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doing critical
social work

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'Doing' critical social work is a contested matter, with commentators noting significant challenges to its practice (e.g. Harris 2003; McBeath & Webb 2005; McDonald 2007). Particularly at stake is how to engage in transformative practices at a time when the possibilities for such practices are increasingly constrained. Yet there is evidence of encouraging developments for the practice of critical social work across a range of settings, a welcome occurrence in a world where the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is increasing.

In this chapter, I consider the implications of critical social work perspectives for practice. Based on a particular set of values in which social justice is core, I consider some of the complexities of power in social relations and their implications for working in empowering ways with service users. I explore practices and processes for assisting people who are marginalised and oppressed to develop ways of knowing and acting in order to open up their personal choices and options in life. I also consider the use of social activism and resistance to improve the access of individuals and groups to rights and resources. Underpinning these practices is the need for social workers to not only reflect on their practice but in particular to be critically reflexive about the influence of their own social location, values and beliefs on their practice. Critical social work cannot be characterised by a specific set of techniques as practice is shaped by time, place and context (Fook 2005; Hick 2005; Pozzuto et al. 2005). I argue for practice to be tailored to the particular

historical, social and cultural contexts of service users' lives, and valued for its capacity to create respectful spaces, however small, from which hope can grow and change can occur.

Values, ethics and social justice

Social work is not a politically neutral activity (Weinberg 2008). A core value underpinning social work practice is respect for the worth and dignity of all people, and the rights that follow from this (AASW 2002; IFSW/IASSW 2004). A commitment to social justice, discussed in earlier chapters, is a central value underpinning critical social work practice and appears as one of the five core values in the AASW *Code of Ethics* (AASW 2002).

A moral concept that was once commonly regarded as having universal acceptance and applicability, 'social justice' is highly contested, neither timeless nor absolute (Camilleri 1999; Ife 1999; Hugman 2008; Solas 2008). There are inevitable tensions between the attempt to hold to a universal value such as social justice while valuing diversity and giving voice to the oppressed and marginalised populations with whom social workers engage. The debate in *Australian Social Work* (Hugman 2008; Solas 2008) between Solas and Hugman on the Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) understanding of social justice in its *Code of Ethics* illustrates the complexities and the need for ongoing dialogue on these matters. In addition, some commentators recognise that social work values such as social justice are being undermined by contemporary managerial priorities within an environment of tighter regulations and policies where practice is often focused on managing resources and assessing risk (for example, see Stepney 2006; McDonald in Chapter 18 of this book). Writing in the UK context about contemporary social work that is shaped by what he terms a 'quasi-business discourse', Harris (2003: 185) identifies the problems of 'fit' between the values held by many social workers and the 'quasi-capitalist rationality' of their employing organisations.

These tensions over values are clearly demonstrated in the quest for a relevant code of ethics or moral framework for practice, discussed some 30 years ago by Galper (1975) in his code of ethics for radical social workers. More recently, Briskman and Noble (1999), in their exploration of the possibilities for a progressive code of ethics, have alerted us to the complexities of universal codes that fail to represent the multiplicity of voices in pluralist societies. However, they also note that an emphasis on different voices can result in intense individualism and a lack of solidarity between people who may share similarities in their differences. They recognise that a social justice framework is necessary to provide direction

for change, but acknowledge that there are different concepts of social justice. As indicated earlier, this debate continues (Hugman 2008; Solas 2008).

Similarly, others argue for the retention of a framework for social workers concerned with social justice because, by reminding us of the need to consider broad political issues, such a framework counters the relativism of poststructuralist approaches and acts as a 'moral compass', providing a direction for practitioners to take (Tew 2002; Weinberg 2008). Such emancipatory 'meta-narratives', argues Tew (2002), should not be abandoned but used cautiously without them taking on a fixed status.

Various ways of addressing these tensions in values and ethics have been suggested. In order to reflect the interests of all groups in society, Briskman and Noble (1999) recommend a process of negotiated compromise between the different groups within society to prevent any one privileged position from emerging as dominant. Harris (2003) sees evidence of social workers holding on to values that differ from the dominant discourse, and creatively making spaces to develop practice that is more just. Centrally important to the choices available and decisions made is the context in which practitioners work (Weinberg 2008), and above all social workers are urged to embrace complexity in their work (Jones et al. 2008). In their examination of critical best practice in the United Kingdom, Jones et al. (2008) note the pattern among practitioners of moving between accepting things as they are and adopting a critical stance of reflection on how they handle their organisations and daily interventions.

