CHAPTER

5

Critical theory and social work practice

The two traditions of radical practice

Attempts to develop a radical, or alternative, social work fall into two categories. The first can be called the *structural* approach, which has sought to base social work analysis and practice around an analysis of structural oppression, specifically in the areas of class, race and gender. Much of the radical social work literature of the 1970s was based on a Marxist or pseudo-Marxist analysis of class (Corrigan and Leonard 1978; Bailey and Brake 1975), and other formulations have used a gender analysis (Marchant and Wearing 1986). More recently, Mulally (1993) has integrated these approaches into a more comprehensive account of 'structural social work'. These structural accounts characteristically depend on a form of universalist discourse, seeing class, race and/or gender oppression as transcending cultural and national boundaries, and as requiring analysis at a more general and abstract level. Thus they rely on a universal discourse about the nature of oppression, though of course they allow for more relativist and culturally specific definitions of appropriate action.

The other tradition of radical social work writing has been the *post-structural* tradition, drawing on the work of writers who have rejected universalist discourse and have advocated relativism, difference, and a world of multiple realities. This includes the post-structuralism of Foucault (1972, 1973, 1975; Gutting 1994; Rabinow 1984), and the various writers within the post-modernist tradition (Harvey 1989; Lechte 1994; Haber 1994). The 'death of the meta-narrative' (Lyotard 1984) implies that universalist accounts, even of oppression along class, race and gender lines, are unacceptable. Alternative forms of analysis and understanding are sought by valuing or celebrating difference, and by understanding the way in which power relationships are constantly defined and redefined as part of a fluid and changing discourse (or a number of changing discourses). Although social work writers have not been as prolific in this tradition as they have in the structural tradition, there are some interesting explorations of how social work might thus be conceptualised (Rojek et al. 1988; Solas 1994; Howe 1994; Hartman 1991; Latting 1995; Leonard 1995; Camilleri 1995).

The contribution of feminist writers has spanned both traditions. Some have written within the structural perspective, using an essentially universalist understanding of women's oppression to seek paths to liberation, in much the same way as Marxist writers in relation to social class. Other feminist writers, however, have used feminism to develop a politics of difference, and as a way of challenging universalism, equating universalism with patriarchy as a system of domination (Rothfield 1991; Brah 1991). This demonstrates how feminism has been able to draw on both traditions, and has been informed by both a structural and a post-structural perspective. In being able to bridge this dualism and other dualisms (Plumwood 1993), feminism has demonstrated that discrete dichotomies, even between structural and post-structural accounts, need not be regarded as universally valid, and this opens the way for an analysis that seeks to benefit from the insights of both the structural and post-structural approaches. This will be the position taken in this chapter.

In attempting to develop a perspective that draws from both traditions, one is essentially abandoning an extreme post-modernist position, as postmodernism does not allow for meta-narratives about such issues as social justice and human rights (Rothfield 1991; Davies 1991). Although the discussion below,

and indeed much of the discussion in previous chapters, has drawn on postmodernist understandings and interpretations, it is not a postmodernist social work that is advocated in this chapter. Rather it is a position which reasserts the importance of principles of humanity and social justice, as specified in the discussion on universal rights in the previous chapter, but which also seeks to contextualise them through an empowerment-based approach to practice. The theoretical paradigm within which this can best be developed is critical theory, and the discussion below uses a critical theory perspective to define an approach to social work that is consistent with the humanist/anarchist perspective discussed in previous chapters.

Critical theory

The field of critical theory contains some of the most inaccessible literature in the social sciences. It is a complex area, with many differing viewpoints and theoretical formulations, and is characterised by writers who frighten off even the bravest readers with their dense argument and obscure vocabulary. This is ironic given that one of the central aims of critical theory is to enable people to be empowered through equipping them with the tools to analyse their own experiences by relating them to social and political structures (the personal is political) and thus to take action. How they are supposed to do this, when the texts are so inaccessible, remains a mystery. This issue of accessibility is important, and will be taken up again in the next chapter, as it directly relates to a potential role for social workers.

It would be impossible in the following pages to convey a complete summary of the field of critical theory, with all its subtle nuances, layers of argument and points of contention; this would be a task quite beyond the scope of this book. There are various formulations of critical theory (Morrow and Brown 1994; Calhoun 1995; Ray 1993; Geuss 1981; Dryzek 1995) differing in many important aspects, and to summarise them into a single entity would be inappropriate. Rather, what is presented is a particular version of critical theory which draws on some of the previous discussion, and directly relates to the articulation of an alternative social work. It is only one version of critical theory among many, and draws specifically on educative forms of critical theory (Ray 1993, p. 22) as discussed

by Leonard (1990), Fay (1987), and others, with particular reference to the work of Freire (1972, see also McLaren and Leonard 1993; McLaren and Lankshear 1994). This version of critical theory is significant because it has sought to relate critical analysis to ideas of political practice, and hence it is relevant to developing a form of social work that can address both the practice and policy dilemmas posed by the context of economic rationalism.

This approach to critical theory also incorporates the humanist vision discussed in Chapter 4. A number of writers have sought to use a critical theory approach to overcome the shortcomings of humanism, and to develop a 'critical humanism' that incorporates a power analysis alongside the humanist vision. In the Australian context, Janet McIntyre (1995) has developed such a perspective in her model of community development, which in some ways parallels the discussion of social work outlined in this chapter.

