-for-granted everyday



professional language, replete with forms of language and ways of working which rely on the attribution of agency to 'things'. By turning their gaze on what they do, what their colleagues do and what their supervisors do, they can begin to see past the forms of language and thought in which 'organisations have missions', the 'profession espouses values', 'power shapes', 'oppression acts to', to instead turn to examine how it is that ordinary people, in the everyday course of their lives, engage in practices such that such forms of accounts are not only produced, but produced congregationally as having sense and sensibility. The possibility for social workers who take up EM is that they might be able to develop accounts that place real people and their actions front-and-centre as the authors of social orders, rather than the determinism in which things command people. In such moments of restoring actors to the stage, social workers can begin to grapple with the humanity at the centre of their professional commitment.

### Study questions

- 1 Locate a recently written account of your work with a client, such as an assessment or a report. For whom did you write the report? How did your understanding of the 'reader' affect how you wrote? How did the format of the report structure what you could say about your interaction with the client? What did you include and what did you leave out? What background work, performed by others, was necessary for you to be able to enter your class and the classroom in social work? *Hint*: Who is in the classroom with you? How did they get to be there? Whose work and what work processes, preceded your entry to this class? What are the social relationships that are in place to allow this class to proceed?
- 2 Audio-record talk at a supper table, or during a ride in a car with a friend, or with a partner. Transcribe about five minutes of it. What can you see in the details of the talk-in-interaction? How did you and the other person interact to produce a particular type of relationship? Can you identify instances where you let ambiguity pass or where you filled in an ad hoc or good enough understanding?

## GLOSSARY

**Account, accounting** Garfinkel's first degree in business accounting informed his interest in social 'accounting' practices and in the essential reflexivity of 'accounts'. Thus 'I give an account of myself', 'I account for my actions'. Local practices are accountable as people accomplish the sensibility, good sense, haecceities or just 'thisness' of an occasion.

**Ad hoc, ad hocing** Means to rely on a taken-for-granted 'infinite depth of detail' of interactive and organisational background features out of which a contingent, unfolding and good enough sense for practical purposes is accomplished.

**Ethnomethodological observation** The attempt to catch what is going on without presupposition by putting aside what you already know and taking what you bring to the observation as itself observable.

**Documentary method** From Karl Mannheim (1952), but since transformed into a recognition that actors deploy a stock of at-hand and taken-for-granted frameworks to take up particulars such that they become documents, or indicators, of the framework. A gestalt is derived from a pattern of occurrences and simultaneously discrete events become documents of the whole.

**Indexical, indexicality** Despite the problem of indexical expressions (pronouns such as he, she and it; deictic expressions – pointing words – here, this and there; Lynch, 1993), participants can and do make sense from each other's talk. Exploring how members resolve indexicality reveals 'ethnomethods' for sensemaking.

**Reflexive, essential reflexivity** The recognition that what is at hand, sensible and understood is as produced through practical activities. The essential reflexivity of practice unfolds the forms of order taken-for-granted in the world, such that ontology is as accomplished.

**Sequence, turns** In CA, sequence and turns are used to accomplish the order of social settings. Sense and coherence are achieved interactively.

**Talk-in-interaction** Talk is as accomplished in vivo, interactively, as a social engagement between participants. Talk-in-interaction attends to how these participants, here and now, produce the cogency, accountability and work of the occasion together.

## FURTHER READING

Besides the original source (Garfinkel, 1967, 2002), Heritage (1984), Sacks (1995), Silverman (1998), ten Have (2004) and Schegloff (2007) are good references for understanding ethnomethodology. For a good critical review of ethnomethodology, see Atkinson (1988).

# 18

## DISCOURSE AND REFLEXIVITY

SUE WHITE

### INTRODUCTION

The social workings of social work depend on language, and language in its everyday use is the concern of discourse analysts. Language is used by service users to tell their story and by social workers and other professionals to retell that story.

Language is not *everything*, though, and, at the extremes of emotion or circumstance, it often fails adequately to capture experience. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1961: 115) may have slightly overstated the case with his assertion that ‘the limits of my language mean the limits of my world’, but words undoubtedly *matter*, as do the order and manner of their delivery and the ways in which they are heard and interpreted. Yet, often this rich cultural resource is rendered immune from systematic analysis simply because it is so ‘ordinary’.

In this chapter, I give a flavour of the debates in the eclectic field of discourse analysis (DA) and argue that the concepts and methods associated with the analysis of ‘talk and text’ can usefully be taught to social workers so that they may become reflexive analysts of their own affairs.

DA involves the analysis of selected extracts of ‘talk’ or ‘text’ – that is, extracts of recorded or written words. These can be analysed in a number of ways. We can attend to the content and organisation of communication or talk or we can seek to identify in this talk dominant and taken-for-granted ideas about particular phenomena, such as childhood, gender, race, the family or mental health, and how these reflect particular historical, political and/or moral positions. I shall describe in detail the debates between these approaches in due course.

Like ‘discourse’, the meaning of the term ‘reflexivity’ in the social sciences is contested (Lynch, 2000a: 26):

Reflexivity is a well-established theoretical and methodological concept in the human sciences, and yet it is used in a confusing variety of ways. The meaning of ‘reflexivity’ and the virtues ascribed to the concept are relative to particular theoretical and methodological commitments.

It is sometimes taken to have the same meaning as ‘reflection’ and, indeed, it has the same Latin root, *reflectere* – to bend back. As Michael Lynch notes above, there are many different definitions of reflexivity in the social sciences and, for him, we are all always and already reflexive. In this respect reflexivity refers to our intrinsic capacity to attend to what we are saying and doing in everyday situations – as evidenced, for example, in a preference for self-correction when we stumble over a word in conversation (Schegloff et al., 1977).

Within social work, reflexivity is often conflated with reflective practice (see White et al., 2006), which, at its simplest, means thinking about what we are doing and why.

The concept of reflexivity I shall use here (after Taylor and White, 2000) adds substantially to reflective practice as it is conventionally conceived in social work (for a critique of conventional approaches, see Ixer, 1999; Taylor, 2006). The ‘bending back’ that the root of the word ‘reflexivity’ implies requires a sociocultural analysis of the kinds of ideas in which practice is embedded. So, what counts as ‘knowledge’ becomes a topic worthy of scrutiny in its own right.

Here, as we shall see below, DA can help by slowing down the action so we can reflect systematically and empirically on the language we use and which words and phrases assume power. In this way, we can start to understand the kinds of ideas that seem to carry currency and how practitioners deploy them in making sense of cases.

## KEY IDEAS

Being concerned with everyday language in use, DA often has a ‘performative’ orientation – a view that people ‘do things’ with their language; that talk *is* social action (Austin, 1962). A core idea is that speaking, listening, reading and writing are crucial aspects of the way in which we communicate and, through these micro-practices, we construct our personal and social worlds. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, there is a sense in which the field of discourse studies is a site for disciplinary struggles (Slembrouck, 2006):

[The] ‘lender disciplines’ [of discourse analysis] are to be found within various corners of the human and social sciences, with complex historical affiliations and a lot of cross-fertilization taking place. However, this complexity and mutual influencing should not be mistaken for ‘compatibility’ between the various traditions. Nor is compatibility necessarily a desirable aim, as much is to be gained from the exploration of problematical and critical edges and from making the most of theoretical tensions.

While DA is an empirical field that often involves the detailed analysis of extracts of ‘talk’, most texts on the subject devote copious pages to what can appear to be rather arid theoretical debates. It is worth considering why this may be. A single extract of talk can be analysed in a number of different ways. A core tension saturates the field, as Erickson (2004: viii, emphasis added) notes:

The conduct of talk in local social interaction as it occurs in real time is unique, crafted by the actors for the specific situation of its use in the moment of its uttering, *and* the conduct of talk in local social interaction is profoundly influenced by processes that occur beyond the temporal and spatial horizon of the immediate occasion of interaction.

There is little doubt that both these statements are true. Frederick Erickson (2004) likens face-to-face encounters to the experience of climbing a tree that is simultaneously climbing you! They involve a complex reading of signals and cues and the operation of turn-taking rules that are often noticeable to us only when the rules are broken (Sacks et al., 1974), as well as the artful selection of powerful words and phrases to get us what we want!

In this situated, local context, talk can go in many different ways. In other words, it is not predetermined in any straightforward manner. Yet, neither do actors invent the world anew in each encounter (see Fairclough, 2005).

So, there are ongoing internal debates about the relative importance of analysing talk-in-interaction as against identifying dominant ideas in wider cultural circulation.

## ANALYSING DISCOURSE AND DISCOURSE

I have noted that DA can be focused on the evolving talk-in-interaction (discourse) or on identifying historically situated, dominant ideas (Discourse). The use of upper and lower case for the terms is intended to differentiate between ‘discourse’ as talk-in-action and ‘Discourse’ as a way of thinking or a body of knowledge (Gee, 1990; Walker, in Woolgar, 1988; see also Wetherell, 1998).

The macro-reading of Discourse is related to Marx’s concept of ideology. For example, Teri Walker (in Woolgar, 1988: 55) contends that Discourses (forms of thought and knowledge – for example, theories or political ideas) are reproduced within discourse (talk) at ‘the point of its articulation’. Therefore, when analysing any conversation (discourse), it should be possible to look for Discourse(s) *and* examine how words are assembled and used (Miller, 1994).

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

There have been numerous attempts to portray the form and organisation of social work and social work agencies as microcosms of particular types of society transmitted through Discourses. These shifts have variously been called ‘postmodern’ (McBeath and Webb, 1991; Parton, 1994a, 1994b), ‘risk’ (Parton, 1996; Webb, 2006) and ‘information’ (Parton, 2008) societies.

These analyses draw, in varying degrees, on poststructuralist ideas associated with Michel Foucault and others (as discussed elsewhere, such as in Chapter 4). Such analyses are usually very elegant, but, within these top-down frameworks, social workers can potentially be represented as the hapless victims of an unprecedented rate of social, or *Discursive*, change.

The inference that things happening at the level of individuals, families and groups can be properly explained by analysing changes in society itself is known as *downward reductionism*, which ‘rests on the a priori assumption that the lower levels of analysis point to phenomena which have no dynamics of their own, and can therefore be entirely explained in terms of regularities grasped at higher levels’ (Mouzelis, 1991: 138). Thus, the identification of ‘society’ as the causal agent tends to ascribe a uniformity and predetermined quality to social workers’

actions. They have very little ‘wobble room’ (Erickson, 2004: 20). It is worth examining an early Foucauldian study in some detail to illustrate this point.

## NOTES ON THE ‘FORM OF KNOWLEDGE’

Mark Philp (1979: 84) notes:

[B]eneath the apparent freedom in social work there is a form, an underlying constitution to everything that is said. This form creates both the possibility of a certain form of knowledge for social work and also limits social workers to it.

Working from the above premise, Philp’s influential paper (1979) advances a Foucauldian analysis of a specific ‘form of knowledge’ in social work. His analysis remains important and relevant because he identifies the relationship between social work and social science and suggests that the concepts of social science leak into social work but then take on a different form.

According to Philp, social workers eschew those parts of social scientific thought that attribute causation to factors *permanently* outside individual control. Remedial work must be seen to be achievable through the ministering of the social worker – that is to say, the social worker routinely ‘speaks for’ clients, whatever their misdemeanours, by invoking their essential subjectivity, except in those situations where the actions or characteristics of individuals have somehow served to eradicate their very humanity.

The strengths and weaknesses of Philp’s analysis represent two sides of the same coin. He places what is essentially a realist and humanist social work Discourse within its historical location and maps its boundaries with other Discourses. However, in so doing, he gives it ‘a totalizing hegemony’ (Law, 1994: 22) which is not adequate to explain the living contingencies of organisational life. For example, it ‘can be argued that the social worker, like the doctor, the lawyer, the policeman, judge and psychiatrist, operates *in the control of discourse*’ (Philp, 1979: 90, emphasis added).

Recently, Nigel Parton (2008) has returned to Philp’s analysis to argue that, driven by rapid technological changes, social work has moved away from a social or relational to an informational *modus operandi*.

While their work is powerfully argued, neither Philp nor Parton undertakes a detailed analysis of ordinary talk and, as a result, inevitably gloss over some of the contradictions and resistances in social workers’ talk. As Erickson (2004: 144) reminds us, ‘no matter how totalizing, or sacralizing the institutional setting within which face-to-face interaction occurs, there is always room for secondary adjustments through mutterings, grumblings and snickerings and their written equivalents in graffiti’. Fundamentally, these contributions, while having due regard for the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy and social theory (and, hence, for social actors as vehicles for the reproduction of vocabularies), retain a degree of structural determinism.

So, what happens if we concentrate on discourses with a little ‘d’ as they are produced in everyday talk?

## REDISCOVERING THE 'ACTOR'

As outlined in Chapter 17, in his seminal works Harold Garfinkel (e.g. 1967) argued that traditional sociology paid insufficient attention to the social actor as free, purposeful and reasoning and able to order the world through the continuous reaccomplishment of intersubjective understandings. The central assertion of Garfinkel's ethnomethodology is that members of society are equipped for practical reasoning, apparently qua members of society.

This signalled a break from structuralism and Parsonian functionalism. Garfinkel took the question 'how do subjects render their situations knowable?' and made it his problematic.

Conversation analysis (CA) grew from ethnomethodology's focus on the detail of what people actually do. The recognition that language was more than description and it was minutely sequentially organised to do complex social work led to a search for empirical methods to record and analyse talk. CA attends, *inter alia*, to the turns people take, the pauses in their talk and the ways new topics are introduced (see Sacks et al., 1974). CA uses detailed transcripts to represent as much of the real-time talk as possible, often using unconventional spellings to indicate regional accent. It records pauses, laughs, coughs, out breaths and non-lexical vocalisations (such as 'erm' or 'ahh') (see Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; West, 1996).

Its methods have facilitated the detailed analysis of particular types of encounters and been influential in DA. This has not always occurred without controversy, however – some of the fiercest methodological debates have taken place between conversation analysts and the wider discourse analytic academy.

Some exponents of CA argue that *all* 'order' must be produced anew *within* each encounter; if we cannot see it, observe it and capture it in a transcript, it is simply, for all practical purposes, irrelevant. Claims such as this led to high-profile published disagreements in the late 1990s between Emanuel Schegloff, one of the founders of CA, and the psychologists Michael Billig and Margaret Wetherell, who were interested in the analysis of discourse as a remedy for perceived individualistic, asocial deficiencies in cognitive psychology.

Schegloff (1997) took issue with some of the critical branches of DA, which, he argued, were in danger of imposing interpretations on the interaction by imposing analysts' categories at the expense of those of the 'members' (participants themselves). Thus, the analytic category 'gender' may impose meaning on an encounter that did not exist for the participants. An analyst may be prone to over-interpret an interruption by a man of a woman's turn of talk, failing to recognise that overlapping turns are part of the sequential flow and unfolding of ordinary talk.

In response, Billig (1999a, 1999b) advanced an argument that stressed the intrinsically argumentative and rhetorical nature of everyday talk. Wetherell (1998) acknowledged the potential for analysts' categories to distort meaning, but argued that it was, nevertheless, necessary to consider the invocation by members of available repertoires derived from wider Discourses. Others have argued that the 'unsaid', or the 'could have been said if circumstances had been different', may sometimes be extremely significant (McHoul, 1994), reflecting, as the ethnomethodologists would accept, different dominant contextual expectations (or 'background expectancies') and wider Discourses (contemporary morality and dominant knowledges, or sets of ideas that originate outside the encounter; Jayyusi, 1991).

