

# SOCIAL WORK THEORIES IN CONTEXT

CREATING FRAMEWORKS  
FOR PRACTICE

SECOND EDITION

KAREN HEALY





Also by Karen Healy:

*Social Work Methods and Skills: The Essential Foundations of Practice*, published  
by Palgrave Macmillan

*Social Work Practices: Contemporary Perspectives on Change*

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2ND EDITION

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palgrave  
macmillan

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In this second edition of *Social Work Theories in Context*, I have built on the framework in the first edition of the book, which has stood the test of time. However, as I engage in professional practice, research and advocacy for the social work profession and the people our profession serves, I am aware that some aspects of our context and knowledge base are changing. This edition reflects these changes.

First, I have reorganized the book into three parts. Part 1 comprises two chapters in which the key concepts of discourse and theory for practice that underpin the book are introduced, alongside the dynamic framework for practice. Part 2 then focuses on the discourses shaping our practice environments and Part 3 outlines contemporary theories for practice. This reorganization is intended to ensure that from the outset readers are introduced to the key concepts and connections can be more readily made between the discourses shaping our practice contexts in Part 2 and theories for practice in Part 3.

Second, I have further developed the theoretical framework regarding the discourses shaping the institutional contexts of social work practice. In recent years, new public management has influenced diverse terrains and contexts of social work practice, and is discussed in Chapter 3. Today, neuroscience, and its potential and limits, is the subject of much debate, and is also influential in the 'psy' discourses on which social work draws, thus it is considered in Chapter 4. Of great interest too, has been the growth of alternative discourses, particularly the increased demand for voice and influence in the survivor movements in fields such as mental health and child welfare services. I acknowledge the growing influence of religion and spirituality on service contexts and processes by extending the discussion of these discourses in this edition. The increasing interest in the environment and social work is also reflected in discussion of environmental social work discourse in Chapter 5.

Third, this edition better recognizes the significant influence of systems theory on social work practice. I have also extended the range of theories for practice considered in this book with discussion of the influence of 'psy' theories, such as motivational interviewing, on problem-solving practice, and more extended discussion of the strengths and solution-oriented approaches.

The reasons I initially wrote the book continue to sustain me in the second edition. I wrote this book to give social work practitioners, students



- Kretzmann, J. and McKnight, J. (1993) *Building Communities from the Inside Out*. (Chicago: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research). Practical guide to the application of asset-based community development. Can be ordered from the Asset-Based Community Development Institute's website (see below).
- Saleebey, D. (ed.) (2012) *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice*, 6th edn. (Boston: Pearson). Edited by one the leading figures in the strengths perspective; offers a comprehensive introduction to the theory of the strengths approach and its application to a broad range of practice fields, including mental health and addictions. If you only read one collection on the strengths perspective, this should be it.
- Turnell, A. and Edwards, S. (1999) *Signs of Safety: A Solution and Safety Oriented Approach to Child Protection Casework*. (New York: Norton). Demonstrates how the strengths perspective and solution-focused approaches can be practically applied to child protection work. The Signs of Safety approach is now internationally recognized and widely used in child welfare services.

## Recommended Websites

- [www.abcdinstitute.org](http://www.abcdinstitute.org)  
Asset-Based Community Development Institute, where John Kretzmann and John McKnight, widely regarded as the founders of the ABCD approach, are located. Includes references to research papers, seminars, and practice projects on ABCD practice.
- [www.sfbta.org](http://www.sfbta.org)  
Solution-Focused Brief Therapy Association posts information about workshops, conferences and research on SFBT. Readers can also purchase publications (books and DVDs).
- [www.signsofsafety.net](http://www.signsofsafety.net)  
Signs of Safety is an innovative solution-focused and safety-organized approach to child protection casework. Provides information about DVDs, workbooks and training opportunities for this approach.

## 9

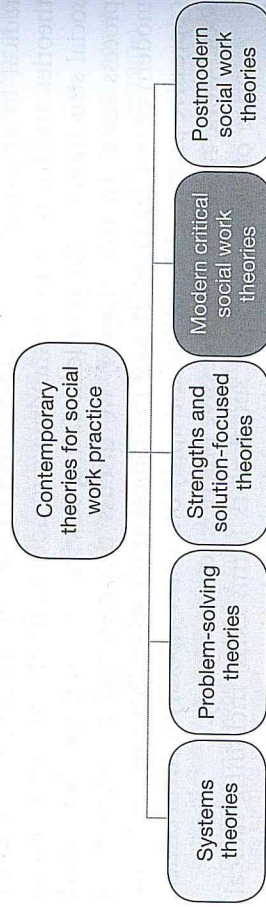
### MODERN CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK From Radical to Anti-oppressive Practice

In this chapter we consider modern critical social work. In its broadest sense, critical social work is concerned with the analysis and transformation of power relations at every level of social work practice. This chapter focuses on modern forms of critical social work and Chapter 10 considers post-modern influences on social work generally, including critical social work. The term 'modern critical social work' refers to forms of critical social work that are grounded primarily in modernist ideas about power and identity. 'Critical social work' refers to a broad range of practice perspectives, from radical to anti-oppressive practice. These draw on critical social science theories and focus on understanding and addressing the impact of broad social structures on the problems facing service users and the social work process itself. In this chapter, we discuss the historical foundations of modern critical social work and the radical approaches that preceded anti-oppressive practice. We outline and apply one contemporary form of critical social work, namely anti-oppressive practice, to a case study.

A range of modern critical social work forms exist, including radical, Marxist, feminist and structural social work. Anti-oppressive practice is also included in this chapter as a modern form of critical practice, although some proponents of anti-oppressive practice have incorporated post-modern ideas as this approach has evolved (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006). Modern critical social work approaches share a focus on the structural contexts of service users' problems and incorporate strategies of critical consciousness and collective action against injustice. Unlike other theories we've considered, these theories for practice are built on the rejection of some aspects of the psychological discourses that have made a significant contribution to modern social work (see Chapter 4). In particular, critical social work approaches reject a focus on psychological assessment and change promoted through 'psy' discourses. But, as we shall see, some core concepts from 'psy' discourses, especially the importance of self-reflection and the 'relationship' between worker and service user, have been incorporated into critical theories for practice.



Figure 9.1 locates critical social work after the strengths and SFBT approaches and before postmodern practices. Although critical social work perspectives emerged prior to the strengths and SFBT approaches, critical and postmodern perspectives involve a significant reorientation of social work practice regarding issues of power and identity and, as such, are separated conceptually from the approaches considered in Chapters 6–8. The critical focus on the operation of power and the social construction of identity within social structures (as is the case for critical social work) or within discourse (as is the case in postmodernism) represents a break with the liberal humanist notions of self and power on which many social work theories rely. Liberal humanism emphasizes and values the human capacity for individual agency and this ideal is reflected in the three theories for practice (systems, problem-solving, strengths and solution-focused) discussed in Chapters 6–8, as each valorizes the individual's capacity to achieve change. By contrast, despite some important differences, the theoretical foundations of critical and postmodern approaches to practice require social workers to question liberal humanist notions of rationality, individual agency and the operation of power (see Agger, 1991).



**Figure 9.1** Modern critical social work in context

Modern critical social work is oriented towards understanding the structural conditions that impact on the genesis and maintenance of social problems and in which social work practitioners operate. Modern critical social workers emphasize that social workers should seek to address injustice at every level of their practice, from direct engagement with clients through to work aimed at challenging the inequitable distribution of resources. Critical social workers identify injustice as stemming from differences in power and access to material resources. While there is a wide variety of modern critical social work, as identified elsewhere (Healy, 2012, p. 192), all share the following characteristics:

- 1 A commitment to solidarity with oppressed and excluded individuals and communities (Leonard, 1994).
- 2 Identifying and, as far as possible, acknowledging the power differentials in all aspects of interpersonal relationships but especially between human service professionals and service users.
- 3 Recognition of the influential role of social, economic and political systems in shaping individual and community experiences and opportunities and the relationships between service providers and users (Leonard, 1995).
- 4 A commitment to the transformation of the processes and structures perpetuating domination and exploitation within the human service system and broader social structures.

## The Foundations of Modern Critical Social Work

The term 'modern critical social work' refers to a broad range of practice approaches, including Marxist social work, radical social work, structural social work, feminist social work, anti-racist social work, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory social work. Despite their considerable diversity, the approaches share an intellectual debt to the critical social science paradigm (Healy, 2000, p. 18).

The key features of the critical social science paradigm that are especially relevant for modernist forms of critical social work include the claim that macro-social structures shape social relations at every level of social life (Healy, 2000, pp. 19–21). For example, some critical social science theories assert that capitalism shapes relations between middle-class and working-class people, patriarchy shapes relations between men and women, and imperialism constrains relations between European and non-European peoples. Drawing on these understandings, critical social workers seek to understand the original causes of oppression, within overarching social structures, and are committed to transforming these structures (see de Maria, cited in Reisch and Andrews, 2001, p. 5).

Critical social scientists also hold that the world is divided between the 'haves' and 'have nots' and that the interests of these groups are opposed and irreconcilable (Healy, 2000, p. 19; see also Mullaly, 1993, pp. 142–3). The 'haves' are members of privileged groups, such as the middle classes, males, Europeans, heterosexuals and able-bodied people, while the 'have nots' are located on the other side of the social divide, that is, the working classes, women, non-Europeans, gays and lesbians, and people with disabilities. In terms of these divisions, social workers are represented as powerful, because of their professional status and access to institutional power, while



service users are represented as relatively powerless. As we shall see, modernist forms of critical practice require social workers to reflect on their access to power and to develop strategies for sharing power with service users who are assumed to be less powerful (see Dominelli, 1988, pp. 10–11; Dalrymple and Burke, 1995).

Another feature of the critical social science paradigm is the view that the oppressed are encouraged to accept their oppressed status via dominant ideologies that present the current social order as just (Fay, 1987, p. 70). For example, the dominant discourse of neoclassical economics focuses on individual choices and responsibilities but obscures the way in which these choices are constrained by patterns of advantage and disadvantage. Critical social workers argue that social workers should raise the consciousness of service users, that is, help them see that the causes of their problems lie not in themselves but in unjust social structures.

A final feature of the critical social science paradigm relevant to modern critical social work is the emphasis on empowering oppressed people to act, collectively, to achieve social change. In all forms of critical social science, the ideal goal of collective action is a society free of all forms of oppression and domination (Fay, 1987). In this paradigm, it is in service users' collective self-interest to agitate for social change. Drawing on these ideas, critical social workers aim to create opportunities for service users to participate in collective, rather than individual, responses to their concerns. So, for example, in responding to young mothers' experiences of violence, we would see individual support and counselling as a precursor to these young women's participation in the development of collective, and consumer-run, initiatives for challenging violence against young mothers (see Healy and Walsh, 1997; Healy, 2000).

## The Early History of Critical Social Work

Although critical social work theories gained prominence during the 1960s and 70s, critical social workers have always existed within the social work profession. In the late nineteenth century, critical elements within the profession highlighted the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on service users and encouraged social workers to forge links with social movements and the trade union movement (Reisch and Andrews, 2001, p. 35). Perhaps the best known 'first wave' critical social worker is Jane Addams (1860–1935), who worked in the settlement house movement in Chicago from the 1890s onwards and later won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 for her pacifist activities.