Power and empowerment

The notion of power, as we have seen from earlier chapters, is central to critical social practice, and there is now a much greater recognition of the nuances and complexities of power and its operations. Here I briefly outline the changed ways of understanding power before discussing the notion of empowerment and its practice.

Power has now come to be understood in multiple ways. Critical perspectives with a modernist structural emphasis, such as Marxist, feminist and anti-racist approaches, have identified patterns of domination and subordination in social relations whereby some groups in society secure privilege over others and use economic, discursive and emotional power to their advantage (Tew 2002). As Mullaly (2002) clearly describes, these traditional notions tend to view power as residing mainly in large structures, such as institutions of the state or the church, and see it as best challenged through large-scale collective action to change the

power structures. Examples include the trade union and environmental movements. According to this view, individuals alone are seen as having no power and as needing to come together with others for change to be possible.

Postmodern perspectives have brought more nuanced understandings of power and its use, as power and privilege are seen as being dispersed, operating in different localities, social situations and contexts—whether that be a school, a local mothers' group or a community health centre. Power is therefore fluid and open to constant influence and change. It is important to ask who is exercising power in a given situation, whose interests are being served and who has defined these interests. With this analysis comes the understanding that power is not inevitably oppressive, but can also be a positive and necessary resource that opens up social opportunities, depending on how it is used (Mullaly 2002; Pease 2002a; Tew 2002; Ferguson, H. 2008).

There are differences in power between practitioners and service users, because of the role and professional knowledge held by the practitioner. Although the relationship is not equal (e.g. Rees 1991; Healy 2005b), it is questionable that we should assume that workers always have power. A female worker who is Indigenous or disabled, for example, may have little power in particular situations (Healy 2000). But, rather than trying to dissipate or avoid the power they have, critical social workers should engage productively with the decision-making power they have in their different practice contexts, and consider how such power can be used in just and humane ways in these different contexts (Healy 2005b). They can also exercise discretion as a form of power. This issue of the power relationship between practitioners and services users is addressed again in the later discussion on dialogical or equal relationships.

A corollary of power is the commonly held notion that whenever power is exercised it is contested through resistance (Mullaly 2002). Dominelli (2004) disputes this, asserting that resistance is not an inherent part of power and 'has to be worked for, or brought into being'.

The idea that those who are oppressed need to be 'empowered' has long been popular and is a key concept in critical social work. What are the meanings of 'empowerment', a widely used term that is at risk of becoming rhetorical? And how might we 'practise' empowerment?

Empowerment

Although the notion of empowerment is seen to have many different usages and interpretations because its use is context-dependent and subject to changing

theoretical perspectives (Fook & Morley 2005), a consistent theme is the idea that it is a process of change through which members of subordinate groups move from being passive to active in order to gain greater control of their lives and their social environments (Mullaly 2007). Through empowerment, people can 'access different types of power, both internal (such as personal strengths) and external (such as social networks), which they can then use to improve their lives' (Barnoff & Coleman 2007: 37).

Empowerment has three different dimensions, variously labelled: personal; interpersonal/social/cultural; and structural/political (Gutiérrez et al. 1998; Thompson 1998; Mullaly 2007). A critical perspective recognises the importance of all three. At the personal level, the emphasis is on assisting individuals to gain greater control over their lives—for example, through enhanced confidence and self-esteem. At a social or cultural level, discriminatory assumptions, stereotypes and discourses that perpetuate the oppressive values and attitudes of dominant groups are challenged. At the structural or political level, power relations rooted in the structure of society are challenged (Thompson 1998; Mullaly 2007).

A numbers of writers believe that 'personal' empowerment is necessary if structural empowerment is to be achieved. Dalrymple and Burke (1995), for example, assert that changes at the feeling level among those who feel powerless will affect their sense of control and their ability to act. This can enable a mobilisation of resources at the level of action, which can in turn affect an individual's feelings because change has occurred. Others recognise the strong link between a sense of powerlessness related to loss of control over decisions that affect a person's life, and their mental and physical wellbeing (e.g. Lundy 2004; Ferguson, I. 2008). To avoid the traps of dualisms, critical social workers can work with people on all dimensions of empowerment—and this can be done simultaneously. For example, as Gutiérrez et al. (1998) suggest, a practitioner and an individual who have come together around issues of family violence may discuss advocacy organisations or attend a social action event together.