Critical theory specifically rejects the positivist paradigm of objectivity, empirical measurement and the quest for universal laws. The critique of positivism has been discussed in earlier chapters, and need not be reiterated here. Instead, critical theory can be seen as starting with a position that values an interpretive understanding of reality. Interpretive social science is concerned to uncover the meanings people attach to actions, and the social rules that guide people's behaviour and interaction (Fay 1975). These are not the universal abstracted rules of positivism, but rather are contextual rules grounded in particular cultural experiences. In its attempt to uncover these rules and make them explicit, interpretive social science seeks to improve communication and understanding between people, both within a particular cultural context, and also across cultural boundaries. It also is concerned with understanding how communication breaks down, and explains this through inadequate sharing of symbolic meanings, different cultural definitions and expectations, and inadequate communication. Interpretive social science aims to promote interaction and understanding, and so inter-personal communication is regarded by Fay (1975) as the form of political practice that is necessarily connected to interpretive social science, in the same way that technocratic managerialism and social engineering are the forms of practice associated with positivism (see Chapter 3).

Interpretive social science is a paradigm with which many social workers are familiar. It reflects the reality of a good deal of social work practice, which is about understanding and interpreting the reality of a client, family or group, and which seeks to understand the patterns of communication that may result in misunderstanding or 'pathological' behaviour. Family therapy, for example, is largely built on a tradition of interpretive social science, as are other accepted forms of social work, especially in casework and work with families. The techniques of interviewing and of establishing empathy are characteristically interpretive, and the interpretive paradigm represents a way of working with people in which social workers have been prominent, and where social workers have made significant contributions to the literature (family therapy being an outstanding example). It is, however, a form of practice that is out of step with the positivism and empiricism of the managerial discourse, and hence has not reacted well to the demands to measure, to specify outcomes and to adopt a form of scientific rationality.

This leads inevitably to a concern with language, as it is through language that symbolic meanings are shared and defined, and it is primarily through language that communication is established and maintained. The skill of a social worker in family therapy or counselling is primarily in her/his use of language, and it is through the interpretation of meaning implicit in the language of others that the social worker attempts to understand the reality of a client. Interpretive social science would stop at this point, but critical social science seeks a more powerful role for language, not only in terms of understanding and interpretation, but also in terms of articulating change and opening up possibilities for liberation, or 'emancipation' to use a favourite term of critical theorists. We shall return to the issue of language a little later.

Interpretive social science, in isolation from a broader contextual analysis, tends toward conservatism. Fay (1975) argues that this is an inevitable consequence of the interpretive paradigm. Interpretive social science, by seeking to enhance communication and understanding, and by resolving tensions and misunderstandings at an individual level, leads to a form of practice that simply reconciles people to their position in society rather than working towards change. Interpretive social science does not contain within it a view of a direction for

change (whether towards liberation or control), but simply works to enable people to live more happily within the existing order. Such practice is, by its very nature, conservative. The criticism of casework as conservative echoes this point within social work, and was behind much of the radical critique of the 1970s, which saw social work as primarily social control, helping to reconcile people to their lot in an unjust society, rather than seeking to change it. This critique is important, and applies just as readily to a good deal of social work in the 1990s. What is needed, however, is a more sophisticated response than that of the radicals of the 1970s, when a number of babies were thrown out with the bathwater, and much of the practice wisdom and the value of the interpretive tradition within social work was devalued. This in turn opened the way for the domination of positivism within social work discourse, in the mistaken belief that the answer lay in being 'more scientific'. A more sophisticated approach, however, is offered by critical theory, which does not reject an interpretive understanding on account of its conservatism. Rather it accepts the need for an interpretive understanding but seeks to add to it a politics of liberation.

Interpretive social science is also compatible with the relativism of postmodernism. It allows for the establishment of multiple realities, for the death of the meta-narrative, and for the valuing of diversity at the expense of a universal discourse. In some ways interpretive social science can be seen as a forerunner of postmodernism and is subject to many of the same criticisms. In seeking an alternative, critical theory thus takes on board a dismissal of totally postmodernist accounts. Again, this is done not in the spirit of complete rejection; it accepts the validity and the importance of much of the postmodern critique, but in the recognition that something more needs to be added if one is to develop an approach to both theory and practice that is able to achieve change towards a more just society.

Critical social science therefore seeks to add a structural perspective to the understandings of interpretive social science. It insists that to interpret, to understand and to communicate are not enough, and that one also needs to incorporate a perspective that can lead to action and change, and can point to the direction in which that change ought to occur (e.g., towards liberation rather than towards further oppression). This

requires some form of structural analysis, which identifies the causes of people's oppression or structural disadvantage within a wider context. The felt needs and sufferings of people may be the consequences of forces of which they have little or no knowledge and understanding, given the global and often hidden nature of the forces of capitalism, patriarchy etc., and the limited analysis presented by the mainstream media, and hence an interpretive approach alone is insufficient to enable them to take effective action. However if one adds a structural analysis, there is the potential for a powerful force for change. This enables people to relate their own experience of oppression at the level of social practice to a broader political under-standing. It is, effectively, the linking of the personal and the political in a paradigm which says that each by itself is insufficient, and that our understanding of the human condition, and of the events impacting on ourselves and on others, must incorporate both. The structural analysis provides the overall perspective within which individual constructions of meaning, and individual actions, occur.