During the middle part of the twentieth century, a small number of leading social work commentators challenged the profession to move

beyond its increasingly individualistic orientation. For example, in 1949, Norma Parker (see Parker, 1969), a leading Australian social work academic, advocated a human rights framework for analysing social issues and promoting service users' wellbeing. The historical evidence suggests that these social workers sometimes paid a high personal and professional price for their views, as they were often professionally isolated and vulnerable to persecution (see Reisch and Andrews, 2001). For example, in the USA, during the McCarthy era of the 1940s and 50s, Bertha Reynolds, a prominent early critical social worker, was forced to resign from her academic post and was effectively blacklisted from service organizations because of her association with the Communist Party (Reisch and Andrews, 2001, p. 115).

## The Birth of Radical Social Work

During the 1960s and 70s, radical social work emerged as a distinctive practice approach and had a significant influence on social work education. The dramatic expansion of radical social work literature during this period can be attributed to a number of factors, including the growing influence of sociology, particularly critical sociology, on social work and social policy, critical social change movements, and the discovery of poverty as a public policy concern (Reisch and Andrews, 2001; see also Thompson, 2006). Across what we now know as the postindustrial world, a cadre of radical social work academics drew on Marxist philosophy to reorient social work towards its 'true' purpose – radical social change (Martin, 2003, pp. 23–4; see Bailey and Brake, 1975; Throssel, 1975; Corrigan and Leonard, 1978; Galper, 1980).

From a base in critical social science theories, particularly Marxism, radical social workers argued that social workers should recognize that the origins of service users' problems lay primarily in unjust social structures, rather than in their personal histories. They highlighted the inherent contradictions in the role of social workers, and questioned the potential for truly progressive practices in capitalist societies and urged social workers to constantly reflect on the social control dimensions of their ostensibly caring role (see Corrigan and Leonard, 1978, pp. 90–3). Radical social workers encouraged social workers to eschew the individualistic practices that characterized 'psy' approaches, in favour of working collectively with service users for social change. For example, Throssel (1975, p. 21) argued that:

Any substantial change in the current oppression of whole groups of people requires not diagnosis and treatment of those groups but change in the others – the non-deviant, the 'normal' or 'healthy'. Thus, to overcome poverty (and its consequences), there needs to be a relinquishing of wealth by the rich.



Consistent with critical social science principles, radical social work theorists argued that service users would only act rationally in their own best interests once they understood that the true origins of their problems lay not in themselves but in oppressive social structures. Thus, critical consciousness raising was a key practice strategy employed by radical social workers and remains a cornerstone of modern critical social work practice.

Beyond Marxist theory, social workers can draw on other bodies of social theory. However, as we shall see, certain forms of social theory, particularly those associated with social movements such as feminist and anti-racist movements, feature more prominently in the modern critical social work literature than others, such as the neo-Marxist work of the Frankfurt School. Notwithstanding the significant influence of the Frankfurt School on critical social theory generally, its influence on critical social work has been limited. The small body of literature examining the potential of the Frankfurt School for social work practice has offered critical insights into existing contexts and methods of practice rather seeking to develop new approaches (see Gray and Lovatt, 2007, 2008; Houston, 2009). This limited engagement can perhaps be explained by the specialist philosophical discourse of the Frankfurt School, which may constrain its relevance to social workers without specialist philosophical training, and the pessimistic outlook that pervaded some of this literature regarding the potential for progressive social change under conditions of late modern capitalism (Healy, 2012). We turn now to an exploration of some of the different frames utilized by social workers in the context of increasingly diverse approaches to modern critical practice.

## The Diversification of Critical Practice Models

Given their concern with a dramatic reorientation of social work, radical social workers had probably anticipated that their perspectives would contribute to tensions within the profession. Less expected perhaps was the growing discontent among radical social workers about the limited scope of a class-based analysis as a base for critical practice. From the 1970s onwards, a diverse band of critical social work projects 'emerged in connection with various intellectual movements, including feminism, race theory and Marxist criticism, that identified dimensions of economic and political domination in modern societies' (Gray and Webb, 2009, p. 77). The most prominent of these new critical practice models were feminist social work, anti-racist social work, and structural social work.

Feminist social workers critiqued the gender blindness of radical social work. They sought to broaden radical definitions of social oppression by placing women's experiences of gender oppression on the agenda of critical social work, alongside other forms of oppression, such as classism, racism

and heterosexism (Dominelli and McLeod, 1989, p. 2). These feminist social workers argued that a gender analysis must be central to radical practice because the vast majority of social service workers and service users are female (Hanmer and Statham, 1999). In practice, they drew attention to women's specific experiences of oppression, such as their vulnerability to domestic and sexual violence, which had been largely unrecognized in the radical paradigm (Weeks, 1994; Hanmer and Statham, 1999). Like radical social workers, modern feminist social workers asserted that the true origins of women's oppression lay in the macro-structures, particularly those associated with patriarchy (Dominelli and McLeod, 1989, p. 33).

From feminist social movements, feminist practitioners incorporated practice principles that have influenced other forms of modern critical practice. One of these principles is that 'the personal is political'. By this, feminist practitioners meant that one's personal experiences have their origins in political structures and that our personal behaviour reflects and reinforces broader political processes (Dominelli and McLeod, 1989, p. 33; see also White, 2006). Thus, we should reflect in our personal and professional relationships the kinds of political changes we would like to effect. Another powerful idea in feminist social work is the notion of 'radical egalitarianism', meaning that service providers should seek to minimize the power differentials between service workers and service users (Dominelli, 2002a, p. 39).

Among radical social workers, there was also a concern that issues of racial injustice were inadequately addressed by class-focused analyses. From this, distinctive anti-racist approaches emerged during the 1980s, not as a threat to radical social work, but as a necessary extension of the apparently myopic focus on class-based oppression. Anti-racist social workers sought to show that racial oppression is a significant and distinct form of oppression, rather than merely an effect of class-based injustices (Dominelli, 1988; Hutchinson-Reis, 1989; Shah, 1989). Like radical social workers, anti-racist social workers adopted a critical stance towards modern professional social work, but extended the radical analysis to focus on the racial dimensions of oppression. For example, Dominelli (1988, p. 33) asserts that:

As their attention is deflected onto resolving 'clients' personal problems', social workers expend considerable energy teaching clients to change their behaviour, making it conform more closely to 'acceptable' standards. For black clients, this has led white social workers to downplay the specific circumstances and avenues through which racism holds black people back and deprives them of resources, power, justice and dignity.

Anti-racist social workers sought to reform social work practice towards recognition of and collective responses to racial injustice (see Dominelli, 1988).



Structural social work represented another offshoot from radical social work. One of the earliest references to 'structural social work' was in 1974 when US social work scholars Middleman and Goldberg published a book on this topic. Since the late 1970s, Canadian scholars have been strongly associated with the development of this practice theory, initially in the work of Moreau (1979, 1990) and, more recently, in publications by Mullaly (1993, 2007), Carniol (1992) and Bishop (2002). In common with the other theories in this chapter, structural social work is based in the critical social science paradigm (Mullaly, 2007). As their name suggests, structural social workers are primarily concerned with analysing and confronting structural injustices, particularly 'how the rich and powerful within society constrain and define the less powerful' (Martin, 2003, p. 24; see also Mullaly, 2007). However, in contrast with radical social workers who focused on class-based oppression, structural social workers insist that 'all forms of oppression are, in reality, mutually reinforcing and overlapping' (Moreau, 1990, p. 64; see also Mullaly, 2007).

Structural social workers seek to alleviate the negative effects of 'an exploitative and alienating social order' and, ultimately, aim to transform the social order to one of greater material equality and respect for diversity (Mullaly, 2007, p. 245). Structural social workers' practice strategies draw on not only critical social science, but also ideas from critical social movements, particularly the women's movement, gay and lesbian rights movements, and the trade union movement (see Bishop, 2002; Mullaly, 2007). In addition, structural social workers draw on the insights of a range of critical social work theories, including radical, anti-racist and feminist social work (Mullaly, 2007). Again, like the critical practice models we have discussed so far, structural social workers promote consciousness raising on the grounds that 'the social order may seriously impair a client's capacities to accurately construe reality' (Moreau, 1990, p. 54). They also aim to facilitate collective rather than individualistic responses to structural injustices (Moreau, 1990, p. 53), and urge social workers to engage with progressive social change activities in order to address the structural injustices that lie at the heart of the issues facing most service users.

## Critical Social Work Today

Within the social work literature, a diversity of critical social work practice writing continues to flourish. In the past decade, a significant body of work defending and reinvigorating the radical social work project has emerged (see Lavalette and Ferguson, 2007; Ferguson, 2008, 2011; Lavalette, 2011). This has coincided with, and been informed by, the emergence of social movements within the social work field, particularly the Social Work

Action Network in the UK. This contemporary body of radical social work writing sits alongside a large body of anti-oppressive, anti-racist, critical and feminist social work writings (Healy, 2000; Dominelli, 2002b; Fook, 2002; White, 2006).

Perhaps more than any other body of social work literature, modern critical social work writers draw attention to the oppressive circumstances and effects of social work practice. In their articulation of approaches to practice, this diverse group draws attention to the devastating impact of neoliberalism and new public management on the social work profession and on individuals and communities (see White, 2006; Mullaly, 2007; Ferguson, 2011). They are also critical of the role of social workers as agents of the state and urge social workers to challenge state practices and policies that disenfranchise vulnerable citizens.

Despite a unifying concern about changing societal and institutional conditions, there remains some dispute among modern critical social workers about both the utility of the term 'critical social work' and the diverse body of critical social work approaches. Ferguson (2008, p. 104) is critical of the extent to which contemporary critical social work theories depart from radical notions of 'the nature of social divisions and the possibility (and even desirability) of social change'. Ferguson (2008, 2011) critiques the extent to which a focus on 'identity', such as gender or ethnic identity, undermines recognition of the material base of oppression and the impact of the social structures of late capitalist society on the continuing marginalization of individuals and communities.

The radical social workers' case for recognition of the class base of oppression is compelling and a much needed reminder regarding the contribution of class inequality and material disadvantage to the lives of people with whom we practise. Yet the relationship between class and other forms of oppression as foci of social work analysis will, necessarily, be a matter for ongoing debate within the profession. Social workers working within the critical tradition make similarly compelling cases regarding the impact of identity-based oppressions that cannot be ignored nor subsumed within a class-based analysis of oppression. Indeed, the tension between the politics of redistribution and recognition is well recognized in sociological and philosophical debates about social justice (see Fraser, 1997; Olsen, 2008) and is unlikely to be resolved in favour of either side of the debate. For critical social workers, this means that we must recognize the multiple dimensions of oppression and acknowledge our dual responsibilities to address the economic and cultural bases of oppression. We turn now to outline anti-oppressive social work as one model of modern critical social work practice that seeks to recognize and address the multiple dimensions of oppression encountered in social work practice.



## Anti-oppressive Practice

Over the past two decades, anti-oppressive social work has emerged and developed as a dominant theory of critical social work practice. Anti-oppressive practice first arose in the UK in the late 1980s (Martin, 2003, p. 29). During the 1990s, a series of landmark publications on anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, primarily by British authors (see Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Dominelli, 1997; Thompson, 2006), led to international recognition of this approach. According to Dalrymple and Burke (2006, p. 7):

Anti-oppressive practice is a critical social work approach that draws on critical social science theories and is informed by humanistic and social justice values, taking account of the experiences and views of oppressed people.

Anti-oppressive practice, like radical social work, is based on recognition of the structural origins of services users' problems and seeks to transform power relations in practice. Anti-oppressive theory also promotes social workers' role and responsibility in achieving social transformation (see Dominelli, 2002b). Yet anti-oppressive theory goes beyond the radical social work tradition in a number of ways, most particularly in its insistence that the personal and cultural bases of oppression must be integrated with the structural analysis of oppression and its recognition of interpersonal and statutory work as legitimate sites of anti-oppressive practice.