Thus, it is often argued that CA is strong on the analysis of talk in sequence, but weak on the critical analysis of the power of certain phrases or forms of thought that predate the

encounter, as Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 81; see also Chapter 3) argues: “‘interpersonal’ relations are never, except in appearance, *individual to individual* relationships and . . . the truth of the interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction’. CA’s response to these alleged deficiencies has been largely shored up by (somewhat proprietorial) claims about the superiority and rigour of its methods and its focus on fine-grained analysis of turn-taking in talk-in-interaction (see Wooffitt, 2005: 159–85).

I have considerable sympathy for this methodological commitment on the grounds that I do not see social actors (or, for our purposes here, social workers) as trapped in an iron cage of Discourse. Yet, I am also persuaded by the arguments that we should be able to see, in the detail of what people actually say and do, what sorts of words and phrases appear to have an impact on the talk-in-interaction – what phrases *do* the social *work* in social work.

I concur with Robin Wooffitt (2005: 210) when he praises CA’s capacity to ‘offer an analysis of power relations, built upwards from real events, rather than an account deduced from theoretical arguments’. There are a number of studies, my own among them (such as S. White, 1998, 2002, 2003; see also Hall, 1997; Hall et al., 2006), that make use of analytic devices derived from CA to examine the artfulness of social workers’ talk and their use of storytelling and various forms of categorisation to accomplish the ‘social sorting’ (see Bowker and Star, 2000) that is arguably their business. Crucially, these studies show how interactions between social workers and other professionals or social workers and clients involve moral work (see Taylor and White, 2000). Depictions and accusations, blameworthiness and creditworthiness are made and managed in everyday encounters. The same is true of the notions of risk so central to the working of contemporary social work. It will be helpful to illustrate this point with some data.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The following brief exchange is taken from a transcript of a weekly social work allocation meeting in which new cases were assigned to social workers in a children and families team in the UK in the late 1990s. The speakers, who have been made anonymous, are the team leader (TL), family resource worker (FRW) and two social workers (SW1 and SW2). The transcript makes some use of notations adapted from CA (see end of chapter for a key to their meanings).

### Extract 1

TL: Right, moving on to pornographic videos, it makes a nice change, they are a family called (o.3) Thornton

FRW: Oh I don’t know those .h.h ((laughs)).

SW2: No I think you do know about pornographic videos and are pretending you *don’t* h.h ((laughs))

TL: Right, basically the long and short of it is the obscene publication police There’s a nine- and a seven-year-old child in the family, obscene publications were given a tip that this man, the children’s father, is distributing naughty videos. What is worrying is that when they



went to the house and looked at the videos they were all stored along with the Postman Pats [children's TV series], which is worrying. They are in with the children's family videos, which is very worryi=

SW2: They were in the lounge or?

TL: Yes in a box easily accessible with a number of catalogues containing sexually explicit pictures (0.7) erm you don't really need to know but they were nasty videos <right>Erm he's going to be formally interviewed and probably charged with it, but *he* said the children don't use the video recorder. The officer said that basically there was nothing to stop them and *I* don't know many nine-year-olds who don't switch on their family video I mean perso[nally=you what?]

SW2: [They know how to] work things better than us

TL: Well exactly. I just spoke with Peter Hampshire [sergeant, police child protection team] and they don't actually think there's a terrific lot to be gained from going in with a child *protection*, but what we need to do is ensure that this family *know* that this is obviously totally inappropriate very worrying and we will have to ring the children's school to check that they haven't got any concerns about the children . . .

SW1: =Don't we need to check with them first, seek their permission?

TL: I don't know, it's a grey area really.

SW1: I mean when you said we're not saying you've hit your child. We're saying it's inappropriate to make videos available and I was saying it is a child protection issue

TL: =YES

SW1: =so therefore I think we should make some enquiries *beforehand*

TL: OK yeah, that's fine OK. I'm just desperately trying to work positively these days at the moment, that's fine.

SW1: I mean if the school said the children had sexualized behaviour we'd be thinking ooooh, do you know what I mean?

TL: Yeah, I mean it's too late to ask parents' permission and if they complain, well=

SW1: =I mean there's a police investigation

TL: Yeah that's fine, just check school and NSP[CC].

The transcript comprises a number of carefully constructed case narratives, delivered in such a way that 'concern' and 'worry' – about child welfare – are powerfully conveyed. These are potent identity claims in child care social work and essential invocations for the team leader who is seeking to persuade a social worker to take the case. There are four utterances by the team leader of the words 'worry' or 'worrying' in this short extract. The stories are routinely interspersed with humour and semi-humorous (such as sarcastic) banter that could appear rather inappropriate in other circumstances. In the extract below, we can see an example of this (emphasis added):

TL: Right, moving on to pornographic videos, *it makes a nice change*, they are a family called (o.3) Thornton

FRW: Oh I don't know those. h.h ((laughs)).

SW2: No I think you do know about pornographic videos and are pretending you don't h.h ((laughs))

Such humorous interludes are not only a routine feature of case talk in meetings but also form part of office chatter in social work generally. Cases with a sexual component are a routine matter for child care social workers and here joking appears to facilitate the display of professional 'savvy' in relation to such cases.

There are numerous markers of deviance and opprobrium used by different speakers. For example:

We're saying it's inappropriate to make videos available and I was saying it is a child protection issue

Canny 'pull the other one' scepticism is displayed in that the parental account is quickly discredited by a commonsense proposition delivered in an ironic tone:

TL . . . I don't know many nine-year-olds who don't switch on their family video I mean perso[nally=you what?]

SW1: [They know how to] work things better than us

The specifically moral nature of social services' role (as distinct from that of the police) is defined as follows:

. . . what we need to do is ensure that this family *know* that this is obviously totally inappropriate and very worrying . . .

For most of this exchange, the members can be seen to narrate the case together, each reinforcing the 'concern' and 'worry' of the other. However, in the extract below, one of the social workers opposes the team leader's assertion that, as the children have not been 'hit', this is not a child protection investigation *as such*. In drawing on *competing* maxims of everyday professional judgement in order to make their account persuasive, the team leader and social worker position themselves on the 'commonsense dilemmatic' (Billig et al., 1988), underscoring the argumentative and contested nature of mundane reasoning:

SW1: I mean when you said we're not saying you've hit your child. We're saying it's inappropriate to make videos available and I was saying it is a child protection issue

TL: =YES

SW1: =so therefore I think we should make some enquiries *beforehand*

TL: OK yeah, that's fine OK. I'm just desperately trying to work positively these days at the moment, that's fine.

The social worker's utterance is powerful and is readily accepted by the team leader whose statement about trying to 'work positively these days' is a reference to the 'refocusing debate', that was at its height when New Labour came into power in 1997. This was essentially concerned with trying to 'rebalance' the relationship between child protection and family support and work in stronger partnerships with parents. The team leader's statement 'OK yeah, that's fine OK. I'm just desperately trying to work positively these days at the moment, that's fine' can be read as a self-exonerative statement in response to the gentle rebuke from the social worker. The team leader makes reference to the imperative to 'work positively' in order to justify what appears to be a minor breach of the commonsense, culturally shared commitment to protecting children, which, in this case, involves seeking information from the school without parental consent.

Andrew Pithouse and Paul Atkinson (1988) use the term 'ethno-poetics' to depict social workers' case talk as skilful oratory and recital, accomplished in the moment-by-moment unfolding interaction that is, as mentioned, the analytic orientation of CA. Yet, we can see that the poetics draw on more widely circulating cultural phenomena, such as those derived from the contemporary policy debates, as well as ideas about what is normal and deviant, appropriate and inappropriate, and what 'damages' children. Clearly, all these potential relevancies must be made relevant again in *this* encounter, by *these* actors, but their status as *candidate* topics predates this meeting. It is because cultures can act as sustaining media for routinised action that the concept of 'reflexivity' is important, which brings me to the final section of this chapter.

## PRACTISING REFLEXIVITY

I noted, at the beginning of this chapter, that, for some commentators, reflexivity is 'an ordinary, unremarkable and unavoidable feature of [any social] action' (Lynch, 2000a: 26; see also Chapter 17). Clearly, this is so – for example, we all self-consciously reflect on our performance in meetings. However, there are aspects of our social life that become so routinised that we don't see them. Vocabularies are hedged in by cultural practices and sometimes we need help to shake language up a little. DA can do just this as it provides devices to analyse talk as text and look at how persuasive accounts are assembled and ambiguous signs, symptoms and competing accounts are interpreted and transformed in professionals' talk. These kinds of studies can assist in the processes of critical reflection and reflexivity in professional practice as part of professional education, supervision and development (see Taylor and White, 2000; S. White, 2006; White and Stancombe, 2003).

The production of audio and video recordings and verbatim transcripts of talk in various settings has the effect of slowing down the action and makes it possible for practitioners to make audible or visible phenomena that would not be available to us in real-time analyses.

Professional reflexivity requires that practitioners begin listening to themselves more carefully, attending to their rhetoric of persuasion and their own constituting practices – that is, listening with a critical ear to their sense- and knowledge-making practices. If we are to develop the capacity of practitioners to evaluate whether or not they want to make changes to tacit aspects of their practice, we need techniques to help them make what is familiar strange. The

analysis of talk and text can assist practitioners in the important business of being serious and playful at the same time so that they can rediscover the freedom of ‘not knowing’.

## Study questions

- 1 Make a short audio recording of a professional discussion about a case. Students might consider recording themselves and their colleagues discussing a case study. The following are some suggestions for analysing transcripts.
  - What aspects of the case are constructed as ‘fact’? Look for phrases such as ‘it is’, ‘he confirmed’.
  - What aspects of the case are constructed as questionable? Look for phrases such as ‘we think’ and reported speech, such as ‘they claimed’ and ‘they maintained’.
  - Try to generate alternative readings of the case.
  - Can you find instances of moral judgement?
  - Do the individuals concerned ‘show their working’ or is the judgement taken for granted?
- 2 Think about the stories you and your colleagues share about other professionals and the way they work. You could make an audio recording of a team meeting where these issues are discussed. What do these stories convey about the contribution you and you colleagues make to practice? Pay attention to the use of humour. What work is it doing? Students might think about the tales they tell each other about lecturing staff or pay particular attention to gossip in the group. What does it say about taken-for-granted norms and ideas?
- 3 Documents carry cultural assumptions and dominant vocabularies through time and space. Examine one of your recently completed sets of case notes, day-to-day records or completed forms. Look at how you have constructed ‘facts’ – that is, presented certainties. Who are the heroes, heroines and villains in your version of events? From what you remember, what is obscured in your record? What lines of enquiry are left unexplored? Students might think about their essays. Were there any arguments you avoided because your lecturer might disapprove? Did you provide arguments for which you felt little need to supply supporting evidence? An example I often encounter when teaching social workers is that they will criticise the ‘medical model’ without offering any supporting arguments. What does this say about the dominance of certain ideas within social work?

## GLOSSARY

**Conversation analysis (CA)** The analysis of detailed transcripts noting the sequential features of talk, such as the turns people take, the pauses, how topics are introduced and so forth.

**Discourse** Discourse with a capital ‘D’ refers to ways of thinking or bodies of knowledge about particular phenomena, such as gender, race, the family or mental health, and how they reflect particular historical, political or moral positions. Discourse with a lower case ‘d’ refers to language used in talk or text, such as case notes or agency reports.

**Discourse analysis (DA)** A collection of research methods and analytical tools from diverse theoretical and disciplinary traditions that have a preference for ‘naturally occurring’ data, which are usually captured on audio recordings and transcribed using coding devices to retain as much detail as possible. Most important is the context in which the talk takes place or the audience for whom the accounts were written.

**Foucauldian discourse analysis** From the work of Michel Foucault, this is concerned with how ideas come to affect the way in which we see and understand phenomena. It focuses on ‘knowledges’ or ‘discourses’ (see above) about particular phenomena and how these reflect particular historical, political or moral positions.

**Hegemonic discourse** ‘Hegemony’ derives from the Ancient Greek *hegeisthai* (to lead) and, with its adjective ‘hegemonic’, has been appropriated by social scientists, associated particularly with Antonio Gramsci. Hegemonic discourses are ideas and words propagated through institutions and processes that serve the interests of dominant groups.

**Rhetoric and rhetorical** Refers to powerful words and phrases deployed in talk and text.

**Tacit knowledge** Michael Polanyi’s (1967) term for taken-for-granted knowledge. Tacit knowledge allows us to perform certain activities without consciously thinking about them.

## FURTHER READING

For a critical review of the concept of reflexivity, see D’Cruz et al. (2007).

For a general introduction to discourse analysis and its role in promoting reflexivity in social work practice, see Taylor and White (2000).

To help students to understand the role of certainty and uncertainty in social work, see S. White (2009).

For a more detailed analysis of talk and text in social work, see Hall et al.’s *Language Practices in Social Work: Categorization and accountability in child welfare* (2006).

For further detail on understanding everyday decision-making in social work, see Broadhurst et al. (2010).

### Transcription symbols

[ ]	overlapping talk
( )	inaudible and, hence, untranscribed passage
(...)	missing text as result of editing
(talk)	uncertainty about the transcription
((laughs))	contextual information not transcribed as actual sounds heard
(o.8)	pauses timed in tenths of second
(.)	audible, but very short pause
<i>talk</i> or <u>talk</u>	italics or underlining indicate emphasis
tal-	abrupt end to utterance
<slow>	noticeable slowing of tempo of talk
=	latching of utterances
.h	laughter (or, without a full stop, an outbreath).

# 19

## EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

DEBBIE PLATH

### INTRODUCTION

Pressure within health and social services to provide evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of interventions has led to the adoption of evidence-based practice approaches in a range of disciplines, including social work. Informed by several theoretical perspectives, some of which are considered in this chapter, evidence-based practice has been supported, resisted and debated in social work (Gray et al., 2009). First, however, the nature, assumptions and principles associated with evidence-based practice are presented, along with some of the debates surrounding its application to social work.

### KEY IDEAS

With its origins in medicine, evidence-based practice has been defined as ‘the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions’ (Sackett et al., 1997: 71). From a social work perspective, ‘it indicates an approach to decision-making which is transparent, accountable and based on the careful consideration of the most compelling evidence we have about the effects of particular interventions on the welfare of individuals, groups and communities’ (Macdonald, 2001: xviii). Arguments in favour of adopting an evidence-based approach in social work include an ethical responsibility to provide the most beneficial services to clients (Ainsworth and Hansen, 2005; Cheetham, 1992; Macdonald, 2001; Sheldon, 1986), enhancing the credibility of the profession (Cheetham, 1992; Gambrill, 1999; Gibbs and Gambrill, 2002; Macdonald, 2001; Macdonald and Sheldon, 1992; Sheldon, 1986; Witkin, 1991, 1996), increasing the body of practical, reliable information on interventions (Hausman, 2002; Newman, 2002; Newman and McNeish, 2005), promoting a critical

approach to practice (Bilsker and Goldner, 2000; Macdonald, 2001) and supporting the development of a research culture (Cheetham, 1992, 1997; Mullen, 2002; Webb, 2002).