Critical social science, then, is normative. It is not simply content to describe the world of society and human relations, but is also concerned to change it. The critical approach incorporates a view of the direction of desired change, based on an articulation of social justice, human liberation, or some other high-level account. The structural analysis involved in a critical approach will typically involve the components of structural oppression, such as class, race, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, sexuality, and so on. It makes no pretence to value freedom, but rather will inevitably be based on value premises about what would make a better, fairer, more just or more liberated society. Many critical theorists use the term 'emanci-patory' thereby underlining the importance of notions of freedom and liberation, whether from the structures of patriarchy, the oppression of class, the denial of human rights, the cultural invasions of colonialism, or from some more complex interaction of these oppressive forces. It is therefore necessary for one's theory and practice to be acknowledged as normative, and any notion of practice as essentially technical and value-free is specifically rejected. All practice, by its very nature, is political.

The important thing for critical social science is that both the interpretive and the structural accounts are not only

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important, and indeed necessary, but they must be somehow integrated into a single understanding, rather than separated. It is not simply concerned with the personal *and* the political, but requires an incorporation of the idea that the personal *is* political and *vice versa*. This is one example (several more will be discussed below) of the essentially integrative nature of critical theory, which seeks to break down many of the dualisms inherent in traditional Western thought. As such, it represents a challenge to the conventional paradigm, and draws heavily on feminist thought, which has been significant in breaking down dualisms, and which was the origin of the phrase 'the personal is political'. Critical theory therefore is readily compatible with feminism, and this underlines the importance of feminist analysis as a way of informing both theory and practice.

Integrating an interpretive approach with a structural analysis, however, is easier to say than to do. They are characteristically defined from very different standpoints, and their compatibility is not helped by the positivist elements of some structural accounts (Marxism, or at least some forms of it, being a particular example). Habermas, one of the most influential writers on critical theory, has attempted to bridge this gap through his analysis of language (Habermas 1987; White 1995; Pusey 1987). He has sought to demonstrate how language is not used simply to define local realities and specific discourses, but also that by its very existence it represents some form of universal rationality, which thus provides a framework for a higher order discourse. His theory of 'communicative action' attempts to extend this to an analysis that sees language and action as inextricably linked, and sees the potential in the universal rationality of language for the establishment of dialogue that can be free of domination and therefore has the potential for liberation. While Habermas is more pessimistic about the potential for achieving such liberation than writers such as Fay (1987), his work is important in establishing the significance of the link between the personal and the political within the way language is used.

The integration of interpretive and structural under-standings, therefore, can be identified as being located in the field of language, and this is an area where critical theory can draw heavily on the work of poststructuralists such as Foucault (1972, 1975), who describes the way power is defined and

redefined in relation to discourse. The discourse then can provide the means for the definition of alternative views of power, and hence can be related to a specific agenda of empowerment. Because people are always part of discursive structures and networks, which have power relations implicated in them (Davies 1991), they are in fact always part of the discourse of power. Foucault describes how different discourses have been used to define, legitimate, entrench and embody relations of power, and the corollary is that working to change the discourse can lead to changes in power relations. This is why the analysis of the current context of social work in Chapter 2 was undertaken in terms of discourse, as it is the orientation of this book that social workers can—and indeed should—work to change the nature of this discourse that defines their work. How this might happen will be the subject of Chapters 6 and 7.

Another important way in which the significance of language affects critical theory is in the notion of practice. Traditionally, use of language has been seen as important for those social workers who are concerned with individual constructions of social problems, such as caseworkers and therapists. Language is, after all, their main tool, and the medium within which they help their 'clients'. On the other hand, action at a more macro level was not seen as relating particularly to language skills. It was more about social action, organising and community development, and while language is a useful (indeed essential) skill for this form of practice, it was typically not seen as the most important skill for such a practitioner. Linking the personal and the political, however, means that language has a greatly increased role in progressive change-oriented social work. Talking to clients becomes not just a matter of the traditional interview, but a dialogical consciousness-raising relationship leading to action, in the kind of practice advocated by Freire (1972), which will be discussed below. This puts a very different focus on the language skills of the practitioner, and on the nature of the communication that takes place between worker and client. In doing so, it removes the 'interview' from the essentially conservative position it has occupied in much traditional social work, and sees the development of inter-personal skills, understood from a specific perspective of empowerment, as vitally important for radical practice.

Critical theory is specifically oriented to a discourse of liberation. It is therefore directly concerned with change and empowerment, and is oriented to the kind of social justice that is such an important part of social work. Because of its link between the personal and the political, it is able to define human liberation and social justice both in individual and structural terms. Thus it is able to acknowledge the legitimacy of both the individual and structural approaches to empowerment, both of which are evident in the social work literature. The tension between these two approaches to empowerment has been an area of difficulty for some social workers. The individual approach requires the worker to seek to empower clients or families to take control of their lives, to have access to resources, to set goals, and to articulate and achieve their ambitions. Structural approaches to empowerment, however, have demanded the empowerment of groups such as women, Aboriginal people, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and so on. This requires a structural analysis, and can be achieved only by structural change. The conflict between the two approaches to empowerment has caused tensions, with structural social workers maintaining that individual approaches to empowerment are simply liberal affirmations of the status quo, thereby devaluing the skilled work of many social workers. By contrast, those who work for individual empowerment may feel that the aims of the structural social workers are unattainable, at least in the short term, and that they devalue the importance of change and empowerment at the personal level.