In this discussion, we refer to anti-discriminatory theory alongside anti-oppressive theory on the grounds that both theories share many core assumptions. However, we also alert the reader to debate among theorists about the commonalities and differences between the two schools. Dalrymple and Burke (2006, p. 4) claim that anti-oppressive practice places greater emphasis on changing social structural arrangements, while anti-discriminatory theorists rely more strongly on anti-discriminatory legislation as a vehicle for achieving change. However, anti-discriminatory theorists may contest this claim on the grounds that they too offer a comprehensive theory of practice aimed at challenging existing structural arrangements (Thompson, 2006).

## Core Assumptions of Anti-oppressive Practice

A key assumption of anti-oppressive practice is that social workers must recognize multiple forms of oppression and that all forms of oppression should be acknowledged as harmful (Thompson, 2006). In anti-oppressive theory, oppression arises from unequal power across social divisions (Burke and Harrison, 2002, p. 229). For example, Mitchell (cited in Dalrymple and

Burke, 2006, p. 41) argues that women are oppressed by men, children and older people by adults, disabled people by able people and so on. Anti-oppressive theorists urge social workers to be constantly alert to the social divisions affecting service users' lives.

Anti-oppressive social workers argue that social divisions shape practice relationships and that we can reduce the disempowering effects of these differences by critical reflection on our position within social structures. According to Thompson (1992, pp. 169–70, cited in Thompson, 2006, p. 15): 'There is no middle ground; intervention either adds to oppression (or at least condones it) or goes some small way towards easing or breaking such oppression.' Anti-oppressive theorists emphasize that the social work role is an intensely political one, in which social workers occupy a privileged status, at least in contrast with service users. Hence, social workers must adopt an ongoing critical and reflective stance so as to avert, as far as possible, replicating oppressive social relations in practice (see Burke and Harrison, 2002).

Anti-oppressive theorists highlight the multiple levels of oppression including, but also going beyond, structural oppression. Thompson (2006, pp. 26–8) proposes a three-dimensional model of discrimination, the 'PCS' analysis, that describes the interaction across the personal or psychological, the cultural and the structural sources of oppression (see also Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Mullaly, 2002). For Thompson (2006, p. 26), the personal level of practice refers to the personal feelings and attitudes of the service user, as well as the interpersonal relationship established between service providers and service users. The cultural level 'represents the interests and influence of society as reflected in the social values and cultural norms we internalize via the processes of socialization' (Thompson, 2006, p. 27). Anti-oppressive theorists require social workers to constantly reflect on the ways in which the social structures associated with capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism contribute to, and interact with, the personal and cultural levels of oppression (Thompson, 2006, p. 28).

Anti-oppressive theorists emphasize that various forms of oppression interact with other. For analytic purposes, they identify specific kinds of oppression, such as ageism and sexism, while also recognizing that, in practice, individuals may experience multiple forms of oppression (Mullaly, 2002, Ch. 7; Thompson, 2006). Recognition of this complexity has significant implications for collective action, insofar as anti-oppressive practitioners do not assume that a specific kind of oppression will necessarily provide the basis for commonality. For example, the experience of oppression encountered by a black single mother will, of necessity, differ from that of a black disabled man; thus, shared racial oppression cannot be assumed as a basis for commonality in all contexts. According to Mullaly (2002, p. 153), 'making links between oppressions, therefore, will require the recognition of both commonalities and specificities across different forms and



experiences of oppression'. In addition, Mullaly (2002, p. 153) argues that we must recognize that complex interactions across oppressions can intensify the experience of oppression. So, for example, a person subject to two forms of oppression, such as class and race-based oppression, may suffer more than twice the level of oppression experienced by a person subject to only one of these forms of oppression (see Mullaly, 2002, pp. 153–6).

Anti-oppressive social workers recognize and seek to support a broad range of intervention strategies. A key strength of anti-oppressive theories is that they recognize interpersonal and statutory practice as legitimate sites of social work practice and, in so doing, seek to develop the potential for critical practice in these sites. For example, in contrast to radical social workers' wholesale rejection of statutory power (see Simpkin, 1979, Ch. 7), anti-oppressive social workers seek a more constructive engagement with constructive power, recognizing it as a necessary but often destructive form of authority (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006). In particular, anti-oppressive practice promotes a minimal intervention approach, which incorporates the idea that practitioners should intervene early and in ways that prevent the escalation of state involvement in clients' lives.

We turn now to a case study of the Hayden family.

### Case Study The Hayden family

Imagine you are working as a social worker in a community-based child and family welfare service staffed by social workers, psychologists and a family worker who provide services to those with ongoing involvement from the statutory authority. Service providers can work for up to three years with a family requiring long-term support and therapeutic intervention. The service works closely with the statutory authority and other agencies, as many families referred have a broad network of services involved in their lives. You have received the following referral from the statutory child protection authority.

Family history of Hayden family re: child protection concerns

Julia – 35 years

Kathleen (subject child) – 12 months

Max (subject child) – 4 years

Cynthia – 14 years

Delia – 16 years

Jonathan – 18 years

Julia is a woman of Anglo-Saxon background whose own childhood was characterized by instability, loss and abuse. Julia's mum and dad split up when she was nine years old.

Initially, Julia lived with her mum, but when her mother's new partner moved in, she was sent to live with her dad, who proceeded to sexually and physically abuse her. When Julia turned 14, she ran away to a refuge.

Julia experienced periods of homelessness and although a good student, she found it hard to maintain her schooling. She became pregnant at 16 to her then boyfriend, and gave birth to her first child at 17. Later, she married the father of her two daughters but the relationship was characterized by violence and drug abuse, and she has been struggling with a drug habit ever since. Her oldest three children were placed in care because of the violence and drug abuse affecting her parenting and she had irregular contact with them for several years. Three years ago, the children re-established contact with Julia and the two girls returned to her care six months later.

Julia has had a number of male partners but most of these relationships have been characterized by domestic violence and criminal activity. The family has been living in public housing ever since the birth of her four year old.

Despite her history of severe abuse, Julia has a clear picture of the sort of parent she would like to be and is able to articulate the steps she needs to take to get there. Concerns focus on her capacity to reach her goals. Julia has a supportive drug and alcohol worker who is an effective advocate; however, there have been concerns that this worker and the drug and alcohol service generally minimize the impact of the drug abuse on Julia's ability to parent. In this case, there has been a history of conflict and poor communication between the services involved with the family.

### Reasons for referral to the child and family welfare service

Julia is experiencing difficulties in her ability to adequately parent her two youngest children. The statutory child protection officer tells you that there have been a number of reports on the two younger children related to neglect – in particular, emotional neglect – and whether or not Julia has the capacity to be a good enough parent. At one stage, she left her two young children with her mother and disappeared for two weeks on a 'drug binge'. After this incident, the youngest child was placed in the grandmother's care and has recently returned to Julia.

The concerns of the statutory child protection agency include:

- Julia's long history of drug use
- her criminal activity in relation to this
- her history of being involved in violent relationships
- her ability to understand the impact of drug use on her parenting capacity
- the impact of disrupted attachment on her youngest child.

She struggles to respond to her children's need and also has a tendency to rely on her older children to provide the parenting of the younger children. For example, her 16-year-old daughter, Delia, failed to attend college because she had to stay home to look after the youngest child.



We now discuss five key principles of anti-oppressive practice, and using practice exercises, you are asked to apply these principles to the Hayden family case study.

### 1: Critical Reflection on Self in Practice

Anti-oppressive social workers seek to maintain an open and critical stance towards their practice (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Thompson, 2006). This approach demands that we reflect on the ways in which our own biographies, especially how our membership of particular social divisions, shapes our practice relationships (Burke and Harrison, 2002, p. 231). We are also challenged to reflect on how the biographies of other professionals involved in intervention and assessment might affect their capacity to truly empathize with and understand clients' experiences. The assumption is that by reflecting on our membership of social categories, and where possible, replacing ourselves with workers of similar social backgrounds, we can begin to address power differentials in practice.

#### Practice Exercise **Critical reflection on self**

As the social worker at the child and family welfare service:

- Who do you see as the service user(s) in the Hayden family?
- Who would you see as the service user if you were working in a different service, such as the drug and alcohol service, or the local statutory authority?
- Using the anti-oppressive framework, what social divisions are you a member of, for example gender, class, race identities?
- How might your membership of these identity groups enhance or limit your capacity to work with the client(s)?

### 2: Critical Assessment of Service Users' Experiences of Oppression

Anti-oppressive practitioners assess how personal, cultural and structural processes shape the problems service users present to social service agencies. An anti-oppressive assessment requires us to consider how the service users' membership of specific social divisions and their historical and geographical context shape their experiences and the options for action available to them (Burke and Harrison, 2002, p. 232). In our analysis of service users' oppression, it is important that we consider the impact of major social divisions such as race, class and gender, as well as other divisions arising from

inequality and discrimination, such as 'geographical location, mental distress and employment status' (Burke and Harrison, 2002, p. 232). In addition, the anti-oppressive assessment process turns workers' attention to a critical analysis of the prevailing ideologies shaping agency policies and resource allocation. For example, we might consider how the discourses of biomedicine, neoclassical economics and law might shape various professionals' assessments of the Hayden family and the services available to them.

The processes of critical reflection also extend to reflection on how the language one uses in assessment is shaped by dominant ideologies that convey and sustain oppressive power relations. Dalrymple and Burke (2006, p. 150) emphasize that in our practice:

we have to be aware of the way in which language can reflect power relations and have an impact on the people with whom we are working ... It enables workers to label others and define what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Terms such as disturbed, at risk and in need describe behaviour from a particular value perspective.

Anti-oppressive theorists contend that while they do not negate social workers' responsibilities towards the assessment of phenomena such as 'risk' and 'need', they insist that any assessment must also be 'theoretically informed, holistic, empowering and challenging' (Burke and Harrison, 2002, p. 234).

#### Practice Exercise **Undertaking critical assessment**

Using an anti-oppressive framework, discuss:

- What forms of oppression are these service users subject to? (Remember to consider major social divisions, for example class and sex, and other forms of discrimination, such as unemployment and isolation.)
- In your role as a child and family welfare worker, what dominant ideas or discourses will shape service provision to the Hayden family?
- How will these ideas shape service provision to this family?

### 3: Empowering Service Users

Anti-oppressive approaches to empowerment seek to overcome the cultural, institutional and structural, as well as personal, obstacles to clients taking greater control of their lives (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006, Ch. 5).

At the interpersonal level, anti-oppressive social workers promote service user empowerment by encouraging them to share their feelings of powerless-



ness (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006, p. 113). Again, like other forms of critical social work, anti-oppressive theorists support consciousness-raising processes that enable service users to understand how structural and cultural injustices shape their experiences of oppression, which highlight that service users are not alone in their experiences of powerlessness (Mullaly, 2002, p. 180).

Anti-oppressive theorists identify that a further barrier to empowerment may lie in service users' lack of capacities, or confidence in their capacities, to act. Thus, social workers working in the anti-oppressive paradigm work with service users to identify areas for skill development and to facilitate opportunities for service users to exercise and gain confidence in their capacities. Another way service providers can empower service users is by ensuring that their views are incorporated into the assessment process, especially where the service provider and service user disagree.