Empowerment practices

Empowerment is both a process and a goal, and is largely educative (Dalrymple & Burke 1995; Chenoweth & McAuliffe 2005; Mullaly 2007). However, the notion of there being such an entity as 'empowerment practices' is debated. Because empowerment is context dependent, Fook and Morley (2005) argue that its use varies widely—for example, sharing or giving of power, having choice or control in one's life or, as Hick (2005) asserts, simply having knowledge of how power is

exercised. Some commentators (e.g. Pease 2002a; Dominelli 2004) maintain that the notion of empowerment has become deradicalised where it has become part of the mainstream in a discourse of 'consumer choice' to legitimate managerial policies and practices. As Harris (2003) points out with specific reference to the United Kingdom, management has coopted the rhetoric of 'empowerment' of service users to justify services becoming 'customer-oriented' in the interests of managerialist agendas.

Fook and Morley (2005) fear that without a broader critical analysis, a single concept such as empowerment misses the bigger question of 'empowerment for what and for whom?' And like Dominelli (2004), they assert that because of factors such as lack of resources, conditions for empowering outcomes to be achieved have to be created—resistance does not just happen. So how can critical social workers empower those with whom they work, and what possibilities are there to do so in the contemporary constrained political context where, in Australia, there is a high value placed on social justice but seemingly limited access to structural change (Fook & Morley 2005)?

There are various interpretations of how empowerment can be practised, and Rossiter (2005) critiques it for being too often harnessed to a set of specific techniques. If reduced to techniques, empowerment runs the risk of ignoring 'parity of participation' (Fraser 2001), which involves two factors needed for participation to occur—the broader distribution of resources, and freedom from discrimination within society. Strategies for empowerment practice clearly must be utilised within a framework that employs a structural and critical analysis.

Earlier interpretations of empowerment practice were seen to involve three components: feelings and beliefs associated with self-confidence; knowledge and skills for critical thinking and action; and action strategies for the cultivation of the resources, knowledge and skills needed to influence both internal and external structures (Dalrymple & Burke 1995; Gutiérrez et al. 1998). These dimensions remain pertinent to the practice of empowerment, but additional elements are now emphasised. These include facilitating the voices of marginalised individuals and groups to be heard. Underpinning all of this is the development of awareness of how dominant culture oppresses subordinate groups and reinforces the entrenched power of dominant groups through dominant discourses, stereotypes and popular culture (Baines 2007a; Mullaly 2007; Ife 2008a).

The notion of an equal or 'dialogical' relationship between practitioners and those with whom they are working is an idea long promoted in critical social work. Underlying this is the assumption that each party has equivalent wisdom and expertise, born out of their respective professional and lived experiences. Sharing their expertise through a dialogue that allows for learning from each other can

allow for joint action in the interests of the client and includes the authentic voices of those who are marginalised (Mullaly 2007; Ife 2008a).

Some have critiqued this notion of an equal relationship between workers and service users on the grounds that it is not appropriate to much of the work in which a social worker is engaged, or to particular organisational contexts such as juvenile justice or prison settings. Ife (2005b, 2008a) acknowledges that there will be times when a practitioner has to act against the will of a person to safeguard his or her rights, but even then such actions must be undertaken with great caution to ensure that they are not violating human rights. Even in settings where social workers represent authority in a social control role, they must strive to develop a dialogical relationship and to avoid colluding with oppressive structures and practices. If there is a genuine dialogue or exchange in which both parties can reach a shared understanding of the nature and limitations of rights and responsibilities in a given situation, then appropriate action can follow (Ife 2005b).

Almost two decades ago, a study by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in Melbourne, Australia (Taylor 1990) revealed the significance an equal relationship can have for those with whom social workers have contact. For the women service users in the study, an equal relationship meant being treated 'on the same level' and 'not being looked down on' (1990: 66). Someone with time to listen, who showed willingness to help, who was friendly and understanding and who acted 'human' were also important factors. More recently, a study of the views of 59 service users, carers and social workers in the United Kingdom undertaken in 2005 by Cree and Davis (2007), revealed that service users and carers wanted practitioners who would listen to them and treat them with respect. Many of the social workers, talking about their reciprocal relationships with service users and carers, described how much they learnt from service users as 'experts by experience' who taught them much about the support they needed and wanted.