An approach based on critical theory would require the incorporation of both approaches to empowerment, within the social work profession as a whole, and in the work of each social worker. It would assert that individual empowerment is not possible unless links are made to structural empowerment issues, and the client is helped to see the connection between individual powerlessness/oppression and broader political questions, through a reflection on her/his own experience not simply of personal oppression, but as a member of one or more oppressed groups. Similarly, it would maintain that empowerment at the structural level must incorporate the lived experiences of the people concerned, their own stories of oppression and disempowerment, and the impact of structural change on individual lives. Thus the idea of empowerment

inherent in a critical paradigm is one that requires it to incorporate the personal and the political in the same process. The link between the personal and the political is made not just at the analytical or theoretical level, but also in practice, and this results in the dialogical consciousness-raising approach to practice spelled out below.

An important aspect of the critical approach of this chapter is that it accepts and validates wisdom and expertise 'from below' as well as 'from above'. In the interaction between worker and client, it is not only the worker's expertise that is brought to bear on the problem at hand. The client also is seen as having wisdom and expertise, as a result of life experience, and from having lived through the experience of oppression in a way the worker probably has not. Similarly, working at a community level, the community is seen as being the location of knowledge, wisdom and understanding. This is not to deny that the worker also has wisdom and expertise. But it is different from the wisdom and expertise of the client/community, and therefore the essence of practice from a critical perspective is that *both sets of wisdom and expertise are valued, and are brought together.* This is essentially a *dialogical* relationship, where each will enter into a dialogue with the other, each will respect and learn from the wisdom of the other, and as a result each will develop and grow. It is an equal relationship in terms of power, in terms of respect, and in terms of the value each places on the other's wisdom. Within this dialogue, the problem or issue is defined, the links can be drawn between the personal and the political, and action can be initiated.

It is important to emphasise that this dialogical relationship includes the posing of the question, problem or issue to be addressed. The worker does not come with an already determined definition of a problem, or a frame of reference within which that problem can be understood. It is up to the worker and the client, together, to formulate the issue and to develop the framework within which it can be addressed. The worker does not impose solutions, but works alongside the client so that together they can ask the questions as well as think about the answers. From the perspective of the worker it is problem-posing rather than problem-solving practice, as the problem-solving takes place through dialogical action. In establishing such a dialogical relationship—whether with a client, a community, a student, a colleague, a supervisor, an employee,

a politician, a manager, or whomever—the social worker must be aware of the power implications, and must ensure that it is a relationship in which power is genuinely shared, where each has a sense of ownership of the outcome, and where each sets out to learn from the other so that the result is *mutual* empowerment for both worker and 'other'. As a result, both will better come to understand the issue, both will learn, and both will act.

There is therefore in this approach a particular understanding of the relationship, and of the way it is constructed, which differs from the way in which the social work relationship is often conceptualised. It is seen as a mutually empowering and mutually educative process, and does not have the power imbalance of the traditional 'professional relationship'. There is no room in it for 'the use of authority' in the sense often understood in the social work literature. It incorporates Freire's (1972) critique of a banking concept of education (where knowledge is essentially commodified, and is something that is transmitted from teacher to student), and instead promotes a model of mutual empowerment. This model of education is as applicable to social work as it is to teaching, and indeed is perhaps more so, given Freire's work was developed against a backdrop of oppression and structural disadvantage that is also the arena in which most, if not all, social work is practised.

An essential component of the critical approach is that it should lead to action. It is not enough to understand and interpret, as is the case in the interpretive paradigm, but this understanding and interpretation must result in the people concerned being able to take action in order to have their articulated needs met. This, according to Fay (1975), is a key criterion for the success of a theory developed from the critical perspective. Within positivism, a theory is successful if it helps to predict and hence to control; within the interpretive paradigm, a theory is successful if it helps understanding, and hence communication. Within a critical paradigm, on the other hand, a theory is successful if it enables people to articulate their needs and to act in order to have them met. Hence social action becomes not something that is somehow separated from other aspects of social work, but a necessary component of all practice.

Another important link made within the critical paradigm is the link between fact (or knowledge) and value. The positivist

world view sees them as distinct, and necessarily so. Indeed social work texts from the positivist perspective, such as Compton's and Galaway's *Social Work Processes* (1994) insist that it is essential for workers to make a clear separation between knowledge and value statements, and to think about knowledge and values in different ways. From a critical theory perspective such a separation is quite untenable, and in this regard critical theory again draws on postmodernism and poststructuralism in understanding how 'knowledge' is socially and linguistically constructed in such a way that it is by its very nature value-laden. To attempt to separate knowledge and values is to deny the value basis of all knowledge, and to reduce social work to a potentially value-free technical activity. Such a separation is a requirement of economic rationalism, where the market is seen as operating in a value-free way, and where the constructed knowledge of economics is at least implicitly understood as value-free or value-neutral. Ideology is an inevitable part of any discourse of power and any construction of knowledge, and critical theory's insistence on the link between knowledge and values (i.e., that they are really the same thing) represents an important leverage point for the critique of economic rationalism, and of the managerialist and market discourses of human services.