At an institutional level, anti-oppressive social workers promote changes to the organization and delivery of services in ways that enhance anti-oppressive practice and service user control (see Thompson, 2006). Anti-oppressive theorists insist that, because the processes of service delivery can serve to oppress or empower, it is crucial that service providers have opportunities to learn about, and maximize their potential for, anti-oppressive practice. According to Thompson (2006, p. 177), 'awareness training' for service providers can help to promote anti-discriminatory practice at every level of the service organization. Additionally, anti-oppressive theorists promote service user involvement in decision-making about the management of social service resources.

Empowerment at the structural level requires social workers to work towards fundamental reform of social, economic and political structures in ways that lead to the more just distribution of material resources and social power. Mullaly (2002, p. 194) suggests that the obstacles to structural empowerment can be addressed by the development of alternative services and organizations, engagement with progressive social movements, critical social policy practice, and revitalization of the political sector. Returning to the case study, we might use the knowledge we have gained by our work with the Hayden family to expose the inadequacies of current government policy and service provision to families affected by parental drug use.

#### Practice Exercise **A critical and multidimensional approach to empowerment**

- Identify at least one barrier to empowerment facing members of the Hayden family at each of the following levels: personal, institutional, cultural and structural.
- Identify and discuss two practical strategies you would use for addressing each of these barriers.

#### 4: Working in Partnership

For the anti-oppressive social worker, the term 'working in partnership' means that 'service users must be included as far as possible as citizens in the decision-making processes which affect their lives' (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006, pp. 131–3). While all the practice theories we have discussed incorporate partnership as a practice principle, anti-oppressive theorists take the notion of partnership in a different direction. In contrast to task-centred practice or the strengths approach, which take partnership as something that can be achieved relatively easily given the will of both parties, anti-oppressive theorists see partnership as a vexed issue. They contend that the potential for partnership is constrained by unequal power relations arising from:

- the stigma of service use
- vested power interests held by professionals and service provider agencies
- social control roles of service agencies
- agency accountabilities to third parties such as funding bodies rather than primarily to service users themselves (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006).

For anti-oppressive practitioners, partnership must begin with the genuine sharing of power and a commitment to collaboration at interpersonal and institutional levels (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006, p. 133). Some ways of enhancing partnership at the personal level include open and clear communication about the nature and scope of the social worker's role. For example, it is vital that service users are made aware of your statutory responsibilities in relation to them and the organizational constraints, such as time limits, on your involvement with them. Partnership also demands that we value the individual by, for example, showing respect for their perspectives and their lived knowledge (Burke and Harrison, 2002; Mullaly, 2002).

At both personal and institutional levels, it is important to maximize service users' opportunities for participation in the decisions affecting them. Some ways of achieving this include establishing an agency charter in which service users' right to participate is endorsed and mechanisms are established for redressing a lack of opportunity to participate. At an agency level, this will also involve the allocation of resources, such as support staff, to ensure that service users can truly participate in decision-making.



## Anti-oppressive Practice: Some Critical Reflections

Here, we consider the strengths, limits and concerns associated with this approach. The substantial body of recent publications on anti-oppressive practice attests to the contemporary popularity of this approach, at least among social work educators and authors. The key strengths of this practice model include its reconciliation of social work values and practice methods. Anti-oppressive practice places the value of social justice centre stage in all dimensions of social work practice. It does not blame individuals for their difficulties, but encourages us to adopt a multidimensional analysis, which recognizes the personal, cultural and structural dimensions of the oppression experienced by service users, such as the Hayden family. It ensures that, as practitioners, we recognize the effects of cultural practices and social structures on services users' lives, and it makes these processes and structures a legitimate site of social service intervention.

Unlike earlier critical practice models, such as radical social work, anti-oppressive practice also values the contribution that local change processes can make to achieving social change. An anti-oppressive approach, then, would encourage us to consider how we can promote effective support for the Hayden family. It would also encourage us to constantly reflect on how our subjectivities shape our capacity to practise in an anti-oppressive way with all members of the Hayden family. For example, we would reflect on how our subjectivity as middle-class helping professionals limits our understanding of the dilemmas faced by Julia as the parent of five children living in public housing.

Anti-oppressive practice challenges social workers to recognize the cultural and structural context of their practice. In the case of the Hayden family, this allows us to move beyond a focus on family dynamics to recognize the cultural and structural dimensions of their situation. Thus, using an anti-oppressive approach, we might become involved in establishing support and advocacy services for families with parents affected by drug and alcohol use. In this way, we might prevent families, like the Hayden family, from reaching the crisis points that lead to statutory intervention.

Despite the growing popularity of anti-oppressive practice in the social work literature, we can also identify many limitations in this approach. We have serious concerns about the application of this model to 'high-risk' decision-making, that is, in situations where there is a significant risk of death or serious injury to a client. The strong critique of the 'psy' discourse underpinning this approach, accompanied by the prioritization of structural analysis of clients' experiences, can lead social workers to neglect individual psychological and personal factors that may contribute substantially to elevated risk in some contexts, such as child protection, mental health, and work in criminal justice. Social workers' capacity to act in high-

### Practice Exercise Working in partnership

- Identify one barrier to partnership that would face a social worker seeking to work in an anti-oppressive way with the Hayden family.
- Discuss two strategies you could use to overcome this barrier.

### 5: Minimal Intervention

Anti-oppressive social workers recognize that social services work is a contradictory activity in which social care dimensions are always intertwined with social control. However, anti-oppressive theorists concede that social workers may need to enact social control to prevent harm to the service user, as is the case in high-risk environments (see Dalrymple and Burke, 1995, p. 78). Anti-oppressive theorists adopt the principle of minimal intervention in order to reduce the oppressive and disempowering dimensions of social work intervention. Minimal intervention means that social workers should aim to intervene in the least intrusive and oppressive ways possible (Payne, 1997, p. 261; see also Dalrymple and Burke, 2006, p. 15). In practice, this usually means that social workers should focus on early intervention, with the primary aim of preventing the escalation of risk of harm to the service user.

Anti-oppressive social workers can achieve minimal intervention through a focus on early intervention and working towards increasing the availability and accessibility of services, particularly preventive services. For example, service workers might adopt an outreach model of practice that increases service users' knowledge and options to access support services that could help a person manage their struggles with mental health concerns.

Another way we might increase the service's accessibility and comprehensiveness is by linking existing services. For example, when working with a group of young parents, we might move beyond a focus on their parenting needs to increase their access to services such as literacy and educational services to address long-term barriers to social and economic participation.

### Practice Exercise Practising minimal intervention

- How might you minimize the intrusiveness of your intervention with the Hayden family?
- Imagine that the manager at the child and family service has asked you for your ideas about how the organization might minimize the intrusiveness of its interventions with families like the Haydens. What practical strategies would you recommend for your organization?



risk situations can be further limited by the principle of minimal intervention, which is based on insight into the oppressive effects of social work intervention, but with the exception of the Dalrymple and Burke's (1995) work on the topic, there is little acknowledgement of the importance and helpfulness of the use of power in social service interventions. Indeed, in situations involving spousal or child assault, what is experienced as oppressive social service intervention by one party, the assailant, may be experienced as the way out of an untenable situation by another, the victim of violence. Even in less extreme situations, clients do not necessarily experience service intervention as oppressive; the anti-oppressive model fails to take account of the diversity of clients' experiences of service provision, especially the fact that some service users willingly seek out this form of intervention to address a wide variety of needs (Wise, 1990).

Furthermore, the anti-oppressive principle of minimal intervention is especially problematic in instances where service users present different and conflicting needs, as it provides no way of prioritizing one set of service users' needs over another. For example, the framework gives us no way of prioritizing the needs of Julia Hayden (the mother in our case study) and those of her children, particularly Kathleen and Max (the two youngest children).

Another limitation of the anti-oppressive approach is its reliance on an oppositional stance, in which the battle lines are clearly drawn even before we enter specific sites of practice. Thompson (2006, p. 179), for example, emphasizes that there 'can be no middle ground', meaning that our practice as social workers either challenges or reinforces discrimination and oppression. The potential polarization between what is identified as anti-oppressive practice and that which condones oppression is problematic in many areas of social work practice where compromise and negotiation of 'grey areas' can be critical to negotiating a workable solution to a problem at hand. If we arrive at these situations with preconceived notions of 'enemy and ally' and 'good and bad', our capacity to respectfully listen to, and work with, a range of stakeholders will be constrained. In relation to the Hayden family, we must also be careful about what is labelled as 'powerful and established' ideology and what is recognized as genuine concerns. This case study raises some potentially painful issues, particularly for Julia, such as confronting the effects of her drug use on her parenting, and we must be careful of the potential to dismiss these concerns as evidence of a 'powerful and established' ideology, such as the ideology of parenting.

A contradiction exists between anti-oppressive theorists' claim to promote dialogue in practice and their assumptions that they hold a true and correct analysis of the world. This is evident in the practice of consciousness raising, in which the social worker, in a spirit of dialogue, introduces a critical structural analysis of service users' experience. For

example, Mullaly (2002, p. 184), describes a three-stage model of consciousness raising, in which the service user develops an awareness of their shared oppression with other members of their oppressed category and gains a sense of identification, self-respect and pride with this category. The danger of consciousness-raising efforts is that those who do not conform to the truths presented by the anti-oppressive service provider may be dismissed as lacking critical consciousness or as conservative reactionaries. For example, Dominelli (2002b, p. 10) charges those who oppose anti-oppressive practice as fearful of losing 'the taken-for-granted privileges accorded to them through an inegalitarian social order'. The issue here is that by characterizing all those who oppose anti-oppressive practice 'insights' as self-interested or conservative, anti-oppressive theorists insulate their approach from the critical practical reflection required to understand the uses and the limits of the model for promoting critical practice in the diverse institutional contexts of social work activity.

The primary reliance on a structural analysis of power relations that underpins this theory leaves little room for recognizing different power relations at local levels. For example, in reflecting on a case scenario involving a young black woman, Burke and Harrison (2002, p. 232) contend that: 'A white male social worker brings to the situation a dynamic that will reproduce the patterns of oppression to which black women are subjected in the wider society.' The assumption here is that one's membership of certain identity categories associated with class, gender and race have direct and causative effects on local power relations. But other factors, such as organizational philosophy, current social policy and legislative dictates, and the valuing of different kinds of local knowledge, can also have profound effects on power relations (Featherstone and Fawcett, 1994; Healy, 2000). For example, while we should recognize the oppressions to which Julia has been subject by her father and her partner, we must also acknowledge and emphasize the kind of power that Julia exercises in relation to her children.

There is concern that anti-oppressive theorists do not adequately address the impact of institutional context on the development and application of anti-oppressive principles. While proponents of anti-oppressive practice urge workers to choose this model as the best, even the only, way for achieving social justice in social work practice, they fail to reflect on how this choice may be easier for service providers in some contexts than in others. Yet our understanding of client needs as well as our role and our options for intervention are profoundly shaped by context, including institutional context, client needs, and even our own capacities as social workers. For example, referring to the Hayden case study, statutory child protection workers have obligations to the application of statutory law, while other workers, such as drug and alcohol workers, have different obligations, in this case to advocate for the mother, Julia. These context-specific obliga-



tions will shape who we see as the primary service user and what will take priority in our practice and thus the extent to which we can apply key anti-oppressive principles. It may even be that, in some practice contexts, anti-oppressive practice may lead to harm by, for example, minimizing the recognition of risk (Healy, 1998). At the very least, greater recognition of the institutional limits to the application of anti-oppressive practice is needed for the critical and grounded development of this theory.