Although there are concerns that empowerment practices are limited in what they can achieve, a number of recent writers maintain that empowerment practices within a critical framework can, and ethically must, be used. Harry Ferguson (2008) argues that power is a resource that can be used appropriately even in highly managerial conditions. Similarly, Baines and her colleagues (2007a) provide evidence of ways in which, despite many workplace constraints, practitioners have been able to develop strategic ways to support individuals while politicising their everyday lives and working in ways to change society at many levels. These include encouraging the voices of service users to be heard and fostering their participation in decision-making; working in collaborative ways with service users; role modelling and demonstrating possibilities; educating other service providers and service users

themselves, in subtle and gentle ways; using therapeutic skills and the healing power of traditional stories, rituals and practices (see also Atkinson 2002; Bennett & Zubrzycki 2003); using advocacy and organising; and working in social movements. This work shows the place of values and hopes in working towards social justice and the importance of seizing moments and spaces to foster this.

Others assert that, although those in the human services cannot expect alone to make major structural changes, they can at least play a part in undermining inequality at the structural level. Links with local activist groups of resistance or broader social movements such as feminist or environmental groups are required (Thompson 1998; Ferguson, I. 2008).

To extend the understanding of practices relevant to critical social work beyond empowerment, I now consider factors that are especially important in opening up life choices for people through developing their ways of knowing and acting. The discussion focuses on linking the personal with the political; social-political analysis and consciousness-raising; discourse analysis; internalised oppression and internalised domination or privilege; and the reclaiming of emotions. Social activism, and reflective practice and critical reflexivity, are then discussed.

Expanding ways of knowing and acting

Linking the personal with the political

'To politicise something or someone is to introduce the idea that . . . everything involves struggle over power, resources and affirming identities' (Baines 2007b: 51). Traditional social work practices have separated 'intervention' into different 'levels' or methods of practice—individual or family casework and case management; group work; organisational development; community development; social policy; and social research—with practitioners tending to primarily work within one of these methods. Typically, larger socio-political issues have been left to the minority of practitioners working in community development and social policy, thus weakening the link between the personal and the political (Jessup & Rogerson 1999; Mullaly 2007). Critical social work approaches to practice do not favour one particular method over another, and instead see the need for multiple ways of working because individuals' experiences are shaped by and shape their broader world (e.g. Moreau et al. 1993; Ife 2005b, 2008a; Spratt 2005).

The following examples illustrate ways in which such links might be made. The connection can be made, for example, between the despair and exhaustion experienced by a young mother in paid work, and the type of provisions and level of support for working parents in our society as well as the dominant discourses,

beliefs and practices surrounding responsibilities for domestic labour. For Ife (1997), the practitioner is expected to understand the person with whom they are working in terms of her/his community and cultural context and to work towards solutions and supports at the community level. Similarly, community workers would be expected to use interpersonal skills that are designed to build trust and rapport with those with whom they need to work. Ife suggests several ways in which links might be made between policy and practice. These include the ways in which problems are discussed with individuals, the terms used, the ways in which solutions are sought, and also linking people with others in similar circumstances. Assisting people to develop organisational skills such as advocating for themselves or making representations in meetings are other ways. Practices such as consciousness-raising and critical questioning have assisted the process of linking the personal and political, and are discussed later in this chapter.

Healy (2000) argues that the dichotomy between structural and local forms of change needs to be dismantled to allow the local concerns and goals of individuals and groups to be seen as part of a continuum of social change. Here, pragmatic and localised approaches to activism are valued, with workers engaging in social change activities through the local networks of which they are part (Healy 2000). Workers might band together with their local community, for example, to establish a drop-in centre to provide information and referral services and recreational activities, to help build social cohesion and combat isolation or fear of cultural differences. Where large-scale political action is considered, broad representation of many different political and professional interests is encouraged and ongoing negotiation of the differences between those involved is urged (Healy 2000; Ferguson, I. 2008).

Socio-political analysis and consciousness-raising

The lens through which workers analyse or 'assess' the social problems of those with whom they work is crucial to critical social work practice. The analysis of hidden oppressions and awareness of social locations is central in helping service users to view their personal experiences within a political framework (Fook 2005). The focus of structural approaches on socio-political analysis—analysing the relationship between personal problems, dominant ideology and material conditions—requires an analysis of power relationships at all levels. This involves identifying the social, political and economic barriers impinging on individuals, families, communities and organisations (Moreau & Leonard 1989). All forms of oppression and marginalisation based on sexism, racism, colonialism, imperialism, classism, ageism, disablism (physical and mental), heterosexism and others need to be considered (Mullaly 2007).

This means that practitioners need a sound understanding of political mechanisms and the workings of power. At a time when human service organisations are requiring workers to undertake 'assessments' that have become increasingly standardised and tightly scripted (Baines 2007b), social workers are urged to keep in mind the socio-political lens. Lundy (2004) recommends particular needs of individuals and families to be considered (material, social and psychological, productive, safety and self-actualisation needs), but at the same time insists on consideration of social, political and economic rights to determine the injustices people face, providing not only immediate resources but also working towards political solutions.

