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Social work knowledge, theory and practice

SOCIAL WORKERS practise across a wide range of settings with all kinds of different people. Some work primarily with individuals whereas others work with families or groups of people in therapeutic or community contexts. Some social workers focus on community advocacy, community action and social change. In such diverse disciplinary contexts, the notion of theoretically informed practice can seem complicated. Yet social workers do draw upon a range of theoretical perspectives in their work, using theory to help understand and make sense of what is in reality a complex human world. Many theories used by social workers can also be found influencing the practices of allied professionals: counsellors, psychologists and others working within the human services. Theories explored in this book are not the sole purview of the social work profession, nor can they be claimed as necessarily emerging from within a social work paradigm. Professional interpretations of knowledge and theory overlap and interweave (Trevithick 2005). We would nevertheless argue that theory applied in social work has a disciplinary character that distinguishes it from the application of the same theories across allied disciplines. This is because knowledge and theory in practice is critically influenced by disciplinary attachments and the underpinning values and nature of the profession itself.

SOCIAL WORK'S INTERPRETATIVE LENS

In the following chapters we explore a range of practice theories that have been influential in social work. First, however, we will tease out the disciplinary nature of social work's interpretative lens, to see how it influences the application of knowledge and theory, what we understand theory to be, and how contemporary debates have influenced the application of theory

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over time. We propose that the social work interpretative lens is enriched by four additional lenses that together influence the way in which we apply theory in practice: the relational lens; the social justice lens; the reflective lens; and the lens of change.

THE SOCIAL WORK RELATIONAL LENS

According to Howe (2009), relationship-based practice has been an integral part of social work since its inception, and some writers have argued that it represents a critical component of effective social work (Teater 2010). Although the relational aspect of social work has been foundational in social work thinking and practice, it has nevertheless not been without criticism:

Relationship-based social work has often been treated unkindly by radical and structural theorists. Traditional and radical theories have argued that relationship-based practices are at best a plaster on the deep wound of oppression and at worst a capitalist trick to keep the poor and disadvantaged quiet and in their place.

(Howe 2009: 156)

This division between practices that are perceived to maintain inequality versus practices that support empowerment and social change runs deep in social work history. The dichotomy created an early philosophical clash between the approaches of social work pioneers Mary Richmond and Jane Addams (Mendes 2009). Richmond maintained that the social work relationship was a critical component of successful client change, and her work was influential in shifting practice from charitable visiting to more scientific professional responses (Miehls 2011). Some writers have argued that Richmond strove to marry social action and casework approaches (Howe 2009), yet others criticise her focus on individual casework as moralistic with too great a focus on human deficits. Mendes (2009) sees Richmond's approach as being in stark contrast to the social action approach adopted by Jane Addams, a contemporary of Richmond. Addams, who was acutely aware of the impact of economic disadvantage, worked towards reforming the social environment that created disadvantage, for example, income and the minimum wage, as well as factory and housing conditions. It is important to remember that Richmond and Addams practised in the early 20th century and a good deal

has happened since then. Given how influenced we are by time and place, judging historical action through a contemporary lens is always a complex endeavour. Yet thinking about how practice seems at the time and then in retrospect can be illuminating. Take for example this reflection from an experienced social worker in a very senior non-government role. Clearly when we are in the thick of practice, it is not always easy to see the bigger picture.

Reflection: the relational lens

I was sitting in a meeting with a group of non-government chief executives, listening to an analysis of child welfare practices over time. The presenter talked about the way in which practices during the 1990s had become more forensic, more focused on investigations and less focused on helping families find solutions. She talked about how the practice literature was risk-saturated, critically influencing the way in which child protection work developed over the decade. It suddenly hit me – I was working in child protection at that time. We had all been deeply committed to working positively with families, yet there was no doubt that we had indeed become more forensic. We started to believe that it was investigations that were important, not supporting families to change. Somehow we had let this happen. I can see this now, but it wasn't clear to me at the time.