## Conclusion

Anti-oppressive social work is a practice theory that stands on the cusp of modern and postmodern practice. We have categorized it as a modern critical approach because of its continuing reliance on notions of critical consciousness raising – which imply that there is a singular underlying truth to which service users should be exposed – and also because of its continuing emphasis on a structural analysis of oppression and its orientation to large-scale structural reform, even though this is mediated by recognition of the personal and cultural dimensions of oppression. The postmodern elements of anti-oppressive practice, particularly the growing use of discourse analysis by anti-oppressive theorists (see Mullaly, 2002), also place it at the intersection of modern and postmodern practice. Yet, as we shall see in Chapter 10, postmodern approaches to critical social work urge social workers to adopt a sceptical attitude towards many of the claims on which modern forms of social work, including anti-oppressive practice, are founded.

## Summary Questions

- 1 What are the key differences between anti-oppressive theory and other forms of critical social work, such as radical social work and feminist social work?
- 2 From the perspective of anti-oppressive theory, why is it important that social workers reflect on their personal biography?
- 3 What practical strategies do anti-oppressive social workers use to promote the empowerment of service users?

## Recommended Reading

- Dalrymple, J. and Burke, B. (2006) *Anti-oppressive Practice: Social Care and the Law*, 2nd edn. (Maidenhead: Open University Press).

Essential reading for those keen to understand the history, application and emerging challenges for anti-oppressive practitioners. Has a strong practical focus and is especially helpful for those seeking to understand how they can apply anti-oppressive practice in practice.

- Jones, K., Cooper, B.T. and Ferguson, H. (eds) (2008) *Best Practice in Social Work: Critical Perspectives*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).  
Demonstrates how critical perspectives can inform direct practice in a broad range of service fields, including practice with children and families, professional supervision, mental health, and health and social care. Shows how modernist critical ideas can intersect with other modern theories, such as the strengths perspective, and critical postmodern theories. Excellent, grounded introduction to critically informed direct practice.
- Lavalette, M. (ed.) (2011) *Radical Social Work Today*. (Bristol: Polity Press).  
Researchers and practitioners from diverse fields of practice argue the case for radical social work.
- Mullaly, B. (2002) *Challenging Oppression: A Critical Social Work Approach*. (Ontario: Oxford University Press).  
Thorough introduction to the theoretical foundations of anti-oppressive practice. Explains the interactions across personal, cultural and structural dimensions of oppression.

## Recommended Website

- [www.socialworkfuture.org](http://www.socialworkfuture.org)  
The UK's Social Work Action Network offers an international resource and network for social workers interested in radical approaches to practice.



attentive to the ways discourses construct these concepts. For example, postmodern perspectives urge us to recognize the different ways discourses, like biomedicine and citizen rights, construct 'client need', rather than view one of these perspectives as more accurate than the other. Like the anti-oppressive practice perspective, postmodern practices challenge some aspects of the 'psy' discourse, especially psychoanalytic ideas that seek the causes for the client's malaise in their past or in individual experience. Instead, as we shall see later in the chapter, some forms of postmodern practice seek to understand and, where necessary, disrupt the narratives that construct service users' self-understandings as well as the understandings of others. Postmodern perspectives challenge aspects of the alternative service discourses, such as the reliance of some new social movements on notions of shared and fixed identities (Healy, 2012). But, like the proponents of new social movements, social workers have drawn on postmodern perspectives to challenge traditional power relations and destabilize the privileged position of professional knowledge over other kinds of knowledge, particularly the lived experiences of service users (see Hanrahan, 2013).

As stated in Chapter 1, this book is written from a postmodern perspective, in that we seek to outline how key institutional and alternative discourses construct social work practices. You may be wondering why we have not positioned postmodernism as a separate, overarching discourse like the human science or alternative discourses considered in Part 1. The primary reason is that postmodernism remains a hotly contested discourse that is not widely accepted by either service providers or service users as a key frame of reference. Indeed, in my experience of conducting continuing professional education for social workers, I find that many workers consider 'post' theories as, at best, mysterious and, at worst, deeply alienating to them. Apart from debates among social workers in academia, practitioners express wariness about the arcane language within which postmodern debates are often couched and the seeming indifference to the realities of suffering and disadvantage to which social workers are daily exposed. However, once the core concepts are considered in a social work context, many practitioners find 'post' theories useful for articulating and developing their aspirations to recognize the local and diverse experiences and knowledge of service users.

First, we explain key themes in postmodern perspectives and how these can contribute to the formal base of social work. We then consider one practice approach, narrative therapy, emerging from postmodern perspectives. Figure 10.1 situates postmodern practice perspectives after the strengths perspective and anti-oppressive practice, to recognize their more recent influence on the formal base of social work practice. Indeed, while these three sets of practice perspectives have grown in influence since the 1990s, the strengths perspective and anti-oppressive theory are grounded in modernism assumptions. Postmodernism demands the critical interrogation of these assumptions.

# 10

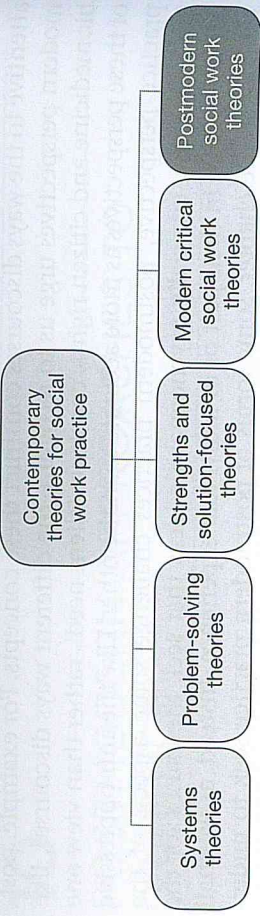
## POSTMODERN APPROACHES TO PRACTICE

Since the 1990s, postmodern theories have had a growing influence on the formal base of social work and have contributed to new understandings of, and approaches to, practice. In this chapter, we explain differences among 'post' theories, including postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism. These theories have been widely discussed in the social sciences and humanities since the 1960s, but their impact on the formal base of social work is relatively recent. Social workers need at least a basic acquaintance with these theories, given that they inform many of the disciplines on which our profession draws. While social work commentators debate the pros and cons of 'post' theories, a growing number of social workers apply these theories to a broad terrain of social work practices from casework to community work and policy practice. Indeed, despite some deserved bad press about the arcane language adopted by some postmodernists, we will see that social workers are already using many similar ideas to explain the complexities of power, identity and change processes.

In this chapter, we outline the key features of postmodernism in the human sciences and consider the historical development of postmodern ideas in social work practices. We discuss the core concepts underpinning 'post' theories and their implications for constructing service users' needs and practice responses. We consider a theory for practice, narrative therapy, that draws on postmodern ideas and use to a case study to consider the pros and cons of postmodernism in social work practice. We turn first to consider where postmodern theories fit in relation to the service discourses and the theories for practice we have discussed so far.

Postmodern theories draw on, but also disrupt, ideas from the discourses discussed in Part 1. In concert with the sociological discourse, postmodernists view all aspects of social work practice, particularly the concepts of client need and social work responses, as socially constructed. In contrast to the critical sociological discourse, which has focused our attention on how macro-processes associated with capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism produce client need and social work practice processes, postmodernists are





**Figure 10.1** Postmodern practices in context

## Differences among 'Post' Theories

The term 'postmodernism' is often used to describe the range of 'post' theories, but there are substantial differences among them. Here, we define three – postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism – and explore some differences among them; an understanding of these differences may be helpful to understanding their different applications to social work.

Postmodernism is concerned with theories of society, culture and history (Agger, 1991). Originating in the field of architecture, postmodernism has since extended into a range of social science and humanities disciplines (Weedon, 1997, p. 170). Postmodernists adopt a sceptical attitude to the truths of modernity, such as a faith in rationality, as the path to progress, on the grounds that these truths cannot help us understand, or respond to, the new cultural conditions of uncertainty and change (Lyotard, 1984, p. 5; Leonard, 1997, p. 25). Put simply, for postmodernists, the truths of modernity once made sense, but no longer do (Butler, 1993).

Poststructuralism, by contrast, is primarily focused on the influence of language on power, knowledge and identity (Agger, 1991). Poststructuralism derives, and deviates, from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a structural linguist (Weedon, 1997, p. 23). De Saussure showed that language is not merely a vehicle to reflect reality, rather, language helps to create the things it describes (Weedon, 1997, p. 23). Moving on from de Saussure's claims, poststructuralists argue that the relationship between language and the objects to which it refers is not fixed but shaped by the different meanings that discourses make available. For example, as we discussed in Part 1, different discourses offer us competing ways of understanding concepts such as 'need' as well as the roles of social workers and service users. In the mental health field, contests exist between traditional professional interpretation of needs, as being primarily the need for psychological and pharmaceutical intervention, and the recovery movement's focus on recognition of service users' needs to be heard and recognized as partners in the recovery process

(Gehart, 2012, p. 443). For poststructuralists, language is a key site of political struggle, as discourses shape how core concepts such as 'rights' and 'needs' are understood within any context. This has enormous implications for modern social work practice, because, as we have seen throughout this book, different discourses and theories for practice offer varying and sometimes conflicting ways of understanding and responding to client 'needs'.

Postcolonial theories are of increasing interest to social workers (see Payne and Askeland, 2008). Postcolonialism is a broad discipline committed to understanding, and responding to, the ongoing legacy of European colonization. Leela Gandhi (1998, p. 27) defines postcolonialism as a discipline 'devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past ... Postcolonial theory commits itself to a complex project of historical and psychological recovery.' Postcolonial approaches are well established in contemporary humanities and social sciences where they are used to analyse how the colonial legacy shapes contemporary understandings of, and responses to, a range of issues, such as migration, race, gender, slavery, and the representation of 'others'. Postcolonial perspectives have been used to confront, disturb and rewrite the narratives of settler societies, such as Canada and Australia, and in so doing 'make way for alternative (though not necessarily more valued) tales concerning a polity's history and culture' (Tuitt, 2011, p. 230). In contrast to critical histories within the modernist traditions, postcolonialists recognize that all accounts of the colonial legacy are politically situated and necessarily incomplete.

## 'Post' Theories and Social Work Practices

Since the late 1990s, a burgeoning literature has emerged on the applications of 'post' theories to social work (Leonard, 1997; Fook, 2002; Payne and Askeland, 2008; Fawcett, 2009; Healy, 2000, 2012; Hanrahan, 2013). In a collection of practice-based writings, Napier and Fook (2000) present a range of practitioners' reflections on the use of 'post' theory ideas for enabling social workers to critically reflect on the construction of social workers' and clients' 'identities' and narratives in practice. Similarly, Taylor and White (2000) use discourse analytic tools to show how truths – such as claims about child abuse or mental health diagnosis – are constructed, rather than discovered, in practice. The continuing debates about postmodernism (see Atherton and Bolland, 2002; Ferguson, 2008) contradict Noble and Henrickson's claim (2011, p. 129) that the postmodern challenge is 'losing its puff'.