Consciousness-raising or 'conscientisation'—derived from the work of Paulo Freire (1972) and popularised through feminism, among other radical traditions—is a process for undertaking socio-political analyses with service users within a dialogical relationship, as a way of assisting them to understand their personal situations in their broader socio-political context. It occurs through both reflection and action (see critical reflection at the end of this chapter), with an emphasis on helping groups of people gain insights into their circumstances, who holds power and how power can be used to make social change (Baines 2007b; Mullaly 2007).

The use of consciousness-raising as a process continues to be popular (e.g. Tew 2002; Mullaly 2007; Ife 2008a). But while opening up possibilities for action, consciousness-raising can be oppressive and patronising if based on the assumption that the practitioner's consciousness is superior, assuming a singular underlying truth, and if imposed on the people with whom she or he is working (Healy 2005a; Ife 2008a). This has been illustrated in efforts of workers to 'elevate' Indigenous people to state 'standards' (Grimshaw et al. 1994). By imposing their own beliefs on others about what is empowering, workers are constructing themselves as the experts, often inappropriately, with the service user expected to take on the worker's beliefs (Fook & Morley 2005).

Thus, consciousness-raising needs to be a mutual process, based on respect and a genuine desire on the part of practitioners to work together with people, whether individuals, families, groups, organisations, communities or at the national and global levels. This involves shared expertise, mutual learning in which professional knowledge and life experiences are equally valued, and joint action. An attitude of respect towards those with whom the practitioner is working, along with sound active listening skills, provides an important foundation for such practice (Ife 2008a). This means that workers need to listen for and negotiate the multiple meanings attached to dialogues, recognise the many different ways of knowing, and even take on board ways of knowing that challenge professional expertise.

Clark (2006: 1) emphasises the need for workers 'to co-create spaces for shared understanding of meanings that people use to interpret the world and their place in it' by listening for meaning in order to attend to spiritual and cultural world-views. This is not to say that service users' own analyses 'are never questioned or reconstructed'. Some reworking of ideas rather than taking them at face value may be appropriate where service users share the same oppressive beliefs as mainstream society, and so are likely to blame themselves or others in society who have little to do with the problem (Baines 2007b: 59). This process is referred to as internalised oppression and is discussed later in the chapter.

Discourse analysis

Critical social work approaches influenced by postmodern ideas emphasise discourses and discourse analysis, as discussed in Chapter 3. Because of the capacity of discourses as sets of meanings and language practices to generate new meanings, they can expand the possible ways of understanding different experiences and of actions available to people and are the sites of 'analysis and struggle' (Healy 1999: 118). Language cannot be regarded as producing experiences such as poverty or racism, but the experiences can only be understood through language (Healy 2000).

The term 'intervention', common in social work parlance, is one such example of how language shapes meanings. Conventional social work practices have used the term to refer to the work undertaken by social workers to bring about change to something of which they themselves are not part. The use of the term is problematic for two main reasons (Ife 2008a). First, it perpetuates an image of the social worker as an outside expert rather than a partner in an action process. Second, it reinforces a notion of disadvantaged people being the passive recipients of the expert help of the social worker who alone is responsible for affecting change. Alternatives to the language of 'intervention' can emphasise a greater degree of mutuality, such as 'work with' or 'work carried out' between practitioners and others towards achievement of goals.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the language of dominant discourses can be analysed through a process of deconstruction. Through deconstruction, cultural, community and family discourses can be flushed out and debunked. This process can disclose ideas, beliefs and behaviours that reproduce prevailing power structures which have taught service users to succumb to their dictates, and can open up possibilities for discourses and their outcomes to be altered (Jessup & Rogerson 1999; Rossiter 2005; Goldberg Wood & Tully 2006). Goldberg Wood and Tully (2006) describe,

for example, the oppressive discourse that prevents many women from reporting rape. Elements of this discourse include that once a man is sexually aroused he is powerless to control himself and that, as many authorities such as police and jury members believe this, women understand it is highly unlikely that their rapists will be convicted.

Other practices useful in discourse analysis include narrative approaches (referred to in Chapter 3) and the utilisation of critical questioning. Critical questioning, derived from the thinking of Freire (e.g. Freire & Faundez 1990) and Foucault (1979, cited in Jessup & Rogerson 1999: 165), helps individuals understand the influence of their stereotypical or socially conditioned assumptions in determining their life experiences (Mullaly 2007). It provides the opportunity for a person to explore their expectations and how they feel they have to act (Fook 1993). As a form of deconstruction, critical questioning acts as an invitation to another person to engage in a dialogue around reconstruction of new ideas and beliefs.