These arguments present evidence-based practice as an appealing prospect for advancing the quality, outcomes and status of social work. It is, however, interpreted in a range of different ways in social work (Dore, 2006; Gambrell, 2006; Rubin and Parrish, 2007; Smith, 2004a). Issues of contention arise when the assumptions and principles of evidence-based practice are examined from different theoretical perspectives. The basic tenet of evidence-based practice is that social workers and policy-makers use *evidence* regarding the *effectiveness* of *interventions* to inform practice decisions.

## ASSUMPTIONS AND PRINCIPLES

Here are the basic assumptions and principles that guide evidence-based practice:

*Assumption 1: Evidence can be found to inform practice*

Principle 1: Find the evidence

*Assumption 2: Certain evidence is stronger or better than other evidence*

Principle 2: Critically appraise the evidence

*Assumption 3: Effectiveness of interventions can be established*

Principle 3: Identify the most effective intervention

*Assumption 4: Interventions can be replicated*

Principle 4: Implement the most effective intervention

These assumptions and principles have been scrutinised and debated in social work to such an extent that implementing evidence-based practice is now recognised as complex, contested and open to interpretation, as the following analysis shows.

### ASSUMPTION 1: EVIDENCE CAN BE FOUND TO INFORM PRACTICE

Evidence-based practice has prompted the development of a number of organisations devoted to locating, reviewing and disseminating research findings to inform practice. The resources for identifying evidence for practice, along with the relative ease with which evidence can be disseminated to practitioners via the Internet, has facilitated access to research evidence via online databases where practitioners can locate systematic reviews of research relevant to their practice. The resources to conduct, then review and disseminate research are much less readily available.

Good-quality research is costly, time-consuming and resource-intensive, as is the process of reviewing and disseminating current, comprehensive and useful research. Contexts, issues

and interventions in social work are dynamic and so keeping up to date with new research in the face of limited resources leads to delays in making research findings available to practitioners (Warburton and Black, 2002). Further, given the enormous variation in social work interventions, contexts and client groups, it is unrealistic to expect that relevant evidence will be available and, even when research findings are available, they might not apply to the diverse practice contexts encountered by social workers. The availability of relevant research studies is limited and there is a need for more and better quality social work research (Gibbs and Gambrill, 2002; Gilgun, 2005; Marsh and Fisher, 2008; Mullen et al., 2005; Scott, 2002; Shaw, 2003). While certain types of practice may become well researched and abundant evidence made available, this will not be the case for new and innovative practices or the types of interventions that respond in multidimensional ways to emergent issues in practice.

Alongside efforts to increase investment in high-quality research, there needs to be acceptance that evidence for practice will not be full and complete. The lack of evidence for a particular practice may not be due to the inadequacy of the practice, but rather the insufficient resources for research, the inadequacy of evaluation methods or the uncertainty as to the nature of the social intervention.

For all these reasons, it is only reasonable to expect practitioners to produce evidence for their interventions if appropriate research is achievable and available. Even then, many social workers face challenges in accessing and using research evidence when they lack the skills and the demands of daily practice provide very little time to do so (Bellamy et al., 2006, 2008; Reid, 2001; Webb, 2001, 2002). Practice research databases can be difficult to negotiate and incomplete (Gilgun, 2005; Newman, 2002). Locating relevant research can be frustrating for social workers when they discover that there is limited or inconclusive research evidence on the particular issue they are facing (Gilgun, 2005). In conclusion, the current state of research in social work falls far short of the requirements of an evidence-based practice culture (Macdonald, 2001; Thyer, 2002).

## ASSUMPTION 2: CERTAIN EVIDENCE IS STRONGER OR BETTER THAN OTHER EVIDENCE

The critical appraisal of research is a central principle of evidence-based practice. Research findings cannot be taken at face value – the quality of the research methodology and the applicability of the findings to specific practice settings need to be critically reviewed.

In appraising the quality of evidence, social work has been strongly influenced by the positivist, scientific approach prevalent in medicine. This approach advocates a hierarchy of evidence with systematic reviews of randomised controlled trial studies as the gold standard and the only source of definitive answers about the impact and effectiveness of interventions (Gambrill, 1999; Gibbs and Gambrill, 2002; Howard et al., 2003; Macdonald, 2001; Macdonald and Sheldon, 1992; Mullen, 2002; Reid, 2001; Sheldon, 1986; Thyer, 2002; Upshur et al., 2001). From a positivist scientific perspective the methods of qualitative enquiry are at the bottom of the hierarchy, offering supportive insights rather than definitive answers. While evidence-based medicine has been influential, there is much debate, both



within social work and the health disciplines, about what constitutes evidence (Gilgun, 2005; Gray et al., 2009; Morse, 2006; Rubin and Parrish, 2007).

Debates about the applicability of the scientific–positivist approach to social work practice began long before the emergence of evidence-based practice. Due to its association with positivism, evidence-based practice is rejected by some social workers with a preference for interpretive research approaches. The scientific model promoted by the positivist approach has long been criticised in social work for reducing complex issues to limited, quantifiable variables and, consequently, providing findings that are of little use in practice (Epstein, 1996; Shaw, 1999a; Witkin, 1991, 1996). While the positivist approach to evidence-based practice remains strong, concern with the limitations of positivism has prompted several authors to develop a wider understanding of evidence that reflects the particular issues and requirements of social work practice (Dore, 2006; Gilgun, 2005; Gray et al., 2009; Hollway, 2001; Plath, 2006; Shaw, 1999a; Smith, 2004b; Webb, 2001, 2002). This understanding of the nature of evidence is still evolving in social work and may incorporate qualitative information, client values and what has broadly been referred to as ‘practice wisdom’ or ‘professional judgement’.

Pawson (2006) provides a useful way of conceptualising research evidence from a critical realist perspective. He proposes that research should not be incorporated into practice using positivist techniques and standards of evidence, but, rather, should be synthesised in a way that is both theory-driven and theory-building. The purpose of reviewing research is, thus, to consider and question the extent to which theories facilitate understanding of the complex context of service provision. For social work, this entails the synthesis of a range of research and information, with particular attention to the applicability and usefulness of findings informing practice decisions. Research that utilises a range of methods and integrates both qualitative and quantitative information on intervention outcomes and processes can be reviewed critically and integrated to inform future practice.

While some social work research using experimental designs *will* produce definitive evidence, generally social workers need to gather a range of evidence from different sources to guide and support practice judgements (Colgan and Cheers, 2002; Plath, 2006; Shaw and Shaw, 1997b; Webb, 2001). Supportive evidence comes from ethical frameworks, organisational and policy guidelines, critical reflection, prior experience, client feedback and mixed-method research. All evidence is likely to be inadequate in some way, so it is up to the individual social worker or policy-maker to gather, synthesise and critique it as it relates to the particular context when making practice decisions. Another challenge is reaching a common understanding of evidence when working in multidisciplinary areas of practice (Gould and Kendall, 2007).

### ASSUMPTION 3: EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERVENTIONS CAN BE ESTABLISHED

Evidence-based practice is sometimes reduced to notions of ‘what works’ or ‘what works best’. While it may be reassuring for social workers, managers and policy-makers to have answers to such questions, generally they are too simplistic for the types of practice dilemmas encountered in social work. It is more useful to ask ‘What aspects worked well?’, ‘What aspects

didn't work well?', 'Why?', 'For whom?', 'From whose perspective?', 'What were the relevant factors impacting on the situation?' and 'In what context did or didn't it work?'

It is easiest to determine the effectiveness of interventions in relation to specific and clearly defined objectives, such as achieving, changing or eliminating a behaviour, attitude or emotion (Gueron, 2007). Effective social work practice, however, also involves the application of ethical principles, such as promoting social justice and self-determination. While fundamental to social work practice, these principles are interpreted according to context and values. As such, they cannot be measured and so evaluation of their effectiveness is open to interpretation.

Social workers are concerned with the range of factors and conditions that impact the quality of life and well-being of clients and communities. Generally, multiple outcomes can emerge from social work interventions tailored in response to presenting issues. Just how effective these outcomes are depends on the values and perspective of the stakeholder making the assessment. For the client, it may be an intangible sense of feeling more positive about life. For the social worker it may be the degree to which goals established at the start of the intervention have been met. For the organisation, effectiveness may be reflected in the proportion of clients returning to it with the same issue.

Thus, evaluation of the effectiveness of social work is a complex, interpretive and value-based process. What constitutes effectiveness is variable, open to interpretation and often political, with powerful voices controlling the effectiveness agenda. An organisation preoccupied with costs and efficiency may define effectiveness in those terms (Dore, 2006). Practitioners with vested interests in the use of particular interventions might define effectiveness at the outset in a way that anticipates the types of outcomes they are likely to achieve. The experiences of clients can be ignored when the interests of more powerful voices determine the effectiveness agenda (Gibbs, 2001). When effectiveness is viewed in this kind of interpretive light, the gathering of evidence should also entail critical analysis of the context and background to the research. With adequate information and appropriate critical reflection, social workers and policy-makers will be in a better position to make informed judgements about the likely impacts of interventions.

Some, however, do not agree that effectiveness is open to interpretation and argue that the assessment of effectiveness in social work should, as far as possible, be a technical, theory-free process where the strongest evidence is used to identify the best interventions (Howard et al., 2003). There remains a tension in the literature between the theory-embedded (interpretive) and theory-free (technical) approaches to the evaluation of effectiveness.

## ASSUMPTION 4: INTERVENTIONS CAN BE REPLICATED

Evidence-based practice relies on reproducing interventions that have been found to be effective. This is possible when interventions are standardised and context-independent. Efforts have been made in some schools of social work to teach students standard, manualised, empirically supported interventions (ESI) that can be replicated in different contexts (Howard et al., 2003; Rubin and Parrish, 2007).

Much social work practice, however, does not entail discrete, standardised interventions. Social workers assess complex, contextual factors at the individual, group, organisational

and societal levels before interventions are planned and adjusted to suit presenting issues. The goals and processes of social work interventions emerge through a collaborative relationship between social worker and client, group or community. Ethical principles, organisational requirements and theoretical frameworks guide this process. The practitioner's knowledge, experience, skill and critical reflection determine the most appropriate response to a presenting issue in practice.

Concerns have been expressed that evidence-based practice ignores the importance of the assessment, interaction and critically reflective processes by privileging standardised, treatment-orientated interventions suited to measurable outcome evaluation (Hausman, 2002; Hollway, 2001; Scott, 2002; Webb, 2001). If social work is to continue to entail innovative, reflective responses to complex social and personal issues, then an overemphasis on discrete, standardised interventions should be avoided. While the replication of well-evidenced standard interventions is possible in some settings, this need not be at the expense of using ethical, theoretical and critical practice principles to guide responses to the unique, multidimensional situations encountered daily in most social work practice. These situations require multifaceted responses for which standardised treatment evaluations are generally inappropriate. The implementation of evidence-based practice in social work entails more than replicating standardised interventions. It involves a critically reflective decision-making process, informed by a range of relevant research and other evidence.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

While the language of evidence has made an impact on social work over the past decade, the issues and debates surrounding the demonstration of effectiveness are not new. Jill Gibbons (2001) traces the history of effectiveness research in social work back to the 1890s. Attention was focused on effectiveness research when Joel Fischer (1973) noted the paucity of research demonstrating that casework interventions had any positive effects for clients. These findings triggered ongoing division and debate between those advocating a rigorous application of experimental research designs and proponents of qualitative or interpretive evaluation of the nature and impact of social work (Cheetham 1992, 1997; Gibbons, 2001; Reid, 2001; Sheldon, 1986; Witkin, 1991). The evidence-based practice movement, however, has shifted debates beyond evaluation and out of the academic realm into the practice arena, where social workers are expected by management and funding bodies to provide evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of their practice. Evidence-based practice has been embraced not only as a basis for clinical decision-making but also as a principle for organisational policy-making and community intervention. While the clinical decision-making model of evidence-based practice requires practitioners to gather and critically review evidence in their daily practice, there is also a role for the organisations in which social workers practise to provide leadership, resources and technical assistance that facilitates access to research findings and the translation of these to practice (Mullen et al., 2005, 2008).

The growing interest in evidence-based decision-making by policy-makers, human service managers and funding providers is reflected in the growing body of literature on the implementation of evidence-based practice, journals such as *Evidence and Policy* and online resources such as the Evidence Network. Indeed, funding bodies and policy-makers are now expected

to make decisions about service implementation on the basis of evidence about the effectiveness of interventions in addressing social issues.

A tension for social work practice is that an evidence-based approach to policy-making has the potential to take decisions away from frontline practitioners, who become the implementers of 'evidence-based policies and interventions' rather than critical appraisers of evidence in making decisions about appropriate practice responses. Edward Mullen et al. (2008) distinguish between top-down (organisational) and bottom-up (individual) approaches to evidence-based practice, showing that it impacts on social workers engaged at all levels of intervention, including policy, management, community and clinical practice.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

### THEORETICAL APPLICATIONS

Evidence-based practice can be approached from a number of theoretical perspectives, reflecting different values, principles and interpretations. Four theoretical perspectives on evidence-based practice are discussed below – *positivist*, *pragmatic*, *political* and *postmodern*.

These perspectives are presented as ideal types and, as such, particular authors or practitioners may not sit entirely within one theoretical perspective. A delineation of the different perspectives is helpful, however, in making sense of the varying ways in which evidence-based practice may be approached, both in the literature and in practice.

#### *Positivist*

The positivist approach is strongly influenced by the scientific paradigm and the physical sciences. The impact of social work is assessed in terms of measurable outcomes. The strongest evidence is sought to provide definitive answers about the most effective interventions. The emphasis is on identifying and facilitating 'gold standard' experimental research – that is, large, randomised, controlled trials that examine the outcomes of standardised interventions as the only type of research that can provide definitive answers about the effectiveness of interventions. Other types of evidence are used to enrich or support these research findings. Systematic reviews provide meta-analyses of research experiments as the strongest form of evidence for practice.

Social work authors who favour a positivist approach to evidence-based practice include Geraldine Macdonald (2001), Brian Sheldon (2001), Bruce Thyer (2002), Matthew Howard et al. (2003) and Aaron McNeece and Bruce Thyer (2004).

#### *Pragmatic*

The pragmatic approach is strongly influenced by the realities of professional social work practice. The emphasis is on identifying useful evidence for social workers needing to make informed judgements in practice.

Research and information from a range of sources are gathered and critically evaluated in terms of their strengths, limitations and applicability to the practice setting. There is recognition that the findings of randomised, controlled trials are context-dependent and not necessarily relevant to the particular practice context and issues being faced. Thus, the relevance of the research is of greater importance than the particular methodological approach used. Research must be accessible and integrated with practice. Practitioners require skills in synthesising and critically evaluating research and other information gleaned from practice in order to make informed judgements, rather than definitive claims about their own practice.

A pragmatic approach to evidence-based practice is evident in the work of Ian Shaw (1999a, 2003), Tony Newman and Di McNeish (2005), Debbie Plath (2006) and David Smith (2004b).

### *Political*

A political approach recognises that there are differences in the power and influence of groups in society. As with all social life, the processes involved in gathering and presenting evidence for particular interventions reflect these power differences. Political decisions will affect the funding of research, the particular interventions evaluated, the research methods employed, access to research findings, the 'social issues' identified, how 'effectiveness' is defined and the value given to different types of evidence.