Social workers associated with modern critical traditions of social work (see Chapter 9) have been especially divided in their responses to 'post' theories. Some critical social work commentators suggest that these theories



failed to adequately recognize the structural origins of social oppression and, in so doing, undermine options for collective action (see Dominelli, 2002a; Fraser and Briskman, 2005; Ferguson, 2008). Yet, other critical social workers demonstrate their value for activist practices. Hanrahan (2013) outlines the application of postmodern ideas to destabilize power relations adhering to professional/service user identities in mental health services. Morley and MacFarlane (2012, pp. 701–2) advocate for the incorporation of feminist and postmodern ideas to critical social work on the grounds that: 'Postmodern critical thinking can assist us to reconstruct possibilities for agency, acknowledge complexity of context and identity, and value a range of knowledge systems.' Many critical social workers have argued that postmodern concepts allow for enhanced flexibility and responsiveness in the way they approach critical analysis and action (see Pease and Fook, 1999; Hanrahan, 2013). My own research has focused on using discourse analysis and deconstructive strategies to open the critical social work canon to a range of activism in practice (see Healy, 2000, 2012). I am concerned that critical social work – radical, Marxist, feminist and anti-oppressive – has tended to privilege some forms and sites of activism and activist 'subjectivities', usually nongovernmental services, while marginalizing critical practice possibilities in other sites and other 'subjectivities' – such as government agencies and in practice by middle-aged or older practitioners (Healy, 2000, p. 4). I am also interested in using poststructural theories to show the complexities of local power in practice, as well as the macro-analyses that dominate modern critical social work approaches to power.

Many social work scholars have incorporated poststructural concepts, especially Foucault's work on governmentality, to interrogate the construction of a variety of human services practices, policies and domains of work. For example, Saario and Stepney (2009, p. 41) examined how managerial auditing systems in Finnish mental health services 'began to reshape practice by reinforcing certain modes of working and excluding others'. They found that the relational aspects of social work practice, often found to be so crucial to service user satisfaction (see Trotter, 2004; Sheldon and Macdonald, 2009), were rendered invisible in managerial systems for accounting for how workers' time is allocated and valued. By encouraging us to look for what has been made invisible in policy and managerial practices, poststructural theories can assist our profession to advocate for the reevaluation of some aspects of social work practice.

In recent years, a small body of social work literature has emerged debating the relevance and application of postcolonial perspectives to the discipline (Harrison and Melville, 2010; Crath, 2012; Lough, 2013). Postcolonial perspectives demand that we recognize the ongoing legacy of colonialization in all aspects of social work practice, from the traumatic impact of the displacement of First Nations peoples through to the extension of 'First

World' social work knowledge and values into 'Third World' countries (Harrison and Melville, 2010, pp. 20–1). Sewpaul (2006) urges us to recognize the complexities of cultural identity, including acknowledgement of differences and also common aspirations among social workers from the global north and south, such as the aspiration for a more just world.

Postcolonial perspectives encourage critical analysis of how the colonial legacy is sustained in modern social work practices, even in anti-racist approaches. Postcolonial scholars problematize fixed racial identities and attack the dualism between European and non-European identities, while acknowledging the colonial legacies that contribute to experiences of oppression. In her analysis of Asian and black women's experiences as social workers, Lewis (2000) argues that social work scholars' continuing reliance on an opposition between European and non-European reinforces racialized social relations by ignoring substantial differences within identity groups such as 'Third World women', 'Europeans', 'Indigenous' people (see also Sewpaul, 2006). Overall, this criticism strikes at the heart of modern anti-racist social work (see Dominelli, 1988), insofar as this project accepts fixed identity categories such as 'European' and 'non-European' as the basis for analysis and social action. Using postcolonial perspectives, social work scholar Gail Lewis (2000, p. 119, emphasis added) argues that 'race/ethnicity needs to be understood and analysed as a major, *but only one*, axis of differentiations organizing a contingent set of social relations'. For example, we need to understand how other categories such as disability and sexuality as well as local differences differentiate racial and ethnic identifications and experiences.

## Key Concepts

Here, we consider four key concepts in these theories – discourse, subjectivity, power and deconstruction. An understanding of these concepts is essential to understanding social workers' use and development of postmodern practice perspectives.

### Discourse

Discourse is central to postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial theories as it is used to refer to the language practices through which knowledge, truth, our sense of selves and social relations are constructed. Throughout this book, we have used the term 'discourse' to analyse how key concepts such as client need and social work practices are constructed in health and welfare contexts and through different theories of practice. Thus, the term should now be familiar to you, but we will briefly recap this concept here.



Discourse refers to the language practices through which we understand 'reality' and act on it. Discourse constructs knowledge in practice, particularly what counts as true or sayable and what is considered false or unsayable (Foucault, 1980a, p. 131). Discourses have 'real' or material effects, in that they construct our understandings of key entities such as 'client need' and 'social work practice'. From a postmodern viewpoint, words are not simply vehicles as they constitute the phenomena social workers deal with in their practice, such as 'child abuse', 'ageing' and 'domestic violence'. This does not mean that experiences, such as child abuse, are made up by language, rather that we can only comprehend these phenomena through language, and language practices shape how we can understand and act. For example, while there can be little doubt that, throughout history, some children have experienced cruelty, the term 'child abuse' has emerged only relatively recently and has profoundly shaped the role of the state and the social work profession in relation to children and their families. The term has provided significant justification for the extension of state powers into previously private domains of family life, particularly for marginalized families. Of importance to social workers is that the term 'child abuse' is associated with the construction of parents or families as 'abusers' rather than as people in need, and deserving of, state support. The term privileges the concept of 'abuse' over other aspects of the vulnerable child's identity and experience, and in so doing can negate the possibility that, for some children, there is a strong desire to remain with their families or at least maintain contact with them.

From a postmodern viewpoint, discourses profoundly shape service users' experiences of, and social workers' responses to, experiences such as mental illness and disabilities. This point is well illustrated by Crossley and Crossley (2001), who undertook a comparative analysis of two anthologies written by people living with mental illness in the 1950s and the 1990s. Their analysis showed that the consumer rights discourse, which emerged during the 1970s (see Chapter 5), created new opportunities for (some) people living with mental illness to assert authority based on their expertise as survivors, rather than as patients, of psychiatric institutions (Crossley and Crossley, 2001, p. 1488). This transformed identity enabled some people living with mental illness the opportunities to critique and, in some instances, opt out of biomedical approaches to psychiatric care.

'Post' theorists draw attention to the way in which discourses operate within specific sites of social work practices. Fook (2002, p. 90) points out that: 'Because discourses are not fixed (that is, their meaning is relative to the situation and interpretation, and subject position), they may operate in different ways for different purposes at different times.' Focusing on the operations of discourse within specific practice contexts, we can see that even an apparently positive concept like 'citizen participation' can be used

for a range of ends – from promoting client involvement in statutory decision-making through to facilitating the reduction of government involvement in the funding and provision of services (Healy, 1998). From a 'post' theory perspective, discourses shape our understandings of the rights, responsibilities, experiences of, and relationships between, service workers and service users. Moreover, social work and social services agencies are often sites of competing discourses. For example, child welfare services are the site of competing interpretations of, for example, the rights and needs of parents and children. Aged care services are sites of contest concerning public and private care in old age and disability services are sites of contest between social responsibility and self-realization.

## Subjectivity

'Post' theorists use the term 'subjectivity', rather than 'identity', to refer to our sense of ourselves. They reject descriptions of 'identity' as fixed and unified, insisting instead that our identities are shaped by discourses and thus vary from context to context (Sawicki, 1991, p. 300). Because different discourses offer competing systems of social reality, we may experience different aspects of our 'identity' as fragmented and contradictory (Weedon, 1997, p. 33; Healy, 2000, p. 46). For example, as a young social worker working in a statutory child protection service, I exercised power and authority associated with my statutory role, but I also experienced powerlessness and vulnerability associated with my low status within the bureaucracy, my age, gender and (non)parenting status. All these subjectivities affected how I experienced my 'authority', and how I was seen by others, as well as the kinds of power and authority I was able to exercise. For instance, the professional assessments I was authorized and indeed required to undertake could be vetoed by others who were positioned more powerfully in these discursive fields of child protection, such as magistrates, doctors and institutional supervisors, even though these higher status professionals may have had little or no direct contact with the families in question. 'Post' theories suggest that these experiences of fragmentation and contradiction in our identities and our exercise of institutional power are an inevitable outcome of the clashes between different discourses that make up our practice contexts.

Just as we recognize the contradictions in the social work 'identity', from a poststructural perspective we must also acknowledge service users' multiple and often contradictory identifications. For example, we may come to understand a 'violent offender' also as 'a victim of child abuse', 'an abusive parent', 'a loyal son', 'a person battling addiction' and so on. Indeed, in direct practice, practitioners often do recognize these multiple



and sometimes competing identifications and, ironically, this probably contributes to the popular and derogatory image of social workers as 'bleeding hearts'.

Poststructural feminists challenge us to recognize ourselves and others as embodied beings. Poststructural feminists encourage us to recognize how bodily differences shape the way we inhabit different subjectivities (Healy, 2000, pp. 48–9). Consider the example of professional power. Critical social work theorists, including Marxist, radical and feminist, have drawn our attention to the authoritarian dimensions of professional power in social work practice. This has been an important critical insight into social work practice and has led to increased awareness of the oppressive effects of power and authority in practice. In addition, poststructural feminists invite us to consider how bodily differences associated with age, height, skin colour, ethnicity and gender complicate one's identifications and thus one's capacity to exercise professional power (see Healy, 2000, Ch. 7).

Critical social work commentators take particular exception to the notion of open and fluid subjectivity proposed by 'post' theorists (see Dominelli, 2002a). According to these commentators, the abandonment of fixed identities threatens progressive social movements that have relied on fixed and unified identifications such as 'women', 'people with disabilities' and so on (see Dominelli, 2002a, pp. 32–6). Critical poststructural commentators counter this criticism on a number of grounds.

Postmodernists argue that the unified notion of self, central to many critical social theories and progressive social movements, requires us to embrace identifications that are a source of oppression. Judith Butler (1993, p. 48) argues that:

Surely there is caution offered here, that in the very struggle toward enfranchisement and democratization, we might adopt the very models of domination by which we were oppressed, not realizing that one way that domination works is through the regulation and production of subjects.

For postmodern critical social workers, the challenge seems to be that of recognizing how categories such as 'survivor', 'woman' or 'person with a disability' can explain our or service users' experiences, and form a basis for collaborative action, while also recognizing how these categories limit change activity. Instead, critical poststructural approaches assume that our identities are negotiated and provisional, rather than fixed. This can open up possibilities for recognizing differences within unified groups, such as 'women', 'European', 'people with disabilities', as well as opportunities to negotiate shared actions across groups (Sawicki, 1991; Butler, 1993; Weedon, 1997; Corker and Shakespeare, 2002). By recognizing and celebrating differences, 'post' theories can support respectful collaboration across differences.

## Power

Power is a central concern of critical 'post' theorists, particularly Foucault and feminist poststructural authors, such as Cixous and Kristeva (see Healy, 1999, 2000). Foucault explicitly rejects the 'juridico-discursive' model of power, which represents power as the possession of individuals and a force that is imposed by one set of subjects, such as the ruling class, on others (Sawicki, 1991, p. 52; Healy, 2000, p. 43). In contrast to critical sociological discourse and anti-oppressive theory, which focus on minimizing power differences, critical poststructuralists see power as an ever-present and productive feature of social relations. Further, poststructuralists contend that power is a product of discourse rather than something that is attached to specific identities, such as 'male' or 'professional'. Thus, in this view, if we want to understand power in any context, we need to analyse how discourses operate to construct identity, knowledge and power within that specific context.

According to Sawicki (1991, p. 21), Foucault's approach to power rests on three axioms:

- 1 Power is exercised rather than possessed.
- 2 Power is not primarily repressive, but productive.
- 3 Power is analysed as coming from the bottom up.

We consider the implications of each of these principles for social workers.