CEO within the non-government sector

There are dangers in perceiving practice through a singular lens. Limiting social work to processes of individual change, whether mediated through the mechanism of a relationship or not, can slip into practice that is deficit focused and blames people for the very predicaments in which they find themselves. This is something we will talk further about in chapter 7. This is when viewing practice through a critical social work lens is of significant importance. In social work we are not only influenced by notions of relationship but also have a longstanding commitment to social justice and social change. Social work is not only concerned with helping people; it is also fundamentally concerned with changing systems that contribute to disadvantage and oppression.

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE LENS

In many respects the work of Addams epitomizes social work's commitment to social justice. Social justice 'provided a thread of historical continuity' that influenced the development of progressive paradigms, including radical, feminist, anti-racist and more recent anti-oppressive social work practices (Dominelli 2002: 4), perspectives that will be discussed more fully in chapter 7. When systems are considered unjust, social work advocates change, at least according to more radical theorists. However, during the 1970s, a formative time in the development of the social work profession, social work's commitment to social justice was exposed to critical scrutiny as writers saw the profession maintaining conditions of oppression rather than ameliorating them (Skenridge & Lennie 1978). Indeed Pemberton and Locke (1971: 101) went so far as to accuse social work of duplicitous intent: 'The social worker is a double-agent; while claiming to be working on behalf of the client he [*sic*] is really an agent of socio-political control, bolstering the existing social order by reinforcing and interpreting moral, social and political rules.'

Although social work practices across a range of practice domains, its positioning within statutory settings, for example, child protection, mental health and criminal justice, illuminates well the tension inherent in providing the professional functions of both care and control. In these settings in particular, social workers can exercise considerable power over personal liberty and freedom. Children who are assessed as needing care can be removed from their parents. People assessed as being mentally ill can be involuntarily confined. Social workers can recommend that people who offend against the law be sent to corrective facilities rather than serving community sentences. These powers rest uncomfortably alongside professional values of social justice, anti-oppression and anti-discrimination – even more so when the clients themselves have suffered unfair treatment and discrimination throughout their lives. As Beddoe and Maidment (2009) note, social justice is not necessarily at the forefront of service delivery concern. Indeed, increased focus on the need to reduce risk has created a contemporary practice environment in which social workers may think twice in their management of risky situations. A risk of community opprobrium may cause a worker to recommend residential options for a young person who offends as opposed to placement in a community setting even when it is considered a more appropriate rehabilitative option. Fear of blame should things go wrong in child protection may influence a worker's willingness to consider family placement options for a child and

result in premature removal from the parent (Connolly & Doolan 2007). Yet, as we can see from the following reflection, social justice and emancipatory practice can also exist even within the most constrained of statutory environments.

Reflection: the social justice lens

Through the course of my work, I was fortunate to be invited to a meeting in a maximum security prison that offered a sex offender treatment program. The meetings were held regularly, and all the men in the program attended, along with the therapists, a few of the guards, and some outsiders with links to the program. There were upward of 60 men in treatment so the room was quite full. The chairs were positioned in a large circle. Two of the men in the program chaired the meeting, encouraging discussion about issues and concerns. People had their say in a context of shared support and challenge. I was so impressed by the way in which the meeting provided for participation and the fact that the men's concerns were responded to with dignity and respect. To me it was a demonstration of rights-based ideals in action.

Senior government official

Over generations of social work practice the thread of social justice has continued to provide a critical challenge, reminding us of the profession's fundamental commitment to social action. Despite the changing context of contemporary practice, in the same way Jane Addams advocated social change in the early 20th century, social work writers and practitioners have continued to endorse a social justice agenda. Social justice continues to feature predominantly in social work codes of ethical practice, thus challenging social workers to find ways of giving effect to emancipatory practice no matter where they may work and regardless of the limitations of their organizational context. Identifying social justice as a key theme across practice domains, Harms and Connolly (2009b: 453) note: 'While social workers may debate, both individually and collectively, aspects of the ethical value-base of our practice, it is important that we unify around the core values of securing social justice, supporting client autonomy, and promoting social well-being no matter where we may work across the service continuum.'

The social justice lens also has an essential historical and contemporary perspective in the context of supporting the rights and aspirations of

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first nation peoples. Indigenous peoples of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand have experienced a devastating cultural dislocation through processes of colonization, a legacy that creates continued disadvantage (Gilbert 2009; Ruwhiu 2009). Social work acknowledges the impact of this on the cultural fabric of indigenous communities, and is committed to developing deeper understanding and more responsive ways of supporting cultural narratives, empowerment and indigenous self-determination. This involves not imposing theories and models that lack cultural fit, and working with people to explore ways in which their needs and aspirations can be met.