Internalised oppression and internalised domination

Internalised oppression (or 'inferiorisation'—see Mullaly 2007), as originally conceptualised by Pheterson (1986: 148), refers to 'the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society'. They thus believe and accept the prejudices against them (Mullaly 2002, 2007; Carniol 2005; Goldberg Wood & Tully 2006; Kumsa 2007). Internalised oppression includes feelings like self-hatred, fear of violence, self-doubt, isolation and powerlessness, and is the mechanism by which domination is perpetuated in oppressive situations.

In contrast, internalised domination, such as sexism in men and racism in white people, is 'the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within a dominant group of prejudices against others' (Pheterson 1986: 148). It consists of feelings such as superiority, normalcy, self-righteousness, distortion of reality, guilt, fear, and alienation from one's body and from nature, and restricts the individual's capacity to empathise, love and trust. It isolates people from one another and prevents solidarity, binding people together through their power to dominate others rather than on the basis of respect for others. Internalised domination can be countered through valuing difference, education, self-reflection and building alliances with others, the last factor helping to counter the feelings of guilt and confusion that arise from being in social positions of dominance (Pheterson 1986). Although the term itself is no longer prominent in contemporary literature, the impact of

internalised domination is a driving force behind the need for social workers to practise critical reflexivity, addressed later in this chapter.

The shift from problem-solving, therapeutic and reformative types of approaches to working with individuals and families, to educational and discursive approaches compatible with a critical discourse, has been promising in addressing the issue of how to work with people's internalised oppression or inferiorisation. Narrative approaches, for example, value the uniqueness of the individual experience and question the fundamental concepts that each individual draws on to make meaning of their world (White 1992; Pozzuto et al. 2005). Helping the individual to identify the influence of dominant discourses on their individual perceptions and experiences achieves this. A narrative approach provides a means of including people in challenging the dominant discourse through the exploration of alternative discourses, and is regarded as a new approach to therapy that fosters links between the individual and the social (Fook 2005). While such an approach can offer hope and optimism to people, it should not be used in isolation from a material and structural analysis of the person's situation, and the process of internalised domination should be considered as well as internalised oppression.

Reclaiming emotions

There is growing recognition in critical social work of the need to integrate an understanding of ways of knowing and transformation through the body (Cameron & McDermott 2007), emotions and spirit (Tew 2002; Wong 2004), combining the social and the psychological in new ways to attend appropriately to emotional dimensions of service users' experiences (Frost & Hoggett 2008; Stenner & Taylor 2008). In his detailed analysis of power and practice, Tew (2002) discusses a third level of social relations, emotionality (the other two levels being material and discursive). He argues that the emotions, separated from rationality in a modernist world because of their threat to the smooth running of society, are related to experiences of oppression and abuse and are a response to outcomes of power and status relations. He shows how, through modernity, emotions have been subordinated and devalued, and treated in later modernity as a commodity to be sanitised and managed within an 'emotion industry'. Tew maintains that to challenge the embedded ideologies that overlook and control emotions, two stages are necessary. First, people need to be carefully listened to in order to feel believed and understood—an experience that may be profoundly empowering. Second, emotions can mobilise energies to bring about the changes that resist oppressions and abuses, as they can bring a sense of motivation and purpose,

both intra-psychically and collectively, and can forge bonds of support and alliance between people (Tew 2002).

In order to respond in an integrated yet emancipatory way to oppressed individuals and groups, rather than avoid or trivialise their emotions, critical social workers need to develop more effective ways of hearing and receiving service users' emotions stemming from discriminatory and oppressive experiences. They need to work in ways that help individuals and groups to effectively resist oppression and to channel the energy of outrage and hurt towards bringing about emancipatory change (Tew 2002).

Social activism

Activism 'involves a number of activities, such as organising, educating and mobilising people' (Baines 2007b: 54). Choices and options can be opened up for those who are oppressed and marginalised through such actions that directly challenge and resist oppressive social relations and conditions. I now consider advocacy and other collective actions, followed by some general comments on acts of resistance.