Foucault invites us to shift our analysis from a focus on who possesses power to the consideration of how power is exercised from specific social locations and by specific people. Recognizing that power is exercised rather than possessed also allows us to acknowledge and expand the possibilities for relatively powerless groups to exercise power. A number of social work authors have used the Foucauldian notion of power to show how empowering discourses lead workers to ignore the ways in which marginalized groups, such as Indigenous people, homeless young women and young mothers, exercise power even though they do not 'possess' it (see Crinall, 1999; Healy, 2000). These commentators argue that a poststructural perspective can contribute to empowering practice by encouraging workers to recognize and support service users' capacities to exercise power, rather than focus on their relative powerlessness from a structural perspective.

In contrast to the view of power as something that oppresses and constrains, Foucault urges us to recognize the productivity of power. He argues that people submit to power because they gain something from their



submission, in other words, a focus on power as oppressive ignores the positive dimensions of power. Foucault (1980a, p. 119) asserts that:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse.

In contrast to the focus on the oppressive social work power that has dominated modern critical social workers' accounts of social work practice (see Chapter 9), Foucault's work encourages us to recognize the productivity of this power as well. This point is well illustrated by a number of critical studies of the micro-politics of practice, which have shown that some service users actively seek out social work services and gain something, such as improved capacities or sense of self, from the exercise of power in these practice contexts (see Wise, 1995; Healy, 2000).

Finally, in contrast to modern sociological discourse and anti-oppressive theories, Foucault urges us to analyse power from the local to the structural, rather than the other way around. Foucault (1980b, p. 99) argues that a focus on macro-processes of power is not particularly useful for understanding the micro-politics of power in local contexts. Rather than seeing power relations as merely an effect of macro-structures, such as capitalism or patriarchy, 'post' theorists recognize the micro-contexts of social work practice as sites where power is also produced. This recognizing of the local production of power is particularly important in challenging the tendency towards structural determinism in some modern critical social work theories (see Chapter 9). It enables us to recognize the complex web of power relations within which service providers and service users are embedded and so guard against a tendency to see both as merely victims of social structures. For example, Featherstone and Fawcett (1994) have argued that, in child protection practice, a mother may be powerless in one context, say in relation to an abusive partner or the statutory authority, but powerful in others, such as in relation to her children. Thus, in one moment, a person may be 'both victim and victimizer and these positions themselves shift' (Featherstone and Fawcett, 1994, p. 134).

## Deconstruction

'Deconstruction' is term commonly used by postmodernists and is associated with the work of Jacques Derrida, French literary theorist. The term describes the process of identifying and undermining oppositions through which discourses represent things such as knowledge, identity and other

social phenomena (Weedon, 1997, p. 159). Some of the oppositions found in social work discourse include:

- normal/abnormal
- true/false
- powerful/powerless
- worker/service user
- middle class/working class
- male/female
- expert/layperson
- able bodied/disabled
- straight/gay or lesbian.

You can probably identify other oppositions within your practice domain. Derrida (1991) criticizes these oppositions because they create a hierarchy between the two opposed terms and hide the differences within and between each of them. For example, a 'middle-class' person may once have been 'working class' and even within the category of middle class, there are significant variations.

Deconstruction is aimed at breaking apart dualisms to show the range of positions that lie within and beyond opposed entities. For example, using a deconstructive approach, we would recognize that the states of 'powerful' and 'powerless' are two extremes on a continuum and that there are many positions of relative powerfulness and powerlessness in between. The process of deconstruction is endless, because the new forms of representation that deconstruction itself produces must themselves be subjected to deconstruction. In this sense, deconstruction involves ongoing interrogation of that which is excluded in the processes of representing anything. For example, people in the disability movement sometimes prefer the term 'differently abled' because the term 'disabled' only shows lack of ability, but from a deconstructive approach we would ask what the preferred term 'differently abled' also hides.

## Narrative Therapy: A Postmodern Practice Approach

This chapter has outlined a variety of ways 'post' theories have been used to inform practice. A large body of work focuses on how these theories can assist social workers to transform their practice through critical interrogation of identity and power relations in practice. Various writers have pointed



to opportunities for resistance and destabilizing of existing power relations from the 'front line' of statutory practices (see Napier and Fook, 2000) through to community practices (see Hanrahan, 2013) and to challenging managerial discourse (Saario and Stepney, 2009). By and large, a major contribution of 'post' theories has been to destabilizing and renewing existing forms of practice including critical modern practices.

However, some social workers have drawn on 'post' theories to create entirely new approaches to practice. Narrative therapy is among the most well-developed and celebrated illustration of the application of 'post' theory ideas to the development of social work practices. Michael White, Australian social worker, and his colleague David Epston, New Zealand-based therapist, are widely recognized as the leading proponents of these ideas (see White and Epston, 1990). Workers associated with the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, Australia, a key centre for narrative therapy, have produced a wide body of work on the application of narrative ideas to a broad terrain of social services work, including group work and community development, and many fields of practice from mental health, family services, to grief in Indigenous communities (see Wingard, 1998). Social work theorists have also applied these ideas to direct social work practice (see Parton and O'Byrne, 2001).

Narrative therapy centres on the idea that the narratives we, and others, construct about us actively shape our experiences, our sense of selves, and our life options. According to this approach, service users' lives are constrained by the harmful narratives they and others have generated about them (Fook, 2002, p. 137). Often, these narratives have been produced in order to 'diagnose' and ultimately 'help' the person, but the effect is to imprison the person in a narrative that damages and constrains them. Narrative therapists contend that because narratives so powerfully shape our 'identities' and our life choices, these narratives should be the site of intervention. These narratives are used across a broad range of methods from interpersonal work through to community practice, where community development workers seek to assist communities to realize new narratives.

We turn now to the four key principles of the narrative approach.

### 1: Focus on the Narratives that Shape Service Users' Lives

In contrast to modernist forms of social service intervention, narrative therapy does not seek to uncover or construct a single truth about the causes of the service user's situation. Instead, narrative therapists seek to assess and transform the narratives that construct our lives. They seek to challenge the harmful narratives, that is, those that represent the service user in a negative and pathological frame, and instead seek to recognize and construct alternative narratives, that is, narratives that recognize and honour the

person's capacities, including, for example, their capacity to take responsibility for violence (see Jenkins, 1990).

Narrative therapy requires the worker to adopt a curious and open, rather than truth-seeking, position towards the service user. An important feature of the initial engagement with the service user is that of exploring, with the service user, how they came to be 'recruited' into the dominant and harmful narrative about themselves. So, for example, rather than accepting the dominant narrative of Joan as schizophrenic, we might explore with her how this narrative was constructed, who constructed it, and how Joan herself has accepted or resisted this construction. In this way, the narrative about Joan's journey with schizophrenia separates her from the condition.

### 2: Separate the Person from the Problem

Another principle of narrative therapy is that the person is not the problem, rather the 'problem is the problem'. In line with this principle, narrative therapists use the strategy of 'externalizing conversations' to separate the person from the problem. A feature of these conversations includes giving a name to the problem that is separate from the person. For example, we might rename an apparently uncontrollable anger as 'the Dragon'. The use of the capital in Dragon is important for naming the problem. Narrative therapists often use magical and unusual terminology, like the term 'the Dragon' here, as a way of unlocking the service user's creative energies.

Let's say we are working with a young man, Peter, whose apparently uncontrollable anger is leading to conflict and unhappiness at home and at school. Using the technique of externalizing conversation, we might ask: 'When does the Dragon visit?' 'What sorts of events are likely to waken the Dragon?' 'When have you successfully fought the Dragon?' 'What would need to happen to banish the Dragon for good?' Through the use of externalizing conversations, we can facilitate the separation of the problem from individuals and communities, articulate the strategies they have already used effectively to address their problems, and offer hope that an alternative future is possible in which the problem does not control them. Recognition of moments in which the service user has effectively resisted the problem, sometimes referred to as 'news of difference', is especially important to the construction of alternative narratives about the self.

### 3: Reconstruct the Dominant Story of the Self

Narrative therapy aims to reconstruct the dominant narratives that shape the service user's life from those that emphasize pathology to those that



highlight and support their capacities. This focus is similar to the strengths perspective and, indeed, some proponents of the strengths perspective draw on narrative practice techniques. This focus on the narrative construction of a problem is not to deny the existence of, say, serious mental illness or violent behaviour, rather it is an approach that illuminates and builds the service user's capacity to live a life of their choosing. For example, Jenkins (1990) uses narrative therapy approaches to invite men who are violent and abusive to take responsibility for their actions. The three-step strategy, outlined by Jenkins (1990, p. 62), involves:

- the worker declining 'invitations' by the man to attribute responsibilities for his actions to external factors, such as his partner's behaviour
- inviting the man to challenge the restraints on his acceptance of responsibility for his actions, such as sociocultural affirmations of male violence
- acknowledging and highlighting evidence of the man's acceptance of responsibility for his actions, by, for example, drawing attention to moments when the man contained his violent behaviour and showed his capacities for respectful and non-violent responses to others.

#### 4: Co-constructing narratives through and with community

Proponents of narrative approaches recognize the importance of building communities that support affirming narratives of the self and community. Indeed, in the past decade, there has been a proliferation of literature by narrative therapists and others attesting to community narratives as a site of restoration and political activism (see Lessard et al., 2011). Michael White and his colleagues at the Dulwich Centre have written widely on the value of narrative work for assisting communities to recover from trauma. White (2003, p. 44) argues that through narrative practices in which community members are encouraged to articulate and deconstruct their community's experiences of trauma, people can 'find safe places in which to stand in the territory of memory ... that provide them with platforms for speaking of what hasn't been spoken about, for putting into more significant expression their experiences of trauma'.

Narrative therapists recognize that the narratives others hold about the service user similarly shape the service user's capacities to live a life of their choosing. For this reason, narrative therapists often incorporate strategies aimed at building a supportive and life-affirming community around the service user. Narrative approaches sometimes incorporate ceremonies that mark the defeat of the pathological narrative and the emergence of alternative narratives that affirm service users' capacities. For example, White and

Denborough (1998) presented a case study of a woman who invited her closest supporters to a ceremony at which they built a bonfire to destroy the psychiatric case files that contributed to the narrative of her life as a psychiatric patient.

#### Practice Exercise **Applying 'post' theories in practice**

Imagine you work in a community support centre in an area where there are many refugee families; several having fled areas of high conflict. In your role, you meet Jamilah, a 28-year-old woman with four children. Jamilah and her husband, Abroom (also 28), arrived from Somali three years ago. Jamilah has come to the community centre to ask for help in paying an electricity bill. Her two younger children (a baby and a 2 year old) are with her on the visit; the two older children (5 and 7) are at school. The children appeared content and calm in their mother's presence.

During the conversation, Jamilah becomes upset, and says she is struggling to cope with her life – she has frequent distressing memories of the fighting she and her family fled and her sleep is often disturbed. Six months ago, Jamilah's doctor prescribed tablets for her, but they made her feel drowsy so she did not complete the prescription. The family are struggling financially and are barely able to get by on the money Abroom earns from his work as a cleaner. Jamilah tells you that Abroom is a qualified secondary teacher and she is a qualified nurse in Somalia, but neither of their qualifications are recognized here. Jamilah often goes without meals so that her children and her husband are fed. Jamilah reveals that she is ashamed of asking for help.

- How would you apply narrative therapy concepts and other 'post' theory ideas to analyse and respond to the situation?