Practitioners engage in evidence-based practice when they use evidence strategically to obtain resources and advance their own and their clients' causes as well as those of their profession and employing organisations. A political analysis also recognises that the voices of less powerful groups, such as service users, are often ignored in debates about evidence and consequently advocate for consumer-led research.

Some authors who have integrated a political analysis in writing about evidence-based practice are Ian Dore (2006), Janice Morse (2006), Ray Pawson (2006) and Debbie Plath (2006).

### *Postmodern*

A postmodern approach asserts that the social world is open to interpretation and meaning is created through the use of language and discourse. This approach does not fit naturally with the evidence-based practice movement's emphasis on effective outcomes. A postmodern influence is nonetheless evident in writing on evidence-based practice that acknowledges the role of interpretation and meaning in identifying and examining evidence (Shaw, 1999a, 2003; Smith, 2004b; Webb, 2002).

A postmodern perspective can assist in understanding how the language of evidence is used to support the status of the social work profession and the position of particular interventions in the practice of social work. From a postmodern perspective, 'intervention', 'success', 'effectiveness' and 'best evidence' are not objective or measurable but open to interpretation. The meanings of these terms are established through discourse among those engaged in social work.

Table 19.1 provides a summary of these theoretical perspectives in terms of the type of evidence sought, the processes employed to gather and use evidence, and the relationship between research and practice.

**Table 19.1** Four theoretical influences on evidence-based practice

Positivist	Pragmatic	Political	Postmodern
<b>Type of evidence sought</b>			
<i>Strong evidence:</i> Definitive answers about effectiveness	<i>Useful evidence:</i> Relevant information to assist practice decision-making	<i>Influential evidence:</i> Information that can be used strategically to obtain resources and further causes	<i>Evidence as discourse:</i> Information used to enhance particular meanings and interpretations of practice and its impact
<b>Processes employed</b>			
Experimental designs	Research synthesis – range of methods	Strategically negotiated evidence in contested domains	Discourse to establish common meaning and interpretation of experiences in the profession, organisations, and other social groupings
Systematic reviews of literature and meta-analyses	Critical reflection on limitations and applicability of research to practice	Advocacy and lobbying	
<b>Relationship between research and practice</b>			
Research directs practice	Symbiotic relationship between research and practice	Research is a tool to achieve professional practice goals	Research and practice both contribute to enhancing meaning and status of social work

## PRACTICE APPLICATIONS

The following case example is used to illustrate how each of the theoretical perspectives outlined above might guide social workers when responding to an issue encountered in practice.

**The issue:** The Sunshine Community Centre provides individual and group programmes for parents and children. Faced with a growing waiting list, management has requested that the social workers examine their practices and identify evidence-based strategies to address this issue.

**Positivist social worker 1:** Using several Internet databases, the social worker engages in a thorough review of the literature on parenting programmes, focusing particularly on systematic reviews of randomised, controlled trials that examine the effectiveness of standardised interventions. Based on a systematic review of international research, a recommendation is made that the Sunshine Community Centre focus its resources on the provision of the parenting programme that has been evaluated in a number of settings and found to achieve effective outcomes for clients.

**Pragmatic social worker 2:** This social worker talks with colleagues in other organisations about ideas for dealing with growing waiting lists and identifies single session and group

programmes as interventions that could provide services to clients more efficiently. Using an Internet practice research database, the social worker finds a number of articles on the implementation of these strategies. She critically reviews them and finds a few that are applicable to the current context. It appears that single session interventions have been useful in reducing waiting lists in a number of settings while also offering clients a satisfactory service. A trial period and internal evaluation process are recommended to management while continuing to gather evidence from a variety of sources.

*Political social worker 3:* This skilled narrative therapist is a member of the Narrative Social Workers group. In the social worker's professional experience, the effectiveness of narrative work with particular groups of disadvantaged clients has been demonstrated through extensive clinical observation. Armed with a number of illustrative case studies and a convincingly argued academic article, the social worker meets with management to explain the nature of the intervention and how effective it can be in practice. A recommendation for additional ongoing resources for this work is made and followed up with a letter of support from the Narrative Social Workers group.

*Postmodern social worker 4:* This social worker is not strongly committed to any particular intervention, believing that, through discussions, a way forward will emerge. Sceptical about whether the effectiveness of practice can really be determined by research, the social worker prefers to focus on experiences and the meanings derived from interventions. Through discussions about the issues and possible strategies, the social work group will strengthen their common understanding of the nature and role of their work. This social worker does not make a recommendation to management.

Social work literature on evidence-based practice is replete with tensions between differing ideological stances. Despite these differences, the focus on evidence-based practice has resulted in a heightened awareness of the role that research can play in informing social work practice. Evidence-based practice is influencing social workers to seek out and use research findings that both question and justify their practices. The literature and debates surrounding evidence-based practice have raised awareness about the importance of critically questioning standard practices and the impact of interventions. Debates about the nature of evidence that is appropriate for social work and the limitations of an evidence-based approach continue. Such debates have strengthened the profession by producing a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of research and evidence needed to guide and inform social work practice.

Regardless of how broadly 'research' is defined, research evidence is a necessary, but insufficient, requirement for quality social work practice. There is wide recognition, even among those who support the scientific paradigm for evidence most strongly, that practitioners' skills and expertise determine the implementation of effective interventions. For social work practice to be effective, therefore, an evidence-based approach should be combined with a strong ethical and moral framework (Gambrill, 2006; Gray and McDonald, 2006), a client-centred approach (Gilgun, 2005), theoretical analysis, critical reflection and questioning (Fook, 2004; Gambrill, 2006; Gilgun, 2005; Plath, 2006) and an innovative, creative approach to practice (Pollio, 2006). For practice to be evidence-based, social workers require skills in the critical appraisal and synthesis of research and the ability to usefully apply findings to make decisions about future practice.

Alongside the skills and capacities of individual social workers, the implementation of evidence-based practice approaches relies upon supportive structures and resources at the

organisational level. Mullen et al. (2005) argue that, despite the potential of an evidence-based approach in social work, it is rarely seen in agency practice due to a range of conceptual and logistical challenges. The dissemination of research findings is unlikely to lead to changes in practice unless there is cultural change within organisations supported by resources and strategies to assist the translation of research into practice.

## Study questions

- 1 Describe your understanding of evidence-based practice. How does this relate to the four theoretical perspectives described in this chapter? What part does evidence-based practice play in the overall quality of social work practice?
- 2 What are the benefits of adopting an evidence-based practice approach? What are the challenges for social work practitioners, managers, funding bodies and policy-makers?
- 3 Choose a social work practice or policy question that you have encountered. What sources of evidence could be drawn on to inform practice in relation to this question? Use the web-based practice research databases given in the select bibliography at the end of this chapter to locate research that could inform your practice question.

## GLOSSARY

**Critical reflection** The process of analysing one's own practice in the context of personal history, values, prejudices and knowledge, and understanding social oppression.

**Experimental design** Research method that looks for causes and impacts by varying one or more independent variable. A true experiment entails random allocation to groups, whereas a quasi-experimental design does not.

**Interpretive approach** An explanation and understanding of social phenomena are regarded as being shaped by the meanings and perspectives of individuals or groups.

**Intervention** A purposeful activity undertaken by a social worker with, or on behalf of, an individual client, couple, family, group or community.

**Political** Concerned with the nature and processes of power and influence.

**Positivist approach** The social world, like the physical world, is regarded as real and tangible. As such, an understanding and explanation of social phenomena are sought by systematic observation and measurement.

**Pragmatic approach** Concerned with practical consequences and outcomes; accounting for the range of contextual factors that impact on a situation.

**Scientific** The systematic study of patterns and general laws through deduction and inference based on observations and measurements.



## FURTHER READING

Several useful texts on evidence-based social work are Gray et al. (2009), Gambrill (2006), Pawson (2006) and Smith (2004b). Also helpful and informative are the following web-based resources on evidence-based practice:

- The Cochrane collaboration: [www.cochrane.org](http://www.cochrane.org)
- The Campbell collaboration: [www.campbellcollaboration.org](http://www.campbellcollaboration.org)
- The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPICentre): [eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms](http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms)
- Evidence Network, Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice: [www.evidencenetwork.org](http://www.evidencenetwork.org)
- Research in Practice: [www.rip.org.uk](http://www.rip.org.uk)
- Research in Practice for Adults: [www.ripfa.org.uk](http://www.ripfa.org.uk)
- Social Care Institute for Excellence: [www.scie.org.uk](http://www.scie.org.uk)
- Social Care Online: [www.sciesocialcareonline.org.uk](http://www.sciesocialcareonline.org.uk)

# 20

## WAYS OF KNOWING

IAN SHAW

### INTRODUCTION

My aim in this final chapter is to help readers gain competence – and confidence – in asking tricky questions about knowledge for social work practice and research. Knowing how and when to ask the right questions and gain an appropriate disposition towards social work knowledge are hard won and more easily lost. Once lost, there is a danger of wrenching the ‘doing’ apart from the ‘knowing’ so that no one recognises the importance of the question, ‘How do I know when I have got it right?’ Much of this book will be more readily understood and assessed if we undertake some preliminary ground clearing.

I am not a philosopher and would have little plausibility were I to claim expertise in philosophical work on knowledge and reality. Perhaps I should have declined the invitation to write. I don’t know. As philosophers might remind us, though, ‘I don’t know’ may be an acknowledgement of ignorance but it can also be a philosophical position.

Thinking about ways of knowing in social work takes us immediately to epistemology<sup>1</sup> – that branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge, its origin and nature, compared with, for example, ‘belief’ or ‘opinion’:

Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, is driven by two main questions: ‘What is knowledge?’ and ‘What can we know?’ If we think we can know something, as nearly everyone does, then a third main question arises: ‘How do we know what we do know?’ (Greco, 2007 [1998])

The three questions are closely related as it is unlikely that someone will address one of them without addressing the others or, at least, assuming something about the others.

The first part of this chapter picks up the questions of what knowledge is and how we know. The second moves on to consider how the social work community has responded to questions of how we can know what we know and, in particular, asks if it makes helpful sense to think

about social work knowledge as socially constructed. I conclude with a brief reflection on scepticism and advocate that a moderate Socratic scepticism is essential for social work knowledge based on evidence, understanding and justice. I refer quite frequently to arguments about evidence-based practice in social work (see Chapter 19). However, this chapter is not meant to smuggle in either a critique or defence of evidence-based practice (see I. Shaw, 2006), but exploring the nature of a strong version of evidence-based practice is a helpful way of making some of the issues stand out.

## KEY IDEAS

Requirements for the accreditation of social work training programmes have much to say regarding knowledge. Skills for Care for social work programmes in England, for example, include the requirement that:

In your specific area of practice, you must understand, critically analyse, evaluate and apply the following knowledge:

- 1 The legal, social, economic and ecological context of social work practice.
- 2 The context of social work practice for this area.
- 3 Values and ethics.
- 4 Social work theories, models and methods for working with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities. (Topss UK, 2004)

Each element is spelt out in detail. The relevant point for our purposes is that there are different kinds of knowledge and understanding in this list. To understand and apply social work theories or the legal context of work in a given area of practice is not the same as to understand and apply values or methods of working. To express this differently, knowing that something is the case is not the same as knowing *how* to do something.

Furthermore, knowledge clearly entails more than being right. Take the following simple hypothetical example from social work practice. You are convinced that a task-centred intervention will prove effective in applying a cognitive-behavioural intervention with a young person who has serious school refusal problems. Let us suppose that there is research evidence somewhere – but unbeknown to you – that yields plausible evidence that your belief is correct. Does your correct belief count as knowledge? While hypothetical, it seems likely that this scenario may be quite common in social work practice.

The classic answer from Socrates is that ‘someone who can’t give and receive an account of something isn’t knowledgeable about that thing’ (Plato, *Theaetetus*).<sup>2</sup> I have knowledge about something if I believe it, my belief is justified and it is true. According to this reading, knowledge is justified true belief.

What is entailed in justifying or giving a good enough account of something is not straightforward. Perhaps we should say that the person with knowledge believes something in a good way – perhaps as an act of intellectual virtue – whereas the person with mere opinion assents

to the merits of task-centred intervention in a way that lacks intellectual merit. What exactly counts as a good way of believing, though, is not easy to agree on.

Let us take a different example to illustrate this difficulty. There has been much – welcome – attention given to diverse arguments for reflective learning and practice in social work (such as Fook, 1996; Gould and Taylor, 1996; Martyn, 2000; Schön, 1983). While Schön (1983) has little to say explicitly about social work, his distinction between reflecting *on* action and reflecting *in* action has entered the vocabulary of social work students. We can call this a strong version of ‘internalist’ approaches to giving an account of a belief. From this perspective, we assume that we can find out what we are justified in believing primarily by a process of learned reflection, that this process is internal to our mind, at least to a significant degree, and it is a process we can consciously access.

## TACIT KNOWLEDGE

None of these assumptions is without controversy. Taking the third assumption, *can* we always access our reflective processes?

Commonsense knowledge, for example, is often tacit knowledge. When we think of tacit knowledge in professional work, it can be defined as knowledge or abilities that can be passed between experts by personal contact, but cannot be or has not been set out or passed on in formal statements, diagrams, verbal descriptions or instructions for action (Collins, 2000). There are actions, judgements and recognitions that we accomplish spontaneously. We do not have to think about them prior to performance. We are often unaware of having learned to do them. While we may remember once being aware of the understanding necessary for the action, we typically are now unable to describe the knowing that our actions reveal. It has become ‘thinking as usual’ knowledge: ‘Tacit knowledge exists in that time when action is taken that is not understood, when understanding is offered without articulation, and when conclusions are apprehended without an argument’ (Altheide and Johnson, 1994: 492).

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with an implicit, unarticulated theory: ‘Reality is what we choose not to question at the moment . . . [and] the better shape science is in, the more the positions are implicit’ (Becker, 1993: 220). Equally, ‘When we watch new scientific consensus emerging we are watching the growth of new bodies of tacit knowledge’ (Collins, 2001: 111).

Tacit knowledge is not limited to what goes on in an individual’s mind. For example, sociologists of knowledge in practice have explored ways that practice is a social form: ‘People in different social groups take different things to be certain knowledge but they are not aware of the social basis of their certainties’ (Collins, 2001: 110).<sup>3</sup>

A consequence of prioritising reflective practice in social work ought to be that different kinds of tacit knowledge will be recognised. The significance of personal contact and the sharing of practical knowledge between social work practitioners will be brought out and sources of trust and mistrust between social workers made clear. This is a big agenda and one that social work has only begun to tackle.

Is tacitness inherent in our knowledge? Is it a part of how we are or is it a ‘God of the gaps’ kind of explanation, where we might conceivably be able to render our knowledge explicit? This question ‘matters’ when we are engaged in identifying the different forms of knowledge

that are part of professional work. For example, in a helpful example of such an attempt in the case of social care knowledge, Ray Pawson et al. (2003) devoted effort to suggesting how tacit practitioner knowledge can be rendered explicit. The aspiration may be wise, if only to avoid the alchemy of intuitionism and appeals to ‘personal style’ that beset some professional practice, so long as we realise that this assumes a weak version of ‘tacit’, and do not deceive ourselves that the goal is fully achievable.