Advocacy

Advocacy involves an attempt to influence the behaviour of decision-makers, and is something that social workers practise on a regular basis. It aims to improve the responsiveness of social arrangements to people's needs out of a basic respect for an individual's human rights, and involves the interpretation of the powerless to the powerful (Payne 1997; O'Connor et al. 2003). Traditionally, advocacy has been divided into two types, case advocacy and class advocacy. Case advocacy involves 'the process of working with, or on behalf of, another or a small group, to obtain services to which they are entitled, or to influence a decision that affects them' (O'Connor et al. 2003: 190). This might occur, for example, when an individual is refused a service or benefit to which they are entitled, when an individual needs benefits or services urgently as a result of a crisis, or when a person is denied their legal rights. Class advocacy refers to 'activity directed at changing policy, practices and laws' affecting a class of individuals (O'Connor et al. 2003), promoting social change for the benefit of social groups. This is required, for example, when groups of people are discriminated against or when organisational or government policies affect people adversely, such as the grievous effects for refugees in Australia of the former Howard government's policy on temporary protection visas.

There are three sets of strategies to influence decision-makers. These are normative strategies, which involve making moral arguments and generating recognition of common values; utilitarian strategies involving bargaining and negotiation, when decision-makers have a neutral view about the advocacy effort; and coercive strategies, involving the use of conflict and complaint to force the attention of decision-makers (O'Connor et al. 2003). Skills for effective advocacy, decided between worker and individual or group, may include written and oral submissions, persuading and lobbying, finding loopholes in bureaucratic rules, bending rules, developing familiarity with formal and informal agency rules and procedures, and skills in handling conflict (Fook 1993; O'Connor et al. 2003; Goldberg Wood & Tully 2006).

Since the 1980s, new forms of advocacy have emerged, based on a belief in people managing their own lives, as advocacy can potentially be disempowering. For, as Ife (2008a) asserts, speaking on behalf of a person may represent profoundly conservative rather than empowering practice. Advocacy should be practised in empowering ways to develop the capacity of people from marginalised groups to act on their own behalf (Tew 2002; Ife 2008a), although Baines (2007b) questions that this applies in all instances, as will shortly be discussed. Tensions can arise where service users do not share the same social justice goals as the worker, or where actions considered empowering by a worker are experienced negatively by service users (Pease 2002a; Kumsa 2007).

Collective action, alliances and citizen participation

There is widespread agreement that for marginalised and oppressed individuals to become involved in a group process can be the most effective way for them to become politically aware of their circumstances (Mullaly 2007). Collective action and resistance through groups of people coming together provide opportunities for consciousness-raising, developing solidarity through shared views, lobbying to change opinions on oppressive rules, conditions and institutions, and developing alliances with social movements and other groups. This calls for educational, support and social change-oriented groups. Group solidarity among participants can develop as people share their individual and common experiences of frustration, anger, oppression and ideas about what might be needed to make their situations different. Full discussion on group work to help promote social change can be found in Sullivan et al. (2003), Breton (2004), McNicoll (2004), Staples (2004), Doel (2006) and Preston-Shoot (2007). Mullender and Ward's (1991) work on self-directed groups remains an invaluable source on a form of group work based specifically on conflict theory and empowerment practices.

Factors that act as barriers to people's participation in society need to be addressed through institutional change and reform, policy advocacy and social activism using collective resistance (Carniol 2005; Mullaly 2007; Ferguson, I. 2008; Ife 2008a) and community organising and building (Goldsworthy 2002; Staples 2004; Stepney 2006). This involves influencing discourses, using the law, developing alliances with other groups working for social and political change such as social justice and human rights groups and protest groups, organising public forums and social action campaigns, supporting grassroots leadership, working with the mass media to mobilise public opinion and applying political pressure against harmful institutional practices (Ife 1997; 2008a; Thompson 1998; Carniol 2005).

To return to an earlier point about power and its use, Healy (2005b) reminds us that critical social workers need to think more broadly about possible activist practice sites and processes, to make visible activism which has been invisible in conventional, bureaucratic practice settings, and to consider other possibilities for stimulating change, such as a careful analysis of specific organisational contexts.

There are encouraging signs of the development of some highly creative collective solutions that do not locate problems within individuals, instead linking common experiences of oppression with the sources of such oppression. Spratt (2005), for example, borrowing ideas from the work of Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal (1979), has used 'forum theatre' with a group of Irish schoolchildren on the issue of bullying as a form of oppression. The method has the capacity to raise consciousness and develop creative potential solutions that can become rehearsals for changes to be enacted in real life. Schatz et al. (2006) also discuss this creative group-oriented approach. As Sin (2007) shows through his work in a research project on gambling in the Chinese community in Montreal, participatory action research can also be used to give voice to marginalised populations and to promote social change.