A further important link in critical social science is between theory and practice. Instead of understanding each as separate, and then agonising about how they can be related (as social workers are apt to do) the critical paradigm insists that they are part of the same thing. It is only by changing the world, according to Marx, that we can understand it, and to assume that we can learn without doing (i.e., develop the theory separate from the practice) is to adopt a very precious and ultimately useless understanding of 'theory' or 'knowledge'. The integrated approach of critical theory maintains that it is by practising that we will develop our theory, just as it is by developing theory that we practise. This is related to the notion of reflexive practice as developed by Jan Fook (1993, 1996) and in the earlier work of Donald Schon (1987), and also relates to the Marxist notion of *praxis*, where learning and doing, or developing theory and practice, are the same process. From this perspective, any attempt to develop theory in a practice-free context is nonsense. Theory for social work emerges from practice; the 'client' has as much of a role in formulating that

theory as the social worker, and any idea of 'theory' being accessible to the social worker but inaccessible to the client is unacceptable. This in turn leads to the notion of 'grounded theory', which emerges from the specific social and cultural context, and represents the constructions of the people who live in that context rather than the abstractions of a social worker, sociologist or psychologist. Social work practice, from the point of view of the critical perspective, must emerge from and be part of grounded theory, namely theory that the 'clients' or 'community' have actually formulated and own. This is a very different understanding of theory, and indeed of knowledge from the traditional social work perspective, and it requires a very different relationship between worker and client.

This approach to theory would not be accepted by all critical theorists, and indeed it represents a direct challenge to those critical theorists who have undertaken their work purely in the cloistered halls of academia and who have produced works that are quite inaccessible to the vast majority; such writing is contradictory to the approach to critical theory/practice discussed here. It must be emphasised that the critical theory described in this section is only one construction of critical theory, and not an attempt to encompass the entire field with its various strands of analysis. However the incapacity of critical theorists to put forward their case in clear and accessible language points to an important role for social workers who have much greater skills of reframing and of grounding their work in the lived experiences of their 'clients'. In some ways, the development and progression of critical theory is a task that social workers are perhaps uniquely equipped to accomplish.

As has already been mentioned, one of the most important writers for this particular version of critical theory is Paulo Freire (1972, see also McLaren and Leonard 1993; McLaren and Lankshear 1994). In his literacy programs, Freire sought to help people define their immediate experiences and articulate their needs, and to relate this to a political analysis of oppressive structures that affected their lives and defined their life chances. This led to programs of action, arising out of the shared analysis of oppression. Thus his education programs were specifically both liberating and empowering. Freire's work has been particularly important for social workers, and has been used by many in the radical social work tradition and in community

development. One of the reasons for its importance is that, in the tradition of critical theory, it provides a framework for analysis linked to practice (or praxis) that requires the personal to be linked to the political, and the political to the personal, so that action to achieve liberation is seen as taking place in both arenas. This, it can be argued, is fundamental to social work because of social work's location on the boundary of the personal and the political; it suggests that non-political social work is an impossibility.

It is also important to note that Freire incorporates both a universalist discourse of structural oppression and a relativist, grounded analysis of specific personal, social and cultural contexts. Indeed, he maintains that such an incorporation of both the universal and the relativist is a requirement for effective action to achieve change, which is aimed towards countering oppression and achieving liberation. This suggests that for social workers the structuralist/post-structuralist issue need not be seen as a simple dichotomy, and that genuine radical practice can, and indeed must, incorporate both. As suggested in Chapter 1, social work has always had to struggle with reconciling apparent dualisms (theory/practice, knowledge/skills, etc.), and so such a synthesis should be more comfortable for social workers than for others who are more completely socialised into dualistic thinking.

Social work and critical theory

It has been suggested throughout the above paragraphs that there are ready parallels to be drawn between critical theory and social work, and that critical theory presents a possible model for the establishment of an alternative social work to address the issues and dilemmas outlined in earlier chapters. Critical theory, at least in the form outlined above, is clearly located in the lower right quadrant of Figure 2.2, in the community-based or humanist/anarchist discourse of human services. It incorporates the humanist position, in that it values the expression of the human ideal and allows for the kind of universal humanist position articulated in Chapter 4, while it also emphasises the 'from below' approach, acknowledging the importance of reality as defined by the people rather than by experts, and encouraging this reality to be the location for both

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theory and practice. It therefore represents a good basis for a discussion of social work theory and practice, and for creative practice opportunities in opposition to the dominant managerial and market discourses of economic rationalism.

There is much in traditional social work that is fully consistent with a critical theory perspective, and many social workers, perhaps a majority, would find little with which to disagree in the approach taken so far in this chapter. That in itself is significant, as it suggests that a critical alternative can be developed from within a construction of social work which is understood and supported by many social workers. It is not a case of establishing a social work that comes from right outside the mainstream, thereby potentially alienating many practitioners, but rather of drawing on traditions that are already present in social work, bringing them to the fore, and seeking ways to articulate their vision in more substantive and influential ways (see Chapter 7). There are, however, some aspects of the conventional construction of social work, as described in Chapter 1, which are not easily reconcilable with the critical theory approach. It is appropriate at this point to identify these tensions, and the issues that each of them raises for any attempt to develop a social work based on the critical paradigm.