The question arises as to whether or not tacit, implicit understanding is in tension with more explicit, planned research-based practice. Evaluation writers Stake and Trumbull may seem to suggest as much when they argue that, ‘For practitioners . . . formal knowledge is not necessarily a stepping stone to improved practice. . . . We maintain that practice is guided far more by personal knowings’ (1982: 5).

In this connection, there is a frequent tension in social work between ‘internalist’ and ‘externalist’ ways of justifying what we believe. Reflective practice is clearly a different approach from evidence-based practice (EBP). Evidence-based practice is strongly externalist, and rests on the view that we can only find a sufficient basis for knowledge for practice from empirical evidence external to ourselves (see Chapter 19).

## PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

We discover the same tension within the social work research community when social work researchers talk about appropriate criteria for judging the quality of research (Shaw and Norton, 2007). Needless to say, knowledge from reasoning or from experience does not exhaust kinds of knowledge. Thomas Schwandt (1997) distinguishes theoretical knowledge (‘knowing that’), craft or skill knowledge (‘knowing how’) and practical–moral knowledge (‘knowing from’).

For Schwandt, when we talk about ‘application’, something more is intended than the instrumental sense of practicality (as though a social work model of intervention or a finding about effectiveness could be applied like a ‘tool’) – that is, the more fundamental sense of making something relevant to oneself. This involves a particular kind of knowledge – ‘knowing from within or practical–moral knowledge’, which ‘requires not cleverness in application but understanding’ (Schwandt, 1997: 76). ‘Practical–moral knowledge aims to actually move people, not simply give them good ideas’ (Schwandt, 1997: 81).

If being practical means having an impact, then ‘practical’ per se is neutral rather than a good thing. We can have bad as well as good practical research. We cannot predefine whether or not social work will be practical. Its practicality is created.

‘Not cleverness in application but understanding’ – Schwandt’s (1997) phrase opens up the question of expertise in social work, whether different kinds of expertise are reconcilable, and how we recognise expertise in others or perhaps in ourselves. Take for example the perspectives of service users or policy-makers. The phrase ‘experts by experience’ has sometimes been used by service users. For example, Beresford (2010: 12) says that ‘what distinguishes service user knowledge (or knowledges) and what is unique about it, is that it is based on direct experience’. Speaking in a very different voice about policy-makers, Duncan and Harrop (2006: 160) set the challenge by insisting that policy users of research are essentially pragmatic, and want

research that is ‘clear, useful, timely and usable’. Furthermore, ‘those responsible for policy and practice will never depend on research evidence alone. . . . research always competes with “common-sense” views of the world’ (Duncan and Harrop, 2006: 163).

Does this mean that such different categories of expertise are incommensurable? Beresford (2010: 12–13) thinks not:

Service users are not suggesting that experiential knowledge is the only knowledge that should be valued or that it should be prioritised. What they have repeatedly expressed concerns about is the way that it has long been systematically excluded from social policy discussions and developments and from social research.

In this they echo the view of most mainstream researchers and practitioners, that a balance of expertise is required. Duncan and Harrop (2006: 161) conclude that it is necessary to understand the different perspectives of researchers and practitioners: ‘Unless we understand the different natures of these two worlds, we risk forever misunderstanding each other and failing to draw on joint strengths’.

My informed hunch – if you will excuse the internalist way of making this claim – is that the idea of expertise typically is imbued with weak meanings in the social work practice community. Year by year I invite a class of final year social work students to consider the possibility of undertaking key informant interviews as an option within their dissertations. ‘Your interviewees should be experts,’ so I advise, ‘so consider approaching policy officers in government departments, political advisors, leading user researchers, and so on’. Perhaps I have too strong a notion of expertise, because my generally able students typically opt for local team leaders or a service user from their team.

## HOW DO WE ACQUIRE KNOWLEDGE THAT IS NOT OBSERVED?<sup>4</sup>

Donald Campbell (1981: 486) – the social psychologist, methodologist and theorist of science – spoke of himself in the third person, that ‘He accepts epistemological relativism but stops short of ontological nihilism’. To express it more openly, he held ‘the view that our knowledge *of* the world is itself a fact *in* the world and that the theory of knowledge may therefore be regarded as a part of empirical science’, while at the same time taking ‘the view that the world of which we have knowledge exists independently of our knowledge of it’ (Skagestad, 1981: 77ff.).

In general outline I share that view, yet it is a profoundly difficult one to justify. If the first is true, how can we know the second is also true? How is it so that ‘we can never know the truth for certain in no way implies there *is* no objective truth’ (Skagestad, 1981: 81). Campbell and other key figures in the last century did so by arguing a natural selection model of knowing. Others, albeit with differing ground rules, did so by arguing that objectivity is normative. Either way, we proceed empirically.

As part of acquiring an empirical understanding of epistemology within social work, we should not ignore the commonsense ways in which practitioners endeavour to make

evaluative sense of their practical activities (Shaw and Shaw, 1997a, 1997b). In a similar way, recognising the role of informal learning means that we also need to discover how researchers draw conclusions about evidence. For example, Stuart Kirk and William Reid (2002) argued that we know little of the everyday epistemologies of practitioners.

There is a problem with this kind of research, however. While we may learn what social workers believe, do these beliefs constitute knowledge? We face a logical problem – the relationship between ‘evidence’ and the ‘conclusion’: ‘These empirical investigations may enable us to describe the ways in which people arrive at *beliefs* about unobserved facts, but they leave open the question of whether beliefs arrived at in this way actually constitute *knowledge*’ (Salmon, 2007 [1967]: 252).

Philosophically, this is the problem of inductive evidence. ‘Evidence-based practice’ has been criticised partly because it appears to some that the relationship between evidence and the conclusion is treated too straightforwardly – as if the evidence spoke unambiguously and the inferences for practice were indisputable and obvious.

There are two sorts of inference. A *demonstrative* inference is one where, logically speaking, the conclusion says no more than was in the premises. A *non-demonstrative* inference, however, is one where the premises do not necessitate the conclusion – they could be true while the conclusion is false.

The critique of ‘evidence-based-practice’<sup>5</sup> I have in mind can be expressed as saying that some advocates present the argument for evidence-based practice as if the inference were demonstrative, whereas it is indubitably non-demonstrative. The social work version of this problem can be observed in other fields, such as evaluation: ‘Everyone agrees that information somehow informs decisions, but the relationship is not direct, not simple. Often the more important the decision, the more obscure the relationship seems to be’ (House, 1980: 68).

Ernest House (1980: 72) goes so far as to say that, ‘subjected to serious scrutiny, evaluations always appear equivocal’, concluding that evaluations can be no more than acts of persuasion: ‘Evaluation persuades rather than convinces, argues rather than demonstrates, is credible rather than certain, is variably accepted rather than compelling’ (House, 1980: 73). When, as social workers or evaluators, we underplay the role of judgement and, hence, of argumentation, this results in an unduly technical, methods-orientated analysis, overconfidence in quantification and a tendency to represent knowledge in an impersonal, objectified form. Those who fail to accept the ‘compelling’ conclusions drawn from the evaluation are dismissed as irrational. If results were unequivocal, then those who failed to accept them would be ‘wrong’.

The pervasiveness of non-demonstrative inferences in identifying and making use of knowledge in social work makes practice more demanding. There have been several attempts to take a different approach to thinking through the reasoning process involved in constructing justified evaluative arguments (Fournier, 1995; Fournier and Smith, 1993; Scriven, 1997). These emphasise the complex connection between evidence and conclusions and commence from the differences between formal and informal reasoning.

Whereas formal reasoning assumes a tight fit between the premises and conclusions within an argument, informal logic ‘deals with ordinary, everyday language, where rules of inference are less precise and more contextual’ (Fournier and Smith, 1993: 317). Stephen Toulmin’s *The Uses of Argument* (1958) has been perhaps the most influential text in this area. In explicating the connection between claims and evidence, he gives a central role to ‘warrants’,

which provide the grounds for explaining how we get from evidence to a claim – he argues that a warrant legitimises the inference we make.

So far we have seen that social work knowledge calls for more than simply having an opinion or even being correct – it needs some kind of justifying account. We have seen that some accounts are ‘externalist’ (such as evidence-based practice) and some are ‘internalist’ (such as reflective practice) and there are perhaps unavoidable tensions between the two – albeit we should remember that the tensions are logical and philosophical and may not always be pragmatic (I return to this point in the next section). We have also seen that the relationship between evidence and practice inferences is rarely self-evident or demonstrative. Finally, we have reminded ourselves of Schwandt’s point that knowledge includes ‘knowing from’ – practical–moral knowledge – as well as ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’.

## EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE

Two final distinctions are in order. First, and one we have already implied in talking about expertise, is that knowledge by acquaintance – what we derive from our senses – is distinct from knowledge by description. This distinction is shaky, however. When we express knowledge by acquaintance in language, it becomes knowledge by description. The face-to-face interview between client and social worker entails knowledge by acquaintance on both sides, but, as soon as the social worker refers to that interview verbally or in writing (in a record, email or report), it becomes knowledge by description. Likewise with a research article or report: ‘It is a deep question how we learn to name objects of common experience . . . from our private knowledge by acquaintance’ (Gregory, 1987: 412).

While the distinction is not absolute, I am not sure that it is well-enough observed. Take the influential and interesting account of the kinds of knowledge in social work and social care mentioned earlier. Pawson et al. (2003) helpfully invite us to distinguish between knowledge held by practitioners, the policy community, service users and carers, researchers and organisations and that set out to develop provisional criteria for assessing knowledge through a common framework of quality criteria. One of the difficulties of this scheme is that there may be as much diversity of knowledge by acquaintance and description *within* each of these as there is *between* them. However, the acquaintance/description distinction has limited purchase in practical terms, in that it is now widely accepted that there is description within perception and experience – evident, for example, in understandings of the world as being (socially) constructed.

Robert Stake and Thomas Schwandt (2006) have explored a different, though related, distinction – that between experience far and experience near knowledge. This is the second of our two final distinctions. In their discussion of discerning quality in evaluation, they distinguish between ‘quality as measured’ and ‘quality as experienced’ (we might say ‘knowledge’ rather than ‘quality’).

In the first case, quality is regarded as measurable and judging quality takes on the characteristic of ‘thinking criterially’, through explicit comparison of the research in question to a set of standards for it – is it reliable, valid, free from bias and so on. Judging quality criterially is more or less an ‘experience distant’ undertaking. ‘Quality as experienced’ starts from the



view that quality is a phenomenon we personally experience and only later make technical, if need be:

This view emphasizes grasping quality in experience near understandings, that is, in the language and embodied action of those who actually are undergoing the experience of a program or policy. Critical thinking is important but it is rooted in interpretation of personal experience. (Stake and Schwandt, 2006: 408)

The importance of experience is closely related to another question addressed in several places in this book – the relation between knowledge and power.

Class, gender, race and education are factors that indelibly shape who is accepted as having knowledge. Feminist work illustrates this powerfully. Although there are important variations on questions of epistemology within feminism, all feminist positions start from the proposition that social workers must ask questions that make sense within women's experience and for women (Hawkesworth, 1989). While most feminists would now reject the idea that there is one single woman's experience, they would also reject a relativist position (see Chapter 7).

Perhaps the strongest form anti-relativism takes is feminist 'standpoint' theory, which has its origins in Marxist and Hegelian arguments that reality is obscured to people from certain backgrounds because of the effects of ideology:

Standpoint theory builds on the assertion that the less powerful members of society experience a different reality as a consequence of their oppression. . . . To survive they must have knowledge, awareness and sensitivity of both the dominant group's view of society and their own – the potential for 'double vision' or consciousness and thus the potential for a more complete view of social reality. (Swigonski, 1993: 173)

This theory makes two linked assertions: the double vision of the oppressed and the partial vision of the more powerful – 'privilege and its invisibility to those who hold it' (Swigonski, 1993: 174). My own position is that a *strong* standpoint approach is hard to sustain, but a *moderate* one is persuasive (Shaw, 1996: 117–20; Shaw and Gould, 2001: 172–3).

Ideas about knowledge by acquaintance, experience near research, power and social construction take us to the remaining discussion regarding social constructivism and scepticism.

## RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

Can we know the world as it really is or are we restricted to knowing it as shaped by our thoughts and experience? Can our knowledge be objective or is it 'only' made up from subjective perspectives? Discussions in social work about this issue are often presented in the form of debates about particular stances in social work, as to whether they are 'positivist' or 'postmodern'. These debates are not always illuminating or well conceived, partly because they are presented in an unduly polarised form (see Shaw, 1999a, 1999b).

There are different understandings of what may be meant by 'objective' (Greco, 2007 [1998], for example). I find myself drawn to a moderate realism, taking the view that what is represented by at least some of our beliefs is objective – that is, logically and causally

independent of how we conceive of that thing. As admitted earlier, such a position is not easy to defend, nor is it easy to show that it does not beg relevant questions in an arbitrary way. It follows that an appropriate humility about human reasoning is warranted.

An important basis for such diffidence about human reasoning is the realisation that critical, emancipatory approaches to social work and research conceptualise problems as part of the social, political and cultural contexts in which social work is formed. Hence, the basic logic is not preoccupied solely with the formal organisation of argument, 'but also particular forms of reasoning that give focus to scepticism towards social institutions' (Popkewitz, 1990: 49). Hence, critical knowledge derived from social work is never neutral (Comstock, 1982: 374): 'It is always for some particular subject'. For many, this involves an obligation to pursue political commitments through active participation in political movements. Before we say anything more about realism, however, it is worth pausing to recognise that, for many practitioners and researchers, the pathway of pragmatism is more attractive: 'What should count is not the favoured method of a particular group, but rather how well we answer the question or achieve the purpose . . . it matters little which perspective or purpose has been adopted' (Chelimsky, 1997: 109).

Howard Becker (1993: 219), writing of epistemological issues, notes: 'I think it is fruitless to try to settle them. . . . These are simply the commonplaces, in the rhetorical sense, of scientific talk in the social sciences, the framework in which the debate goes on'. He believes that we should take an empirical perspective on such matters, treating them as 'a topic rather than an aggravation' (1993: 222). We should also beware the paralysing effect of too much methodological discussion, however: 'We still have to do theoretical work, but we needn't think we are being especially virtuous when we do' (1993: 221). Rather than regard such theoretical work as the responsibility of all, Becker is content to view it as a specialism – the profession of 'philosophical and methodological worry' (1993: 226)!

We should distinguish between *methodological* and *philosophical* pragmatism. Methodological pragmatism rests on impatience with philosophy and an emphasis on real-world evaluation and practice; it claims that methods can be separated from the epistemology out of which they have emerged. The emphasis, thus, is on practical utility and the credibility of the methods used. Most of the pleas for pragmatism referred to above are of this kind. Thus, Michael Scriven, in complaining about the 'philosophically besotted', says 'it is better to build on what might conceivably be sand . . . than not to build at all. . . . It is a waste of time to try to solve the problems of epistemology without getting on with the job' (1997: 478, 479). William Reid (1994: 478) argued to similar effect, if more temperately, for social work: 'Irreconcilable conflicts may indeed exist in the discourse of philosophers, but their perspectives are not essential to the task of resolving differences and building consensus in the practical worlds of social work'. Despite its disclaimer, this is, of course, a philosophical position and one that seems to assume a fairly strong acceptance of a realist position. Holding to a realist position does not necessarily entail either positivism or even strong confidence in objective knowledge. Sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969: 22) argued that a view of knowledge as socially constructed:

does not shift 'reality', as so many conclude, from the empirical world to the realm of imagery and conception. . . . [The] empirical world can 'talk back' to our picture of it or assertions about it – talk back in the sense of challenging and resisting, or not bending to, our images or conceptions of it. This resistance gives the empirical world an obdurate character that is the mark of reality.