Resistance within organisational, historical, social and cultural contexts

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, central to critical social work practice is resistance—those acts or actions in which people, individually or collectively, 'take a stand in opposition to a belief, an idea, an ideology, a climate, a practice, or an action that is oppressive and damaging to individual and social well-being' (Benjamin 2007). Resistance requires a strategy (a plan of action) and tactics (the specific process for implementing the plan) as well as the use of critical analysis and critical reflection (Benjamin 2007). Many of these practices of resistance were identified in the preceding section.

There is pressure for social workers to conform to organisational cultures that, despite the rhetoric around notions like social justice, are often at odds with social justice-oriented approaches to practice. Practices of resistance are therefore often limited because of the strength of oppressive everyday practices and constraints and the reluctance of social workers to take a stand. To counter these barriers, collective efforts with others are essential (Benjamin 2007). An important rider is the need to practise appropriately to the particular historical, social and cultural context and not to act on ideological clichés without critical analysis and critical reflection.

A clear example of this is shown by Baines (2007b), who reflects on the effectiveness of her work some years ago in a large American public hospital where class and race disparities were acute. Certain depoliticised practices rooted in white middle-class experiences did not work for the clients with whom she worked. These included individuation, encouraging women to express their anger and equalising power in the therapeutic relationship. Details of this work can be found in Baines (2007b), but some examples illustrate the point. While individuation (a process emphasising a person's separateness and autonomy) may be helpful to some individuals, especially women who might benefit from seeing themselves as separate beings from others demanding their care, it can overlook the interdependence needed, and deep meaning and support gained, from tight-knit networks that people in poverty require to survive. Similarly, the women, who were already practised at expressing their anger in order to survive their daily struggles, benefited from assistance to develop strategies for 'using' their anger more effectively to meet their material needs rather than alienating themselves from much-needed sources of support. Finally, despite the emphasis in feminist and other justice-oriented approaches on equalising power between worker and client in the helping relationship, Baines found in her short-term crisis work with clients that they were not at all interested in understanding the therapeutic process because they needed immediate solutions and resources. Instead, Baines found that the practices which worked well with this multiracial group on low incomes were those rooted in activism: politicised practices such as critical consciousness-raising; using her privilege as a white middle-class worker in the interests of her clients; and linking with social movements and unions (Baines 2007b).

Reflective practice and critical reflexivity

Fundamental to all critical social work practice are the actions of reflective practice. The notion of 'reflective practice' originated with Argyris and Schon (1976) and there are now many variations of the term, often used interchangeably (D'Cruz

et al. 2007)—for example, 'critical reflection' (Fook 2002; Rossiter 2005), 'critically reflective practice' (Tew 2002), 'critical reflexivity' (McDonald 2006) and a 'reflexive approach' (Healy 2005a).

In essence, the general concept can be understood in two main ways. The first concerns service users developing their knowledge and awareness for opening up their life choices through critical reflection (see the discussion on consciousness-raising earlier in the chapter). The second focuses on social workers' critical reflection on their own practice in relation to how knowledge about clients is generated and the operations of power in this process, but also on their reflections on their own values, feelings and emotions and the ways these influence their work, a process often referred to as critical reflexivity (D'Cruz et al. 2007).

Using critical reflexivity, social workers reflect on the influence of their own personality, background, social and cultural location, and perspectives on their practice (Fook 2002). Taken-for-granted assumptions are questioned and its use encourages practitioners to re-analyse situations in ways that provide for new actions and changes in power relations. The use of uncertainty is a catalyst for change, and the process of critical reflexivity draws attention to the absolute necessity for social workers to be involved in continual self-reflexive learning to work as effectively as posible for the betterment of people's lives and social relations (Fook 1999; Tew 2002; Rossiter 2005; McDonald 2006).

Conclusion

At the centre of critical social work practices is the lens through which we view social problems and their causes, involving both our emotions and our minds (Baines 2007c). Also underpinning the practices are hopes for a socially just and peaceful world that encourage us to work in respectful and ethical ways according to the values stated at the beginning of this chapter. Constraints in the workplace and in society more broadly act as significant barriers to working towards a more socially just world, but it is imperative that we do not lose the hope and respect. Despite these considerable barriers to the practice of critical social work in the often uncaring and alienating world of individuals and groups who are marginalised, oppressed, and largely unheard and made invisible, there are ways of working that open up alternative possibilities. A common and binding theme for 'doing' critical social work is the requirement to work in ways that link the personal with the political to ensure that people's immediate material needs are addressed and longer-term social change is acted on. We have a responsibility to continue to develop and evolve these ways.