Professionalism

One of the most important areas of contention is that of professionalism, as critical theory requires either an abandoning of a professional mode of practice, or a considerable redefinition of what is involved in practising as a 'professional'. The inequality of power implicit in a traditional professional relationship is not acceptable within the critical theory approach outlined above. The relationship between 'worker' and 'client' becomes one where power is shared, and where each is seen as bringing specific wisdom and expertise, with neither being given the superior status implied by the term 'professional'. The reification of professional knowledge and expertise, and its being rendered inaccessible by the use of jargon, is similarly unacceptable.

There are, of course, obvious advantages to a professional approach to practice. If being professional involves a commitment to the highest practice standards, and a commitment to ethical practice, then few could argue with it. And the

additional credibility social workers can claim, as a result of their professional status, enables them to take some actions and to have a degree of influence that would not be possible if they renounced their professional identity. These potential advantages, however, may not be as positive as they seem, and a critical theory approach leads one to question even these claims for a professional model.

The commitment to the highest standards of practice begs the question of who defines those standards, and how they are operationalised. Traditionally, this is done by senior members of the 'profession', by the professional association, or, in the current context, by managers. In each case, the definition of what counts as high standards can be a limitation on creative practice, and can become a way of seeking to ensure that social workers conform to the dominant definition of what counts as 'good' service. As this is increasingly being defined by managers, working within an economic rationalist paradigm, the danger of using 'high standards' as a form of control are even greater. A critical theory approach would question this construction of 'high standards', and instead would seek a definition derived from the perspective of the 'client' her/himself. While many social workers will support the idea of some form of client feedback as part of evaluation, to expect clients to be the ones who define what is meant by 'high standards' of practice is a rather more radical notion.

This relates also to the question of competencies, which has become an increasingly important part of the context of social work. The competencies required of social workers now have to be specifically defined for employment and accreditation purposes, and indeed the AASW has produced a significant document that attempts to achieve this. But the role of clients, consumers, customers or citizens (depending on which of the discourses of Chapter 2 one is using) in this definition has been minimal. In any case, even if clients had been actively involved in preparation of this document, it would still not meet the requirements of critical theory, which would expect that the idea of competencies be contextualised, or grounded, in particular practice experiences. Simply defining social work competencies in the abstract, and applying them to all possible locations for social work practice, is removing the idea of competency from its practice context, where critical theory would require it to be located. The notion of competency

is surely relative to many differing conditions, and defining competencies in a generalised way is simply to accept the positivist paradigm of universal generalisations and context-free evaluation, and to impose a definition of social work from above, with the consequent potential problems of control.

A similar argument applies to ethics, and the professional ideal of high ethical standards, adherence to a code of ethics, and so on. While ethical behaviour should of course be encouraged, who defines ethical behaviour, and on what basis? A code of ethics, however carefully formulated, will, like a set of competency standards, be divorced from the reality of the practice context. It leaves little or no room for an alternative approach based on situational ethics, where ethical issues are seen as not being able to be resolved by reference to an abstracted code, but rather have to be understood within the specific context in which they are located. This of course may be done by reference to values such as equity and social justice, or affirmations of human rights, but the expectation that a code of ethics can be readily applicable, and that it will result in genuinely ethical behaviour, is problematic. Further, it again represents an attempt by a particular group of people, however well-intentioned, to define what is and what is not acceptable behaviour for a social worker, without reference to the views of those with whom that social worker has to work. Like a statement of competencies, it has the potential to be used as a mechanism of control, to ensure that social workers accept the discipline of an 'official' professional view of how they should behave. However, like competency standards, a code of ethics is not entirely negative, and can also be a powerful political document that can be used by social workers as a justification for making a stand on a particular issue of social justice, especially where this involves a conflict with an employer. Just as it represents a discourse of power that can be used to control, it can also be harnessed in order to legitimise a stand taken for liberation and empowerment. Whether critical social work is better off with or without a code of ethics is therefore a debatable question, which exemplifies the contradictions of professionalism and the complexity of the professionalism debate.

The other apparent advantage of professionalism is the extra status and legitimacy it gives social workers to operate in the public arena. This was one of the primary motivations for social

workers seeking professional status, as it was felt that this would empower social workers in their attempts to achieve change. Such power is indeed important, and will be a focus of discussion in the following chapters. However, this argument too is problematic from the point of view of critical theory. It locates the significant area of analysis and change away from the interaction between social worker and client, and defines a significant area for social work 'professional' action as in the rarefied 'policy' arena, away from 'practice'. This raises the whole issue of policy and practice, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. For the present, it is sufficient to say that critical theory requires social work to redefine its concern with 'policy' in such a way as it includes the kind of dialogical relationships discussed above. Hence policy must become part of practice, and 'clients' must be incorporated in policy intervention, so that it is a genuine result of the dialogical action inherent in critical theory. If this is the case, and the cause can be advanced by the status of 'professionalism' claimed by social workers, then it may well be that a professional label is a useful one for social workers to wear.