Constructivism of this kind is thus not incompatible with realism. On this view of things, we can maintain belief in the existence of phenomena independent of our claims about them and in their knowability, 'without assuming that we can know with certainty whether our knowledge of them is valid or invalid' (Hammersley, 1992: 50). 'The essence of this position is that, although a real world, driven by real natural causes, exists, it is impossible for humans truly to perceive it with their imperfect sensory and intellectual mechanism' (Cook and Campbell, 1979: 29).

There is a wide range of positions within this broad approach. My own is that, while some version of objectivity remains as a 'regulatory ideal' (Phillips, 1990: 43), social work processes and results are always significantly jeopardised by interests, the social location of the practitioner and agency, powerful stakeholders and, in Egon Guba's (1990: 19) surprisingly realist phrase, 'nature's propensity to confound'.

Such epistemological modesty does not necessarily lead to modest aspirations for social change. For example, from within social work, Reid (1988: 45) has asked, 'Is it better to make limited but well-documented progress or to work toward more important goals with less certainty of what we have attained?' Yet, fallible realist social work practitioners and researchers are less likely to pronounce confidently that they have got it right. They are likely to concur with Denis Phillips (1990: 43) when he admits that 'the objectivity of an inquiry does not guarantee its truth . . . *nothing* can guarantee that we have reached the truth'.

We have taken constructivism too much for granted. Suppose a given intervention, X, is found to be effective in working with young people who have challenging behaviour problems. Assume that for someone this can be stated as, 'It is a fact that X is effective in working with young people who have challenging behaviour problems'. Is this a fact for everyone? Not in the sense that all social workers believe it to be a fact (a trivial case of 'not a fact for everyone'). Is it possible, then, to say, 'It holds true for you but not for me'? Is it true independently of what I believe or how society is organised?

A social constructionist would respond by saying that:

- facts are social constructions rather than objects;
- it is constitutive of a given fact that it is so constructed;
- the construction is contingent and not universal.

The interest lies in exposing constructions where none is thought to exist, 'where something constitutively social had come to masquerade as natural' (Boghossian, 2006: 18). To 'deconstruct' is then thought to be potentially liberating.<sup>6</sup>

This is a strong version of social constructionism. The classical philosophical view is that it is sometimes possible for the evidence alone to explain why we come to believe something. Task-centred social work may be considered a case in point. The original experiment, *Brief and Extended Casework* (Reid and Shyne, 1969), was carried out with the assumption that open-ended casework would prove most effective, given ideal circumstances. When the contrary was supported by the evidence, it led to a prolonged programme of research to develop and test the effectiveness of the model. A strong version of constructionism would respond by asserting the *descriptive dependence of the facts* in this experiment. A moderate constructionist would respond by asserting the weaker position of the *social relativity of descriptions*. However, even if we go for the weaker position, making judgements about evidence still

remains a demanding task. If we accept that there are some mind-independent facts, ‘This argument . . . does not tell us all by itself which facts obtain and which ones don’t; nor does it tell us, of the facts that do obtain, which ones are mind-independent and which ones aren’t’ (Boghossian, 2006: 57).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

‘I don’t know’ might, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, be a philosophical position. Is evidence-based practice the right way to improve quality of services? I do not know.

The philosopher most associated with scepticism is perhaps René Descartes. To provide a firm ground for knowledge, he began by ‘doubting all that could be doubted’ (Grau, 2007: 195) by, for example, asking what if he were only dreaming. Contemporary films explore this idea via speculations about technology (such as *The Matrix*). Hume saw no way out of Descartes’ problem and thought that we have to live with it, on the grounds that we can be philosophical sceptics yet sustain a practical belief in reason.

Does (moderate) scepticism lead to paralysed inaction? Not necessarily. It is possible to be philosophically sceptical yet practically committed to action.<sup>7</sup> This tension between philosophy and practice is perhaps inescapable. Jennifer Greene (1996: 280) talks of qualitative evaluators, but her remarks will stand for social work practitioners and probably also researchers:

Many qualitative practitioners struggle with the dissonance invoked by the assumed mind-dependence of all social knowledge claims in the face of the contextual (as well as personal, ego-related) demands to ‘get it right’, to ‘find out what’s really going on in this setting’.

### Study questions

- 1 In this chapter, I have illustrated ‘external’ and ‘internal’ ways of knowing from evidence-based practice and reflective practice. On the basis of what you have read, what do you think are the strengths and limitations of each of these?
- 2 Read Chapter 12 on postmodernism and Chapter 19 on evidence-based practice. How do the issues discussed in this chapter help you critically assess and compare those two chapters?
- 3 Make brief notes on something about which you hold strong beliefs. What do you know in support of these beliefs? How do you know this to be so?

## FURTHER READING

The collection of essays by Collins and Pinch (1998) on the history of science are written for non-specialist readers. They imply ways in which we should read accounts of taken-for-granted knowledge – in social work as in other fields.

While you may not wish to dot every ‘i’ and cross every ‘t’, Kirk and Reid’s (2002) book is one of the finest accounts of the meaning, role, contributions and limits of science in social work (see especially Chapters 1 and 2).

The title of Pawson et al.’s (2003) *Types and Quality of Knowledge in Social Care* aptly prefigures the content. This short text has been helpfully influential in thinking about forms of knowledge on social work and social care, and how we should assess its value.

Shaw’s (2011) argument in *Evaluating in Practice* bears on two aspects of this chapter. First, it is an extended argument with worked exemplifications of how ways of knowing and doing in research bear on similar questions in social work. Second, in Chapter 2, it includes a developed assessment of the relationship between practice and research.

While Shaw et al.’s (2010) *Sage Handbook of Social Work Research* is a heavyweight effort to say something about social work research, there are several essays that are helpful in considering theory and practice, and ways of knowing in social work. For example, the opening chapter by Parton and Kirk is excellent and Trevillion’s contribution has much to say. Two essays by Shaw – one on ‘Places in time: Contextualizing social work research’ and one on ‘Logics, qualities and quality in social work research’ – deal with some basic ideas.

## NOTES

- 1 I have embedded definitions of key terms within the chapter.
- 2 Socrates did not, in fact, find this argument convincing.
- 3 For an engaging review of major controversies in the history of science and an exemplification of how scientific certainties do not come from experimental method, but from the way ambiguous evidence is interpreted, see Collins and Pinch (1998).
- 4 This problem is associated with the work of Scottish philosopher David Hume.
- 5 I have hyphenated the phrase in this passage as an indication of the assumption that inference and conclusion are demonstrative and inseparable. I have placed it in inverted commas because I do not accept the assumption.
- 6 There is a philosophical problem in the deconstruction project as it seems to require an assumption that the ‘deconstructor’ is able to see through the construct. This risks inviting the accusation of ‘ontological’ gerrymandering’ (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985).
- 7 Offstage, as it were, I would also argue that such scepticism is not incompatible with a strong faith-based position.

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# INDEX

- ABC model 164–5, 165, 172  
acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) 170  
accounts 216  
ad hoc 216  
Adams, Robert 101  
Adorno, Theodor 13, 108  
advocacy 101  
affectional bonds 77, 85  
Agamben, Giorgio 107  
Agar, Michael H. 204  
Ainsworth, Mary 76  
alienation 108  
Allan, Graham 187  
Allan, June 109  
Allman, Paula 114–5, 124  
Almack, John 183  
Althusser, Louis 37–8, 68  
Alverson, Hoyt 198  
ambivalent attachment 81–2, 85  
Antaki, Charles 214  
*Antigone's Claim* (Butler) 66  
Argyle, Michael 190  
Arminen, Ilkka 214  
*The Art of Travel* (de Botton) 9  
assimilationism 126  
Atkinson, Paul 204, 217, 226  
*Attachment Across the Lifecourse* (Howe) 86  
*Attachment and Loss* (Bowlby) 76  
attachment behaviour 76–7, 85  
attachment system 76–7, 85  
attachment theory  
    attachment behavioural strategies and 79–83  
    co-regulation of affect and 77–8  
    internal working model and 78–9, 80, 81, 82, 86  
    overview 75–7  
    social work and 83–4  
    social work practice and 84–5  
attunement 86  
Austin, John 15, 66  
Australia  
    CBT in 160  
    critical social work and 102  
    ecological systems theory in 177, 180  
    multiculturalism in 130, 131  
    structural social work in 117  
automatic thoughts 164, 167, 172  
avoidant attachment 80–1, 86  
  
Badiou, Alain 106, 107  
Baines, Donna 117, 118  
Bandura, Albert 160, 172  
Bannerji, Himani 130  
Barnes, John Arundel 186  
Barnes, Marion 95  
  
Battye, Peter 160  
Bauman, Zygmunt 41, 148, 151  
Beauvoir, Simone de 64, 65, 88  
Beck, Aaron 160, 161–2, 164, 172  
Beck, Ulrich 26, 28–9, 40  
Becker, Howard 249  
behaviourism 160, 166, 172  
Bell, Margaret 190  
Ben-Ari, Adital 132–3  
Benhabib, Seyla 20, 151  
Beresford, Peter 154, 244–5  
Beringer, Antonia 28  
Berkowitz, S.D. 184  
Bernard, Russell 202  
Bertalanffy, Ludwig von 174  
Besthorn, Fred H. 176  
*Beyond Left and Right* (Giddens) 26, 27  
Biggs, Simon 53, 62  
Billig, Michael 222  
bio-politics 49, 50–1, 52  
biopower 61  
Bissoondath, Neil 127  
Bittner, Egon 210  
Blair, Tony 26, 27  
Blaug, Ricardo 22  
Blumer, Herbert 249–50  
Boddy, Jennifer 90, 98  
*Bodies that Matter* (Butler) 66  
Bohannan, Paul 204  
Bonfenbrenner, Urie 175  
Booth, Tim 55–6  
Bott, Helen 183  
Bourdieu, Pierre  
    conversation analysis and 222–3  
    critical social work and 99, 108  
    life and works 36, 45  
    notions of habitus, field and capital 36–8, 41–3, 44  
    social theory and 38–41  
    social work and 41–3  
    social work practice and 43  
Bourgeois, Philippe 197  
Bower, Gordon H. 161  
Bowlby, John 75–6  
Bracken, Patrick 151, 154  
Braye, Suzy 101  
bridges 189, 190, 192  
*Brief and Extended Casework* (Reid and Shyne)  
    250–1  
*British Journal of Social Work* (journal) 204  
Broadhurst, Karen 228  
Brown, Gordon 27  
Brückner, Margrit 90  
Brugha, Traolach 188  
Bruno, Frank J. 159

- Bryant, Christopher 6, 35  
 Burchell, Graham 62  
 Burke, Tracey Kathleen 204  
 Butler, Judith  
   on identity 95  
   life and works 63–4  
   on postmodernism 150  
   on recognition 67–70, 72  
   on sex, gender and sexuality 64–7  
   social work and 70–1  
   social work practice and 71
- Campbell, Donald 245  
 Canada  
   critical social work and 102  
   ecological systems theory in 173  
   multiculturalism in 127, 130, 131, 133, 134  
   structural social work in 110, 117
- Cantley, Caroline 189–90  
 capital 38, 42, 44  
*Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (Giddens) 26  
 care 94–5  
 Carniol, Ben 114, 117–8, 125  
*Case Critical* (Carniol) 125  
 Cassidy, Jude 86  
 Cavanagh, Kate 93  
 censorship 68  
 centrality 192  
*Challenging Oppression* (Mullaly) 103–4, 125  
 Chamberlain, John Martyn 48, 60, 62  
 Chambon, Adrienne S. 62  
 Charity Organisation Societies (COS) 173, 181  
 child abuse 93, 96, 120, 170  
*Child Abuse and Neglect* (Howe) 86  
 child protection  
   attachment theory and 84  
   ethnography and 198  
   Foucault and 51–2, 55–6  
   Giddens and 29, 30, 32–3  
   Habermas's systemic analysis and 20  
   therapy and 214
- childhood  
   Bourdieu on 37–8, 42  
   nonheterosexual parents and 67  
   schemas and 163  
   social networks and 183, 189  
   see also attachment theory; democratic family
- Children Act (2004) 42  
 citizenship 136  
 Clark, Chris 32  
 Clark, David A. 163  
 Clarke, John 144, 145  
 Climbié, Victoria 42  
 Clinton, Bill 26, 27  
 Coates, John 182  
 cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)  
   information processing and 162–5, 165  
   overview 159–62, 172  
   social work and 165–6  
   social work practice and 166–71
- cognitive errors 164  
 cognitive restructuring 168–9, 172  
 cognitive therapy 161–2  
*Cognitive Therapy of Depression* (A. Beck et al.) 161–2, 172  
 cohesion 192  
 Colarossi, Lisa 188  
 collaborative empiricism 166–7  
 Collins, Alice H. 187  
 Collins, Barbara 91, 92  
 Collins, Harry 251  
 Collins, Randall 185  
 colonisation 17, 23  
 communicative action 15, 16, 18, 22–3  
 community work 102–3  
 complete networks (whole networks) 194  
 compulsory heterosexuality 72  
*Connections* (journal) 187  
*The Consequences of Modernity* (Giddens) 26, 28–9, 35  
*The Constitution of Society* (Giddens) 26  
*Constructing Clienthood in Social Work and Human Services* (Hall et al.) 214  
 constructivism 161, 170, 249–50  
*A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Giddens) 27  
 conversation analysis (CA) 210–1, 217, 222, 227  
 Corcoran, Jacqueline 167  
 Cree, Viv 93  
*Critical and Radical Social Work* (journal) 108, 109  
 critical best practice (CBP) 101, 102  
 critical postmodernism 151–5, 156  
 critical poststructural theory 108  
*Critical Practice in Social Work* (Adams et al.) 101  
 critical reflection 239  
 critical social work  
   critique of 104–5  
   Giddens and 34  
   overview 99–104  
   social work and 106  
   social work practice and 106–8  
*Critical Social Work* (journal) 109  
 critical theory  
   critical social work and 100, 101–2, 103–5, 107  
   deconstruction and 150–1  
   definition 108  
   Habermas and 18–9, 22  
   structural social work and 110–1, 112
- critical thinking 4–5  
 Crittenden, Patricia 83, 86  
 cultural competence 131–3  
 cultural essentialism 134  
 cultural imperialism 40  
 culture 132, 136
- The Dark Side of the Nation* (Bannerji) 130  
 D'Cruz, Heather 228  
 de Botton, Alain 9  
 Dean, Mitchell 62, 109  
 Dean, Ruth 132  
 decentering 171  
 deconstruction 101, 109, 150–1  
 deduction 203  
 deep-ecological theory 177–8, 181  
 Deleuze, Gilles 62  
 democracy 128–9  
 democratic family 29–30, 31–3, 34  
 density 192  
 depression 164, 170  
 Derrida, Jacques 65, 66, 109, 151