The social justice lens intersects with the relational lens providing a critical edge to social work practice. Embraced as an essential interpretative lens, a focus on social justice challenges individualistic responses that can negatively merge with notions of individual culpability, blame and stigmatization. An equally critical interpretative lens that intersects with social justice and relationship practice is the reflective lens.

THE REFLECTIVE LENS

Cultural thinking shapes the way we feel, think and act. Over decades of practice, social work has appreciated the power of cultural thinking and the ways in which culture shapes professional responses. Whether culture is considered in the context of ethnicity or other cultural identities – gender, sexuality, religiosity, ability – it is important to the way we understand the world and the people within it. Our own thinking, which may include these multiple cultural interpretations, influences our understanding and appreciation of the world of another. Reflecting upon the ways in which both the personal and the professional cultural thinking influences what we do and how we think has become a hallmark of good social work practice.

While appreciation of the personal self and its potential to affect the way a social worker practices is now well understood, the influence of professional ideologies and the professional self has received less attention but is every bit as important. This is where the notion of ‘institutional attachments’ (Wacquant 1998: 226) becomes important. The professional self, infused with explanatory theories, professional attitudes and beliefs, also creates cultural understandings and professional ways of thinking that can affect practice. If a worker holds strong beliefs about an issue or concern or is uncritically attached to institutional mandates this may unwittingly restrict the worker’s ability to consider alternative explanations. In this reflection, a traditional feminist interpretation of relationships of

dominance and subordination contrasts starkly with an alternative response that attributes greater importance to cultural dimensions and imperatives. Such differences in professional cultural thinking can run very deep and influence our capacity to ‘change lens’: ‘Our own world suddenly becomes self-evident, so unproblematically “the way it is”, that the other’s world can seem blatantly incoherent . . . Instead of inviting mutual inquiry into our ways of world making, we defend our world, even impose it on others.’ (McKee 2003: 3)

Reflection: the reflective lens

I recall being at a conference on violence and families. It was quite a long time ago now, probably 1990, but I remember it vividly as it was the first time I’d seen open hostility in response to a presentation. An Asian academic was presenting on domestic violence in Asian families. She talked about the status of men as the head of the family and how ‘saving face’ for men was important when working with domestic violence. She explored the ways in which women could use this to reduce the violence that was directed towards them. The response from a small group of Anglo women was quick and angry. She was accused of shifting responsibility for male violence on to women, and of accommodating to, and supporting, gender inequality within the family. The presenter tried to explain how important it was to work with cultural strengths, but it fell on deaf ears. It was one of the clearest examples of cultural miscommunication I think I have ever seen.

Social work academic

The social work profession has paid considerable attention to the ways in which cultural thinking influences practice and how practitioners can develop reflexive responsiveness. Writers have argued the importance of self-reflection, greater awareness about the influence of personal and professional values, and the development strategies that support reflective and reflexive practice, something we will return to in chapter 8. The discipline’s commitment to supervision is an example of this commitment to critical reflectiveness in practice. As a safe forum for exploring practice issues, the commitment to supervision has remained strong in spite of what Phillipson (2002: 244) describes as ‘seismic upheavals’ in social work. Supervision provides an important reflective opportunity to explore understandings of both the personal and professional self in practice:

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Such a capacity for containment, empathy, reflection and their encouragement of analysis in depth can help us to cope with the pain, violence and anxiety we may encounter. It can also help us to become more able to take responsibility for our own work, to make our own judgements and then improve them... supervision is time for exploration, reflection, learning and problem-solving.

(Lishman 2002: 104)

This acknowledgement of the complex dynamics of practice and the need to support practitioners as they navigate their way through cultural landscapes has been an important focus in the training and practice of social work. It adds a unique dimension to relationship-building in practice and our interpretation of social justice and human rights.