Professionalism, then, cannot be understood or evaluated in a context-free way, but must rather be contextualised and evaluated in terms of power and the particular social, economic, political and organisational location. Whatever one's position on professionalism, the structural analysis of power inherent in critical theory requires that social workers take seriously the power aspects of practising as a professional, and if they choose to use that power, that they do so in ways that are consistent with the emancipatory aims of critical theory, and not in such a way as to entrench and reinforce inequalities and structures of oppression. If professionalism is unable to be constructed except in disempowering terms, then it has no place in a social work based on critical theory. If, on the other hand, a form of professionalism is constructed that is genuinely compatible with empowerment-based practice, then incorporating professionalism into social work becomes quite appropriate.

It is likely that professionalism will remain an unresolved dilemma for social workers for some time to come. From a critical social work perspective, however, it is important not to accept uncritically either professionalism or anti-professionalism. Rather, it is necessary to engage in the task of

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deconstructing professionalism, and of helping social workers to reconstruct a form of professionalism more consistent with critical practice that allows them to use their professionalism in a positive, creative and liberating way.

Authority and control

Another area where there is a tension between mainstream social work and the critical theory approach is in the area of authority and control. Many social work positions require the social worker to take an authority role, especially in the areas of corrections and child protection, where there is a statutory function to perform. This is at odds with the idea of practice under a critical theory model, as the power relationship effectively prevents the establishment of the mutually res- pecting dialogical relationship described earlier.

The question, then, is whether social workers should continue to define such roles as legitimately within the arena of social work. On the one hand, authority roles seem to be totally opposed to the social work approach developed above, and a critical social worker would surely seek to avoid such positions. On the other hand, they are locations for social work practice, where many social workers are employed, and they perhaps represent the most likely areas for continued employ- ment of social work graduates, given the social control agendas of conservative governments. To deny social workers the opportunity to apply for such positions could be to deny a future for social work and for social work education. It can also be argued, and it is a strong argument, that if social workers were not to fill these positions they would simply be filled by others, and that it is better to have social workers doing such jobs, as at least they can be expected to act with humanity and a concern for equity and social justice. The challenge for social workers is whether it is possible, even in such an authoritarian setting, to introduce at least some of the elements of a critical practice, and to retain social work's integrity from a critical theory perspective. Child protection, public welfare and corrections are, after all, at the critical edge of social control, and as such they can perhaps provide an opportunity for creative practice. It is easy to talk about an alternative social work paradigm when working in, for example, a community centre or a welfare rights and advocacy service, but the real test of progressive

social work is whether it can be located in the more hostile and authoritarian environments within which social workers are currently required to work. There is no easy answer to this question, and it will be resolved differently by different social workers, but it represents a continuing source of tension for workers seeking to operate within the critical paradigm.

Supervision and accountability

The social work understandings of supervision and accountability have been very much affected by the economic rationalist context. Supervision has often been defined in largely top-down terms, where a social worker, or student, is 'supervised' by a more experienced and more senior worker. The very understandings of 'experienced' and 'seniority', however, imply a particular construction of social work and what makes a good social worker. This does not value the experience the social worker may have achieved outside 'the profession', and in terms of life experience, wisdom and the first-hand experience of oppression, it may well be that the supervisee is far more experienced than the supervisor. In the conventional supervisory relationship, however, qualifications, formal position in a hierarchy, and length of time in the profession are defined as more important. Moreover, the relationship, like the traditional casework relationship, is characteristically one-sided. It does not (at least formally) allow for the possibility that the supervisor may learn from the supervisee, or that both may develop a dialogical relationship from which each may grow, with the potential to lead to action for change. In this way, the supervision relationship is defined as parallel to the conventional casework relationship, with its built-in disempowerment and its reinforcement of relationships of power and control; hardly an appropriate environment in which to develop a critical form of practice.

Fortunately, many supervisory relationships do not work out that way in practice. There are many social workers who realise that the relationship can be redefined as one of mutual empowerment; these tend to be reported by both supervisor and supervisee as good supervisory experiences, but they do not always fit the supposedly ideal model. There remains, however, the potential (and in many instances it is more than potential) for supervision to become simply another form of control of a social worker, and a way of reinforcing the power

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of orthodox professionalism. The unequal supervisory re-
lationship is also reflected in the apparently increasing practice
of a social worker paying for private supervision from a more
experienced colleague, because 'good supervision' is not
available in the agency. The very idea of the supervisee paying,
and the supervisor accepting payment, suggests that the whole
experience is something of a burden for the supervisor, for
which she/he needs to be compensated, and that all the benefit
flows to the supervisee; hardly the mutual empowerment of
the critical perspective.

All this is not to say that social workers cannot benefit from
the wisdom and experience of their colleagues. Any responsible
social worker, however experienced, will seek opportunities
to benefit from such wisdom. It is rather that 'supervision' has
been defined in a way that reflects a top-down approach of
managerial or professional control, which is incompatible with
the critical paradigm. Supervision should in this regard mirror
practice, and the same principles of empowerment, dialogue
and mutual learning should apply. This could be achieved by
other forms of 'supervision' (preferably not even using the word,
with its strong connotations of hierarchy and control), where
workers meet on a more equal footing, where 'peer support'
rather than the more controlling 'peer review' is the norm, and
where all workers, however experienced, are seen as having
valuable wisdom and expertise to contribute.