- Descartes, René 251  
 Di Stefano, Christine 150  
 dialectical thinking 124  
 dichotomous (all-or-nothing) thinking 164  
*différance* 151  
 difference  
     critical social work and 104  
     feminism and 90, 95, 96, 97  
     multiculturalism and 127–9, 134–5  
 direct ties 192  
 disability 112–3, 154–5  
*Discipline and Punish* (Foucault) 46, 62  
 discourse 47, 220, 227  
 discourse analysis (DA)  
     overview 218–20, 228  
     social work and 220–3  
     social work practice and 223–6  
     transcription symbols 228  
 disorganised–controlling attachment 82–3, 86  
 distance 192  
*Distinction* (Bourdieu) 36  
 diversity 126, 136  
     *see also* multiculturalism  
 divine right 138, 146  
 Dobson, Deborah 167  
 Dobson, Keith S. 167  
 documentary method 217  
*Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (J.C. Scott) 60  
 Dominelli, Lena 41, 98  
 Donoghue, Jane 33  
 Donovan, Mary 22  
 Dore, Ian 236  
 downward arrow technique 168  
 downward reductionism 220–1  
 doxa 109  
 Dreyfus, Hubert L. 62  
 duality of structure 28, 30, 34  
 DuBois, W.E.B. 127  
 Duncan, Sue 244–5  
 Durkheim, Emile 26, 206  
 dyads (dyadic ties) 192  
 Dynamic Maturational Model (DMM) 83
- Eagleton, Terry 45  
 ecological systems theory  
     overview 173, 175–9  
     social work and 179–80  
     social work practice and 180–1  
     *see also* person-in-environment (PIE) orientation  
 ecological theory 181  
 Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESSRC) 6  
 Ecosystems Perspective 176  
 education 37–8  
 ego-centred network (egocentric network, personal network) 193  
 Ellis, Albert 160, 161–2, 172  
 empathy 96  
 empirically supported interventions (ESI) 233  
*Empowering Practice in Social Care* (Braye and Preston-Shoot) 101  
 empowerment 1, 58, 101–2  
*Empowerment through a Structural Approach to Social Work* (Moreau and L. Leonard) 124
- epistemology 9–10, 19, 241  
     *see also* knowledge  
 equality 128–9  
 Eribon, Didier 62  
 Erickson, Frederick 219–20, 221  
 essential reflexivity 215, 217  
 Estroff, Sue 198  
 ethic of care 94–5  
 ethnicity 136  
 ethno-poetics 226  
 ethnography  
     overview 195–6, 203  
     social work and 196–8  
     social work practice and 198–202  
 ethnomethodological observation 211–3, 217  
 ethnomethodology (EM)  
     conversation analysis and 210–1, 222  
     distinctiveness of 207–9  
     nature of 209–10  
     overview 205–7  
     social work and 213–5  
     social work practice and 215–6  
*Ethnomethodology's Program* (Garfinkel) 208–9  
 European Union (EU) 138, 143, 144–5  
*Evaluating in Practice* (Shaw) 198, 252  
 Evans, Tony 57  
 evidence-based practice  
     assumptions and principles 230–4  
     attachment theory and 84  
     critique of 246  
     overview 229–30  
     vs. reflective practice 244  
     social work and 234–5  
     social work practice and 235–9, 237  
*Excitable Speech* (Butler) 68  
 existentialism 37  
 experience-near 203  
 experimental design 239  
 expert knowledge 149, 153  
 exposure therapy 170  
 Eyrich, Karin 188–9
- Fabian socialism 139, 142  
 Fanon, Franz 111  
 fateful moments 29, 34  
 Faust, Katherine 194  
 Fawcett, Barbara 151, 152, 156  
 Featherstone, Brid 32, 151  
 feminism  
     experience and 248  
     Habermas and 19  
     liberal feminism 88  
     Marxist feminism 88–9  
     modernism and 149  
     overview 87–8  
     postmodern feminism 90, 91, 96  
     radical feminism 89–90  
     social work and 90–3  
     social work practice and 93–7  
     socialist feminism 89, 91  
     structural social work and 112  
     *see also* Butler, Judith  
*Feminist Social Work* (Dominelli) 78  
 Fenge, Lee-Ann 204

- Ferguson, Harry 31, 32–3, 35, 102, 198  
 Ferguson, Iain 108, 109  
 fields 38, 42–3, 44  
 Finlayson, James Gordon 24  
 first wave feminism 88, 97  
 fiscal crisis of the State 143, 146  
 Fischer, Claude 186, 194  
 Fischer, Joel 234  
 Floersch, Jerry 199–201, 202  
 Fook, Jan  
   critical social work and 101, 102, 103, 104–5, 109  
   postmodernism and 151, 152, 156  
   structural social work and 116, 117  
 Foote Whyte, William 204  
 formal analysis (FA) 208  
 Forrester, Michael 214  
 Foucault, Michel  
   on bio-politics 49, 50–1, 52  
   Butler and 65  
   critical social work and 103, 104  
   critique of 60–1  
   discourse analysis and 220, 228  
   on governmentality 50  
   on knowledge and power 47–50, 57–9, 94, 149, 228  
   life and works 46, 62  
   postmodern feminism and 90  
   postmodernism and 156  
   social work and 51–3  
   social work practice and 53–60  
 Fournier, Valérie 62  
 Fowler, Bridget 36  
 Frankfurt School (Institute for Social Research)  
   13, 103, 108, 110–1  
 Fraser, Nancy 151  
 Freeman, Linton 183, 194  
 Freire, Paulo 111, 122  
 Freud, Sigmund 65, 66, 116, 176  
 Friedan, Betty 88, 94, 111  
 Friedman, Milton 141  
 Friedman, Rose 141  
 Früchtel, Frank 20–1, 21  
 Fuller, Jeffrey 190  
 Fultner, Barbara 24  
  
 Gadamer, Hans-Georg 20  
 Gambrill, Eileen 240  
 Garfinkel, Harold 205–10, 212–3, 222  
 Garrett, Paul 31, 35, 54, 55  
 Garrison, John 187  
 gender  
   Butler on 64–7  
   social support and 190  
   structural social work and 112  
*Gender and Child Protection* (Scourfield) 98  
*Gender and Community Care* (Orme) 98  
*Gender Trouble* (Butler) 63, 64–6  
 General Systems Theory (GST) 174  
 Germain, Carel 175–6, 181, 182  
 Gibbons, Jill 234  
 Giddens, Anthony  
   life and works 25–7, 35  
   reflexive modernisation and reflexive project  
     of the self 26–7, 28–30, 34  
   social work and 30–3  
  
 Giddens, Anthony *cont.*  
   social work practice and 33–4  
 Gillespie, David 191  
 Gilligan, Carol 94  
 Gitterman, Alex 175–6, 181, 182  
*Giving an Account of Oneself* (Butler) 69, 71  
 globalisation 26, 40, 125, 136  
 globalised multiculturalism 129–30  
 Goldberg, Gale 116–7  
 governmentality 50, 61, 109  
 Gramsci, Antonio 106, 111, 228  
 Granovetter, Mark 190, 194  
 Grass, Gunther 45  
 Gray, Mel 31, 90, 98, 109, 240  
 Greene, Jennifer 251  
 Guba, Egon 250  
*A Guide to Rational Living* (Ellis) 172  
 Gurwitsch, Aron 205  
 Gutmann, Amy 136  
  
 Habermas, Jürgen  
   critical theory and 18–9, 22  
   on language 14–6  
   life and works 13–4, 24  
   social work and 19–22, 21  
   social work practice and 22–3  
   on society 16–8  
 habitus 37–8, 41–3, 44  
 Hall, Christopher 214, 228  
 Hall, Tom 198  
 Hammersley, Martyn 204  
*Handbook of Attachment* (Cassidy and Shaver) 86  
 Hardiman, Eric 188  
 Harding, Sandra 96  
 Harris, John 57, 109  
 Harris, Ralph 142  
 Harrop, Anne 244–5  
 Harvey, David 107–8, 146  
 Have, Paul ten 217  
 Hayek, Friedrich von 138–41  
 Healy, Karen 102, 103, 109  
 Hearn, Gordon 174  
 Heffernan, Kristin 56  
 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 19, 67–8,  
   113, 248  
 hegemonic discourse 228  
 Heidegger, Martin 9, 13  
 Henderson, Monika 190  
 Henkel, Mary 19, 20  
 Henry, Frances 134–5  
 Heritage, John 209, 214, 217  
 Hesch, Karen 189  
 Hesse, Mary B. 6  
 Hick, Steven 102, 113, 125  
 high modernity 26–7, 29, 34, 106–7  
 Hilbert, Richard 207  
 Hilgard, Ernest R. 161  
 Hill, Anita 68  
 Hillier, Jean 45  
 Hillock, Susan 117  
*The History of Sexuality* (Foucault) 46  
 Hobbes, Thomas 206  
 Hoff, Maria 177  
 holism 195–6, 203

- Holland, Sally 32  
 holons 178, 181  
 homeostasis 178, 181  
 Honneth, Axel 24  
 Horkheimer, Max 13, 108  
 House, Ernest 246  
 Houston, Stan 20, 22, 35  
 Howard, Matthew 235  
 Howe, David 86, 151, 153, 155, 156  
 Hudson, Barbara 160  
 Hughes, Judy 118  
 Hume, David 252n4  
 Husserl, Edmund 206–7  
 Hutchby, Ian 214  
 Huyssen, Andreas 148
- ideal speech situation 15, 23  
 idealism 19, 113  
 identity  
   feminist social work and 95, 96  
   multiculturalism and 128–9  
 ideological thinking 124  
 ideologies 109, 111–2, 220  
 Ife, Jim 102, 155  
 imagery techniques 169–70, 172  
 in vivo 203  
 indexicality 217  
 indirect ties 193  
 individualisation 95–6  
 induction 195–6, 203, 246  
 informal support networks 188–90  
 information processing  
   automatic thoughts and 164, 167, 172  
   CBT and 162–5, 165  
   schemas and 163, 167–9, 172  
 information processing biases 163–4, 167, 172  
 Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA) 142  
 Institute for Social Research (Frankfurt School) 13, 103, 108, 110–1  
 institutional ethnography (IE) 198, 204  
 Integrated Children's System (ICS) 32  
 internal working model 78–9, 80, 81, 82, 86  
 International Monetary Fund 111, 138  
 International Network for Social Network Analysis (INSNA) 186  
 interpretation 2–4  
 interpretive approach 239  
 interventions 239  
 intimacy 29, 31–2
- Jackson, Stevi 150  
 James, Carl 134  
 James, William 127  
 Jamieson, Lynn 30  
 Jani, Jayshree 132  
 Jansen, Clifford 135  
 Jary, David 35  
 Jefferson, Gail 210, 214  
 Jeffery, Donna 117  
 Jehu, Derek 160, 162  
 Joas, Hans 24  
 Jones, Chris 144  
 Jones, Kip 204  
*Journal of Progressive Human Services* (journal) 109
- Keenan, Elizabeth 56  
 Kemp, Susan P. 175  
 Keynes, Maynard 139, 142–3  
 Kirk, Stuart 246, 252  
 Kirke, Deirdre 186, 194  
 Kivisto, Peter 136  
 Knoke, David 194  
 knowledge  
   acquisition of 245–7  
   discourse analysis and 221  
   experience and 247–8  
   Foucault on 47–50, 149, 228  
   postmodernism and 152–5  
   social work and 242–3, 248–51  
   social work practice and 251  
   *see also* practical knowledge; tacit knowledge  
 knowledge-in-action 204  
 Kohlberg, Lawrence 15  
 Kuklinski, James 194  
 Kymlicka, Will 128–9, 136
- Lacan, Jacques 65, 66, 67  
 Lane, Jeremy 37, 45  
 language  
   Habermas on 14–6  
   postmodernism and 151  
   social work and 218  
*Language Practices in Social Work* (Hall) 228  
*langue* 211  
 Lash, Scott 26  
 late modernity 26–7, 29, 34, 106–7  
 Lavalette, Michael 108, 109  
*Learning Theory and Social Work* (Jehu) 162  
 Lee, Eunju 189  
 Lee, John 214  
 Lemert, Charles 37  
 Leonard, Lynne 119, 124  
 Leonard, Peter 62, 102  
 Lévi-Strauss, Claude 108  
*Leviathan* (Hobbes) 206  
 Lévinas, Emmanuel 69, 70, 132–3  
 liberal feminism 88  
 liberal humanism 109  
 liberalism 138  
 life model 175–6, 181  
 life-planning 29, 31, 33, 34–5  
 life politics 29, 33, 35  
 lifeworld  
   Garfinkel on 205  
   Habermas on 16–8, 21, 23  
 links 193  
 “Living in a post-traditional society” (Giddens) 26, 35  
 Longhofer, Jeffrey 201  
 Lord, John 189  
 Luhmann, Tanya 197–8  
 Lum, Doman 132  
 Lundy, Colleen 125  
 Lynch, Michael 210, 212, 218–9  
 Lyotard, Jean-François 36  
 Lysack, Mishka 118–9
- Macdonald, Geraldine 160, 235  
 Macey, David 62  
 MacKinnon, Catherine 68

- Madoc-Jones, Iolo 54  
 magnification 164  
 Main, Mary 83  
 Mannheim, Karl 217  
 Marcus Aurelius 161  
 Marcuse, Herbert 13, 108  
 Margolin, Leslie 62  
 marketisation 143, 144–5  
 Marshall, Alfred 206  
 Marxism  
   critical social work and 102–3, 104  
   Giddens on 26, 27  
   Habermas and 19  
   ideology and 220  
   structural social work and 113–5, 124  
 Marxist feminism 88–9  
 materialisation 66, 119, 121–2  
 materialism 19, 111, 113, 124  
 Maynard, Douglas 214  
 McBeath, Graham 101, 102, 104, 151, 155, 156  
 McDonald, Catherine 119  
 McLaren, Peter 129, 133  
 McNamara, Patricia 204  
 McNeece, Aaron 235  
 McNeish, Di 236  
 McNutt, John 177  
 McRobbie, Angela 69  
 Mead, George Herbert 14–5, 128  
 melancholy 66  
 melting pot 130  
 methodologies 10  
 methods 10  
 Meyer, Carol 176, 182  
 Michael Oliver 154–5  
 Middleman, Ruth 116–7  
 Miller, Gale 214  
 Miller, Toby 62  
 Milner, Judith 93  
 mindfulness 170–1, 172  
 minimisation 164  
 modernism 148–9, 156  
*Modernity and Self-identity* (Giddens) 26  
 Modood, Tariq 134  
 monoculturalism 126  
 moral development 15  
 Moreau, Maurice 113, 117, 124, 125  
 Moreno, Jacob 183  
 Morris, Jenny 154–5  
 Morse, Janice 236  
 Mullaly, Robert  
   critical social work and 102, 103–4  
   structural social work and 115, 116, 117, 118, 125  
 Mullen, Edward 235, 239  
*Multicultural Citizenship* (Kymlicka) 128–9  
 multiculturalism  
   critical multiculturalism 129, 133  
   critique of 133–5  
   difference blindness and 127–8, 129–30  
   globalised multiculturalism 129–30  
   overview 126–7, 136  
   recognition of differences and 128–9  
   social work and 130–3  
   social work practice and 133  
*Multiculturalism: Charles Taylor* (Gutmann) 136  
 Multiculturalism Policy Index 136  
 multilevel analysis 193  
 Munro, Eileen 55  
 Murty, Susan 191  
 Nancy, Jean-Luc 107  
 Nash, Roy 37  
*The Nation-State and Violence* (Giddens) 27  
 nationalism 136  
 negative internal attribution (personalisation) 164  
 neoliberalism  
   Bourdieu and 38–40, 41  
   critical social work and 106–7  
   Hayek and 138–41  
   overview 137–8  
   public choice theory and 141–2  
   social work and 123, 142–5  
   social work practice and 145  
*Network Analysis* (Knoke and Kuklinski) 194  
 New Labour 27, 40, 51, 139, 226  
*New Politics of Critical Social Work*  
   (Gray and Webb) 109  
 New Public Management 143–4  
 New Right Conservatives 51  
*New Rules of Sociological Method* (Giddens) 26  
*The New Structural Social Work* (Mullaly) 125  
 Newman, Tony 236  
 Nicholson, Linda 151, 156  
 North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) 143  
 Nuccio, Kathleen 91–2  
 Nylund, David 133  
 Oakley, Anne 64–5  
 objectivity 204  
 O'Brien, Martin 6, 146  
 observational learning 160–1, 171  
 Ochocka, Joanna 189  
 O'Malley, Pat 109  
 open systems 174, 204  
 operant learning theory 160–1, 171  
 O'Reilly, Michelle 214  
 Orme, Joan 98  
 Ortiz, Larry 132  
 Osvaldsson, Karin 214  
*Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu) 37, 45  
*Over to You Mr Brown* (Giddens) 27  
 overgeneralisation 164  
 PAJEK (social network analysis program) 187  
 Pancoast, Diane 187  
 panopticon (surveillance) 49, 51, 54–6, 59, 61  
 Pareto, Vilfredo 206  
 Parks, Rosa 68  
*parole* 211  
 Parrot, Lester 54  
 Parsons, Talcott 174, 205–6  
 partial networks 193  
 participant observation 196, 198, 202, 204  
   *see also* ethnography  
 Parton, Nigel 151, 155, 156, 221, 252  
*Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu) 45  
 paths 193  
 patriarchy 89, 97  
 Patton, Cindy 43