## Uses and Limitations of 'Post' Theories for Social Work Practices

We now discuss the strengths and weaknesses of 'post' theories in social work, using the case of Jamilah. A postmodern approach to practice encourages practitioners to recognize and explore a range of perspectives about the problem facing the service user. When working with Jamilah, from a postmodern viewpoint, we would explore the multiple narratives shaping her situation. A focus on the narratives through which Jamilah and others construct her situation, including the professionals involved, would enable us to recognize its inherent complexities and ambiguities.

From a postcolonial perspective, we would analyse how cultural identifications and perspectives shape Jamilah's 'identity' and options. We would



also recognize that 'cultural' subjectivity is only one of many identities that may be important to Jamilah's sense of self (see Lewis, 2000). For example, we can see that Jamilah is a refugee, a survivor of regional conflict, a mother and a wife. Jamilah may also refer to other subjectivities, such as those related to religious faith, which are important to her sense of self and the options available to her. From a postmodern perspective, it is important to explore how Jamilah defines herself and the nature of the challenges facing her, and consider how the discourses and narratives through which she and her problems are defined also shape the options available to her. For example, it may be that certain kinds of support, such as participating in a spiritual healing group, are more acceptable to her than seeking biomedical intervention for the trauma she is experiencing.

Postmodern theories also highlight the 'micro-politics' of practice. They draw attention to local contexts – including the institutional context – as key sites of analysis and action (Healy, 1998; Morley and MacFarlane, 2012). This contrasts with liberal humanist approaches to social work, such as task-centred practice, which have paid little attention to inequities between workers and service users. 'Post' theory approaches also differ from modern critical theories, including anti-oppressive practice, which have analysed local power relations as effects of structural processes (Healy, 1998, 2000, 2012). By recognizing complexity in local relations of power, 'post' theory would encourage us to explore how Jamilah and her family are able to exercise power in their lives, particularly in relation to the challenges they face. For example, it may be that Jamilah feels proud of her role as wife and mother and she may be reluctant to return to the paid workforce while her children are young and her husband is in low-paid work. Her preference may be to support her husband to achieve recognition of his qualifications, rather than to seek recognition of her qualifications. Such a perspective may, from a critical viewpoint, be understood as a lack of critical consciousness, while from the postmodern view, it may be interpreted as a different and equally valid approach to the way she and her family would prefer to live their lives.

From a postmodern perspective, we can recognize the oppressions faced by Jamilah and her family, while also acknowledging and supporting her capacity for agency (Crinall, 1999, p. 80; Healy, 2012). This could include acknowledging that Jamilah has resisted others' definitions and responses to the challenges facing her, such as her rejection of the biomedical intervention, and working with her to assist her to identify and work towards her preferred outcomes. In Jamilah's case, this does not necessarily mean that all biomedical approaches should be resisted but that any intervention, biomedical or otherwise, must take into account the specificities of Jamilah's context, such as her caring responsibilities for four young children.

Postmodernists also reject the notion that there is one desirable path for any individual or collective to follow and, instead, invite us to recognize

and celebrate different paths and possibilities. In relation to the case study, this focus on differences would enable us to work with Jamilah to respect her decisions regarding Western healthcare and to consider other options, including possible ways of managing trauma and stress that are consistent with her cultural processes. This may include an exploration of how Jamilah's religious beliefs and spiritual life have shaped her understanding and ways of coping with her life experiences. Recognition of differences is also important for understanding that in some cultures, the wellbeing of the individual is not necessarily valued over collective responsibilities, such as Jamilah's responsibilities to her family.

Narrative strategies can be used to empower and energize service users by separating them from the perceived problem. This contrasts markedly with modernist forms of social work that have aimed to understand the service user's identity and issues and, in modern forms of critical social work, have encouraged individuals to embrace the oppressed identity (see Chapter 9). We could use narrative strategies to explore how Jamilah has already taken control of her situation and help her investigate how she has responded to the difficult situation. For example, we might help her name the characteristic, such as 'Determination', or the higher spiritual power that has helped her manage the challenges she faces.

So far we have considered the uses of 'post' theories for social work practice, now let's turn to their limitations. Again, we'll use the case study of Jamilah to ground these criticisms in social work. The focus of postmodernism on language practices can lead us to ignore the material realities of oppression and the extent to which these oppressions are shaped by macro-social structures, particularly capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism (see Ife, 1999; Dominelli, 2002a). In relation to Jamilah, we can argue that her situation, and her options for responding to it, are shaped by culture, gender and class. These categories represent social divisions that profoundly shape the life chances of disadvantaged people. For example, refugees and asylum seekers frequently suffer from post-traumatic stresses and often experience extreme material disadvantage and racism in the countries where they settle. Thus, a focus on the language practices that shape Jamilah's situation should not distract us from the pressing material needs of her situation or recognition of the broader contexts of oppression facing refugees and asylum seekers.

Many social workers question whether postmodern theories can provide a coherent framework for practice. The academic and often arcane language of most postmodern writing is alienating to many social workers. Agger (1991, p. 106) points out that most 'post' theory arguments are 'incredibly, extravagantly convoluted – to the point of disastrous absurdity'. But social workers' concerns go beyond issues about the inaccessibility of postmodern writings to concerns about the relativism inherent in this perspective and



thus the loss of a moral and political framework for action (Peile and McCouat, 1997). Professional social workers often develop and legitimate their practice by appealing to universal social values, particularly social justice. For example, in working with Jamilah, many of the responses we've discussed so far are consistent with values of self-determination and social justice. Some critical social workers have responded to the concern about value relativism in postmodern approaches by combining these perspectives with other modernist frameworks such as human rights (Ife, 1999) or radical and feminist social work perspectives (see Leonard, 1997; Healy, 2000, 2012; Fook, 2002; Morley and MacFarlane, 2012).

Critical social workers, in particular, argue that 'post' theories can be used to support conservative policy agendas and practice approaches. While acknowledging their use for recognizing complexity and uncertainty, Ife (1999, p. 211) asserts that: 'a lingering doubt remains as to whether it [postmodernism] represents a 'sell-out' to the very ideologies of individualism, greed and exploitation against which social workers have claimed to stand' (see also Dominelli, 2002b; Ferguson, 2008). In Jamilah's situation, for example, we can see many grounds for political protest against the material realities of disadvantage facing this young woman and her family. The family's situation can be understood as directly linked to state policies that limit if not entirely exclude refugees and asylum seekers from the material supports available to citizens, and discriminatory employment practices that further marginalize and oppress them. 'Post' theories promote critically self-reflective practice by demanding that we, as social workers, interrogate all our assumptions about identity, power and values, but, in so doing, it also threatens to detract our attention and energies from much needed wide-ranging social change.

## Conclusion

The burgeoning literature on postmodern theories in diverse fields and methods of social work and the growing popularity of narrative therapy have contributed to the legitimacy of these perspectives to the formal base of social work. In this chapter, we discussed how social workers can and do apply 'post' theory concepts to practice. For example, social workers often find themselves in the difficult situation of making sense of multiple and competing truth claims (Taylor and White, 2000) and in our contact with service users we often encounter multiple subjectivities in ourselves and in others. These theories can enrich our practice by providing a language through which we can understand and express the complexities and ambiguities we face, but an uncritical embrace of them also threatens our capacity to develop coherent ethical and political frameworks for practice.

## Summary Questions

- 1 What are the common assumptions of the theories discussed in this chapter?
- 2 How does the postmodern view of 'subjectivity' challenge modern social work theories, such as the strengths perspective and anti-oppressive practice?
- 3 How might postcolonial perspectives assist social workers to understand the experiences of people who have been displaced from their own countries as a result of conflict?
- 4 Identify and discuss the practice principles of narrative therapy.

## Recommended Reading

- Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. C. Gordon. (New York: Pantheon Books).  
Series of lectures, interviews and papers providing an accessible introduction to some of Foucault's most important ideas on power, subjectivity and change.
- Harrison, G. and Melville, R. (2010) *Rethinking Social Work in a Global World*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).  
Excellent introduction to international social work; clearly articulates the relevance of postcolonial theory for critical approaches to international social work practices.
- Healy, K. (2000) *Social Work Practices: Contemporary Perspectives on Change*. (London: Sage).  
Discusses the historical development, and application, of 'post' theory ideas to social work, emphasizing the implications for critical forms of social work practice.
- Lessard, H., Johnson, R. and Webber, J. (eds) (2011) *Storied Communities: Narratives of Contact and Arrival in Constituting Political Community*. (Vancouver: UBC Press).  
Collection of writings drawing on a range of perspectives, including poststructural and postcolonial ideas, to examine the political nature of narratives, including the possibilities for narratives to disrupt and rewrite dominant accounts of settler societies. Considers the potential of narratives to transform communities.
- Napier, L. and Fook, J. (eds) (2000) *Breakthroughs in Practice: Theorising Critical Moments in Social Work*. (London: Whiting & Birch).  
Collection of practice-based writings, where practitioners and academics working within a broad range of settings, including income security, mental health, child protection and services related to death and dying, using 'post' theory ideas to reflect on and develop their practice.
- White, C. and Denborough, D. (eds) (1998) *Introducing Narrative Therapy: A Collection of Practice-Based Writings*. (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre).



Beautiful collection of practice-based articles demonstrating a breadth of terrains for the application of narrative therapy ideas. Barbara Wingard's article on grief in indigenous communities is particularly recommended.

- White, M. (2003) Narrative practice and community assignments. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Practice*, 2, 17–55.  
Excellent paper outlining the theoretical ideas that inform White's approaches to narrative work in communities affected by trauma. Accessible introduction to how the application of Derrida's approach to deconstruction can be drawn on in assisting communities to value previously unheard and marginalized voices.
- White, M. and Epston, D. (1990) *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. (New York: WW Norton).  
Widely regarded as a classic in narrative therapy by two of the 'founding fathers' of the school. You are encouraged to read this text if you are interested in using narrative approaches to practice.

## Recommended Website

- [www.dulwichcentre.com.au](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au)  
The Dulwich Centre, based in Adelaide, Australia, is internationally recognized as a leading centre for narrative therapy education, writing and research. Includes recordings of narrative workshops and seminars on a wide range of topics, information about conferences and training opportunities, and online bookshop for Dulwich Centre publications.

# 11

## CREATING FRAMEWORKS FOR PRACTICE

This book has introduced a contextually informed and dynamic approach to social work practice. Social work has been presented as a negotiated activity; in particular, our purpose and practices as social workers are negotiated through interactions between our institutional context, our 'formal' purpose, our professional base, service users and our frameworks for practice. It has been argued that the potential for social workers to influence the contexts and formal theory base of the profession is, as yet, underdeveloped. One of this book's intentions has been to enhance our capacities, as social workers, to actively use and influence the ideas that shape the institutional contexts of practice and the formal theory base of social work itself. In this chapter, we consider how we can use this knowledge of the ideas underpinning the institutions and formal theories for practice for constructing our framework for practice, which is the final component of the model introduced in Chapter 2.

### Frameworks for Practice

In every practice encounter, we are drawing on, but also constructing, our framework for practice. In Chapter 2, the term 'framework for practice' was introduced to refer to the unique combination of formal and informal knowledge and skills developed by social workers in practice. This fusion includes formal theoretical and substantive knowledge as well as tacit, or difficult to articulate, knowledge, that can be built up through repeated exposure to practice situations. Ideally, our frameworks develop over time, through practice, and become increasingly useful to us for constructing unique responses in each practice encounter (see Fook et al., 2000).

The act of constructing our practice framework is creative, in that we draw on ideas from multiple sources, such as institutional context and formal theories, but we also transform these ideas through their application. For example, a social worker's application of the strengths perspective