Like supervision, accountability has also been defined pri-
marily in top-down, or managerial, terms. The critical paradigm
emphasises a form of accountability that is either 'downward'
to the client, or 'outward' to the community, rather than
'upward' to management. Social workers have, understandably,
been very willing to accept obligations of accountability, but
these have been incorporated into a top-down managerial
approach that assumes it is the managers who know best, and
that social workers owe their primary public accountability to
management. This is the discourse of the managerial strand of
economic rationalism, and again contributes to structures of
control within which very conservative practice models can be
reinforced, and which make the development of creative
alternatives extremely difficult.

It is important for social workers to be exploring other
mechanisms of 'accountability', by involving consumers and the
community as those to whom social workers are accountable.

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This in turn leads to the idea of agencies or programs that are run or 'managed' by the community, or by the 'clients' themselves, as in the empowerment model of the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Liffman 1978; Benn 1981). For this reason, an understanding of community work principles of participation and community-based decision-making are vital for social workers who are seeking to practise within the critical paradigm.

Services

It was noted in Chapter 1 that social work has largely been conceptualised in terms of the delivery of social *services*, and that social workers are regarded as social *service* workers. It was also pointed out that the idea of a 'service' has changed significantly from its original meaning, and has become a commodity that is delivered to a consumer or client, or is purchased in the market (depending on whether the managerial, professional or market discourse is used). In any event, the recipient of the 'service' plays essentially a passive role, and has little part in defining the nature of the 'service' or in 'delivering' it. This is hardly consistent with the active, dialogical, partnership role required in the critical paradigm. The empowerment of the recipient requires that the very idea of 'service' be either abandoned or totally redefined.

The language of 'services' is so dominant within social work and social policy that it is very difficult to move away from it, and to think of another way to characterise the work social workers do. This presents a major challenge for the critical paradigm, as the pervasiveness of the idea of social or community 'services' effectively leads to a restrictive social work discourse incorporating the power of the service 'provider' and the relative powerlessness of the passive service 'recipient' (as pointed out in Chapter 1, this is the reverse of the original understanding of the idea of 'service'). The language of 'services' helps to commodify the work of social workers, and is totally consistent with the managerial paradigm and the desire to measure social work competencies.

Reconstructing social work outside the language of 'services' is a major task for social workers. Critical theory provides a paradigm within which this can be done, and has the potential to help recast social work in more emancipatory terms, but this is a challenge social workers have not yet adequately faced.

Skills

The idea of skills within the critical paradigm is very different from the understanding of skills in conventional social work discourse. Critical practice requires that skills not be seen as the sole prerogative of the social worker, to be carefully applied, and to be kept out of the reach of those who are not professionally accredited. The critical paradigm requires that skills be shared between worker and 'client', that the 'client' be seen as possessing skills that are just as valid and important as those of the worker, and that each should share their skills with the other in a process of mutual empowerment and mutual education.

Social work skills, therefore, are not to be confined to social workers, nor are they only able to be used after lengthy training and accreditation. Social workers do have skills, certainly, but critical social work requires that these be shared with others, and the challenge for the critical practitioner is how to communicate and teach these skills, while at the same time being open to valuing and learning the many skills (though not formalised and accredited) that the 'client' will also possess.

The critical paradigm, as noted above, does not separate knowledge and skills, but sees them as two aspects of the same thing. Hence the sharing of knowledge and understanding, implied in the dialogical relationship, extends to the sharing of skills between the social worker and those people or communities with which she/he is working.

Developing a critical approach to social work

Because of the above difficulties, it must be emphasised that many social workers will not be able to work entirely, or even occasionally, from within a critical theory perspective in their work within the contemporary managerial welfare state, or in private agencies that are forced to operate in the market arena. The approach to social work inherent in a critical perspective must rather be seen as an *ideal paradigm*, a goal to be aimed for, rather than a form of practice that must be instituted in all agencies tomorrow, and about which social workers should feel characteristic guilt if they are unable to live up to the ideal. It represents a goal to work towards, and a vision of what social work could be, in terms of its potential to contribute to a better world.

On a more positive side, however, it should be noted that much of the critical perspective is entirely consistent with social work, its history, tradition, values and practices. Social workers are probably on the whole better than most other professionals at linking the personal and the political, and at taking a holistic perspective that incorporates a structural as well as an interpretive account of human behaviour and social issues. There has long been a tradition of linking practice with the ideals of social justice and human rights. Before 'empowerment' became a word used even by conservative politicians, social workers (most notably at the Brotherhood of St Laurence) had undertaken significant work in defining empowerment and in trying to put it into practice in working with the disadvantaged. Much about social work is consistent with critical theory, and in many ways what has been presented as the critical theory approach to social work is familiar to many social workers, and is what they have been trying to implement in their practice, often against significant opposition.

The assertion of a critical theory base for social work therefore serves more as an affirmation of the critical and alternative spirit in social work, which can be traced back to Jane Addams (Woodroofe 1962) and to many who came after her, who saw social work as an essentially critical practice to bring about a better, fairer and more just society, rather than merely providing professional interventions to individuals and families.

Critical social work, as it has been described, clearly falls within the humanist/anarchist discourse, which was identified earlier as the necessary location for an alternative formulation of social work. In Chapter 7 this will be further explored, in terms of what such an approach means for practice, theory and education, and directions for the development of such an alternative will be identified. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to consider the relationship between social work and social policy, and to look at the interaction of policy and practice. This will be the task of the next chapter.