- Pavlov, Ivan 160  
 Pawson, Ray 232, 236, 240, 244, 247, 252  
 Payne, Malcolm 91, 100  
 Pease, Bob 102, 103  
 Penna, Sue 6, 146  
 Pennock, Mike 187  
 Peräkylä, Anssi 214  
 performativity 66, 72  
 person-in-environment (PIE) orientation  
   CBT as 165–6  
   definition 182  
   ethnography and 196  
   feminist social work and 95–6  
   social learning theory and 160  
   *see also* ecological systems theory  
 personalisation (negative internal attribution) 164  
 perspective-taking 15  
 perspectives 10  
 phenomenological practice gap (PPG) 201–2, 204  
 Phillips, Denis 250  
 Philp, Mark 221  
 Pileggi, Mary 43  
 Pinch, Trevor 251  
 Pithouse, Andrew 32, 226  
 Plath, Debbie 236  
 Polanyi, Michael 228  
 Policy Press 108, 109  
 political approach 236, 237, 238, 239  
 Polity Press 26  
 positivist approach  
   *see* scientific–positivist approach  
 Pösö, Tarja 204  
 post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) 170  
 postfeminism 90, 97  
*The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard) 36  
 postmodern feminism 90, 91, 96  
*Postmodern Welfare* (P. Leonard) 62  
 postmodernism  
   critical postmodernism and 151–5  
   critical social work and 103, 104, 106–7  
   evidence-based practice and 236, 237, 238  
   overview 147–8, 150–1, 156  
   social work and 155  
   social work practice and 155–6  
   structural social work and 115  
 postpsychiatry 154  
 poststructuralism 148, 220  
 Poulanzas, Nicos 106  
 Powell, Jason L. 48, 53, 60, 62  
 power  
   Bourdieu on 99  
   critical social work and 103–4  
   feminist social work and 94  
   Foucault on 47–50, 57–9, 94, 149  
   postmodernism and 152–5  
   structural social work and 112–3  
   *see also* governmentality  
 Pozzuto, Richard 103  
 practical knowledge 244–5  
 pragmatic approach 235–6, 237–8, 237, 239  
 pragmatism 249  
 praxis 114–5, 124  
*Precarious Life* (Butler) 68–9, 71  
 prestige 193  
 Preston-Shoot, Michael 101  
*Problems in Social Theory* (Giddens) 26  
 Profitt, Norma Jean 117  
*Protecting Children in Time* (Ferguson) 35  
*The Psychic Life of Power* (Butler) 66  
 public choice theory 141–2  
 qualitative enquiry 231  
*Qualitative Social Work* (journal) 204  
 Rabinow, Paul 62  
 race and racism 112, 135, 136  
*Radical Casework* (Fook) 116  
 radical feminism 89–90  
 radical social work 102–3, 110  
*Radical Social Work Today* (Lavalette) 108  
*Raising Parents* (Crittenden) 86  
 Rancière, Jacques 107  
*A Rational Approach to Social Casework* (Werner) 172  
 rational emotive behaviour therapy 161–2  
*Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy*  
   (Ellis) 161–2  
 Rawls, Anne 205, 208, 209  
 Razack, Narda 117  
 reachability 186, 193  
 Reason, David 214  
*Reclaiming Social Work* (Ferguson) 108  
 recognition 67–70, 72  
 reflective function 86  
 reflective practice 101, 219, 243–4  
   *see also* reflexivity  
*The Reflective Practitioner* (Schön) 101  
 reflexive modernisation 26–7, 28–30, 35  
*Reflexive Modernization* (U. Beck, Giddens  
   and Lash) 26  
 reflexive project of the self 26–7, 28–30, 35  
 reflexivity 215, 217, 218–9, 226–7  
   *see also* reflective practice  
 Reid, William 246, 249, 250–1, 252  
 relationships 193  
 residual welfare state 138, 139, 146  
 resistance 49, 59–60  
 respondent learning theory 160–1, 171  
 rhetoric 228  
 Robertson, James 75, 76  
 Robinson, Virginia Pollard 159  
 role-taking 15  
 roles 182  
 Rooksby, Emma 45  
 Rose, Nikolas 57, 109  
 Rossiter, Amy 102, 118  
 Rowbotham, Sheila 87, 94  
*Runaway World* (Giddens) 25  
 Sacks, Harvey 210, 217  
*Sage Handbook of Social Work Research* (Shaw et al.) 252  
 Said, Edward 148  
 Saleebey, Dennis 102, 178  
 Salih, Sara 63, 72  
 Salvo, Michael J. 54  
 Sands, Roberta 91–2  
 Sapey, Bob 154–5

- Sartre, Jean-Paul 114  
 Sarup, Madan 148  
 Saussure, Ferdinand de 108, 149, 211  
 scepticism 242, 251  
 Schegloff, Emanuel 210, 211, 217, 222  
 schemas 163, 167–9, 172  
 Scheyett, Anna 56  
 Schinkel, Willem 39  
 Schön, Donald 101, 243  
 Schütz, Alfred 16, 205, 206–7  
 Schwandt, Thomas 244, 247–8  
 Schwartz, Howard 214  
*Science and Human Behavior* (Skinner) 172  
 scientific–positivist approach 231–2, 235, 237, 237, 239  
 Scott, Dorothy 32  
 Scott, James C. 60  
 Scott, John 194  
 Scourfield, Jonathan 98  
 Scriven, Michael 249  
*The Second Sex* (Beauvoir) 64  
 second wave feminism 88, 97  
 secure attachment 80, 86  
 Seed, Philip 187–8, 191  
*Seeing Sociologically* (Garfinkel) 205  
 Seldon, Arthur 142  
 selective abstraction 164  
 Selman, Robert L. 15  
 sequences 217  
 service user movement 101  
 Settlement House Movement (SHM) 173, 182  
 Sewpaul, Vishanthie 21–2  
 Shaver, Phillip R. 86  
 Shaw, Ian 198, 236, 252  
 Sheldon, Brian 160, 235  
 Shyne, Ann W. 250–1  
 Silverman, David 214, 217  
 Sinclair, Tom 20  
 Skerrett, Debbie 19, 20  
 Skinner, B.F. 160–1, 172  
 Slee, Phillip T. 160  
 Smart, Carol 30  
 Smith, Carole 31  
 Smith, David 236, 240  
 Smith, Dorothy 204  
 Smith, Gilbert 189–90  
 social capital 191  
 social casework 116  
 social constructionism 250–1  
 social democracy 19  
 social justice 139, 146  
 social learning theory 160–1, 171  
*Social Learning Theory* (Bandura) 172  
 social network analysis  
   methodology 186–7  
   overview 183–5  
   social work and 187–90  
   social work practice and 190–2  
   theoretical approach 185–6  
*Social Network Analysis* (J. Scott) 194  
*Social Network Analysis* (S. Wasserman and Faust) 194  
 social networks 184–5, 192–3  
*Social Networks* (journal) 186, 187  
 social protest 18  
 social relations 124  
 Social Systems Theory 174  
 social work  
   contestable thinking and 5–6  
   critical thinking and 4–5  
   interpretation and 2–4  
   knowledge and 242–3, 248–51  
   overview 1–2  
   theory and 6–7  
 Social Work Action Network (SWAN) 108  
*Social Work and Social Justice* (Lundy) 125  
*Social Work and Society* (journal) 109  
*Social Work in a Risk Society* (Webb) 35  
 socialism 139  
 socialist feminism 89, 91  
*Sociology for Social Work* (Dominelli) 41  
*Sociology* (Giddens) 27  
 Solas, John 106–7  
 Solomon, Judith 83  
 SONI model 20–1, 21  
 Spratt, Trevor 20  
 Stake, Robert 244, 247–8  
 standpointism 88–9, 92, 97–8  
 Stanley, Liz 87  
*The State of Feminist Social Work* (V. White) 98  
 Stein, Herman D. 178  
 Stevens, Harvey 187  
 strategic action 15–6, 22–3, 24  
*Street Corner Society* (Foote Whyte) 204  
 strengths-based perspectives 101, 102  
 Strier, Roni 132–3  
 strong ties 193  
 “A structural approach to social work practice”  
   (Moreau) 124  
 structural equivalence 193  
 structural social work  
   commitment to social transformation and 114–5  
   vs. critical social work 100  
   critique of social, political and economic  
     relations and 111–2  
   dialectical analysis and 113–4, 124  
   overview 110–1  
   power and 112–3  
   social work and 115–9  
   social work practice and 119–23  
 “Structural social work (Canada)” (Carniol) 125  
*Structural Social Work in Action* (Hick) 125  
*Structural Social Work* (Mullaly) 116, 125  
 structuralism 37  
 structuration theory 26, 27–8, 30–1, 35  
*The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons) 206  
*Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Garfinkel) 207  
 subjectivity  
   Butler on 65  
   definition 204  
   economic processes and 139, 140  
   feminism and 91–2, 151  
   Foucault on 47, 49, 53, 60–1  
   postmodernism and 151  
*Subjects of Desire* (Butler) 63  
 surveillance (panopticon) 49, 51, 54–6, 59, 61  
 symbolic violence 38, 40, 44



- systems  
 definitions 24, 182  
 Habermas on 16–8, 21  
 systems theory 174–5, 182
- tacit knowledge 18, 140–1, 228, 243–4  
 talk-in-interaction 211, 215, 217, 220, 223  
 Taylor, Carolyn 101, 109, 228  
 Taylor, Charles 128–9, 136  
 technical–rational knowledge 199, 204  
 technologies of self 48, 49–50  
 Tester, Frank 117, 118  
 theological worldview 138, 146  
*Theorising Welfare* (O'Brien and Penna) 6  
 theory 6–7, 10  
*The Theory of Communicative Action*  
 (Habermas) 16  
*The Theory of Social Work* (Bruno) 159  
*The Third Way* (Giddens) 27  
*The Third Way and its Critics* (Giddens) 27  
 Thomas Aquinas 37  
 Thomas, Clarence 68  
 Thomas, Philip 151, 154  
 Thomassen, Lasse 24  
 Thompson, A.K. 136  
 Thompson, Neil 152  
 Thompson, Sue 152  
 Thyer, Bruce 235  
 Timms, Elizabeth 187  
 toolkit approach 5–6  
 Toulmin, Stephen 246–7  
 Townsend, Elizabeth 198  
*The Transformation of Intimacy* (Giddens) 26  
*Transforming Social Work Practice*  
 (Pease and Fook) 103  
 Trevillion, Steve 252  
 triads 193  
 Trumbull, Deborah 244  
 Turner, Bryan 48  
 Turner, Roy 214  
 turns (conversation analysis) 210, 217, 222  
*Types and Quality of Knowledge in Social  
 Care* (Pawson et al.) 252
- UCINET (social network analysis program) 187, 190  
 undirected ties 193  
*Undoing Gender* (Butler) 67–8  
*The Uses of Argument* (Toulmin) 246–7
- Valente, Thomas W. 194  
 van der Elst, Dirk 204  
 van Wormer, Katherine 176
- Wacquant, Loïc 37, 40, 45  
 Wakefield, Jerome C. 180  
 Walker, Teri 220  
 Walsh, Joseph 188
- Ware, Norma 198  
 Wasserman, Harry 187  
 Wasserman, Stanley 194  
 Watson, D.R. 214  
 Watson, John B. 160  
 weak ties 190, 194  
 Webb, Stephen A.  
 critical social work and 101, 102, 104, 109  
 on Giddens 31, 32, 35  
 postmodernism and 151, 155, 156  
 Weber, Max 26, 206  
 Weber, Zita 151  
 Weick, Ann 173  
*The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu et al.) 36, 38, 41, 45  
 welfare state  
 Giddens on 29, 31  
 Habermas on 17  
 neoliberalism and 137–8, 139, 142–3, 145  
*see also* residual welfare state
- Wellman, Barry 184, 185, 186, 194  
 Wellman, Beth 183  
*Weltanschauung* (worldview) 6  
 Werfel, Sandra 187  
 Werner, Harold D. 172  
 Wetherell, Margaret 222  
 Whelehan, Imelda 88  
 White, Patrick 65, 70  
 White, Susan 92, 101, 109, 204, 228  
 White, Vicky 59, 98, 109  
 whole networks (complete networks) 194  
 Wiles, Peter 139  
 Williams, Charmaine 132  
 Williams, Fiona 147, 151  
 Wilson, Anne 154  
 Wilson, Elizabeth 91  
 Wilson, Sheila 151  
 Wise, Sue 87, 92  
 Wittgenstein, Ludwig 14, 218  
 Wittig, Monique 65  
 Wolf, Naomi 94  
 Wolfreys, Jim 37, 39–40  
 Wollstonecraft, Mary 88  
 Wong, Yuk-Lin 132  
 Woodward, Rona 109  
 Wooffitt, Robin 223  
 World Bank 111, 138  
 World Health Organization (WHO) 76  
 World Trade Organization (WTO) 138, 143  
 Wortley, Scot 194  
 Wraparound 189
- Yan, Miu Chung 132  
 Yip, Kamshing 19–20  
 Yuen Tsang, Angelina 189, 191
- Zimmerman, Don 210, 214  
 Žižek, Slavoj 107