These first three interpretative prisms – relationship, social justice and reflection – have all featured prominently in social work literature and practice. Despite waxing and waning they have remained constant and frequently appear in some shape or form in social work codes of ethical practice, each influencing the ways in which we interpret social work theory and perspectives. Our last interpretative lens, although implicitly important, has received less attention in terms of its power to influence the way we think about practising in social work.

THE LENS OF CHANGE

Many books have been written about how to both understand and how to change people. There has been less emphasis on the nature of change itself and the importance of this understanding to what we do. In our view, social work interpretation of what is considered necessary to create change in human systems nevertheless provides a unique disciplinary influence. It influences our appreciation of theory and method, and it influences the application of theory and method in practice. Our interpretation of change influences the theoretical choices we make and provides a particular dimension to theory development. Although we would argue that the lens of change provides a unique contemporary social work interpretative perspective, insights with respect to its development have been drawn from a broad range of multidisciplinary thinking.

Two early influences with respect to our understanding of change can be found in the theorizing of systems and systems thinking. We discuss in greater depth the evolution of eco-systems theory in chapter 3. Here we will focus specifically on the way in which it has influenced the way we think

about change. In a nutshell, a systems approach pays attention to the ‘here and now’ interactive processes within complex systems (Connolly & Healy 2009: 20). Change happens in the context of this interactive dynamic, and social workers have the potential to influence that change. The nature of change has been further explored in the context of understanding family systems theory. Here the way in which one family member thinks, feels and behaves affects everyone else in the family, an insight that is captured in this reflection.

Reflection: the lens of change

I was sitting in a lecture on family therapy. The lecturer was talking about family systems, homeostasis and what happens when balance is disrupted. The lecturer held what looked like a child’s mobile in front of us – a set of funny little family members hanging on strings. She held it out very carefully and asked us what would happen if she were to pull on one of the little figures. There was a murmur around the room and I wasn’t quite sure what she meant. Then she pulled on one, and the rest jumped up and down with the impact. What happened to one person impacted on them all. Suddenly it made sense to me. The phrase I’d read in the literature also started to make sense: ‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.’

Social work student

Friedman and Neuman Allen (2011: 9) also describe how broader systems influence interactional dynamics within the family:

Within the context of a family there may be forces affecting the parental subsystem that trickle down to affect the children without the children even being aware of them. For example, if a parent is experiencing stress at work and displaces his or her frustration at home by yelling at the children, one may see how events outside the child’s immediate environment may exert a pronounced effect on the child’s development.

Ideas emerging from Brief Family Therapy and the work of Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch have also been influential. These writers introduced the notion of first- and second-order change. First-order change is one that ‘occurs within a given system which itself remains unchanged’ while second-order change produces a change in the system itself (1974: 10). These ideas have been influential in social work thinking and have shaped

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interpretations about the way change occurs both within and outside the immediate family. They provide a broad interpretative framework that enriches our application of theory in practice. In more recent years, two further perspectives have influenced the way we think about change and how we approach theories of practice: the strengths perspective, and social constructivism.

Although the notion of building on strengths is not a new idea – it has featured in a range of ways across a range of perspectives – it emerged powerfully in the social work literature, particularly through the work of Dennis Saleebey (1992) and Charles Rapp (1998). Strengths-based ideas captured the imagination of social workers who were keen to shift from a negative focus on problems and deficits to one exploring possibilities and solutions. From Kondrat's perspective it was developed 'to bring the practice of social work back to its foundation of valuing and collaborating with the client' (2010: 39). We will talk further about narratives of strengths and resilience in chapter 6, but important to this discussion is the core strengths-based principle relating to change: that all people have the capacity to grow and change. This process of change is achieved through collaboration, supported by the belief that people are experts in their own lives and that they have an innate ability to change their lives for the better. This positions the social work role as professional supporter and facilitator of change. Strongly associated with the strengths-based approach is the concept of social constructivism, which brings with it another set of ideas that have influenced the social work lens of change.

In essence, social constructivism is based on the notion that reality is constructed by equal measures of individual and social factors (Teater 2010). Human experience is defined and constructed by various discourses that can enhance or limit a person's ability to live a full and rewarding life. Like the strengths-based approach, control over change rests with the client: if realities are constructed then they can be deconstructed. Howe (2009: 89) reports messages from social work clients: 'What they say is that in conversation with warm, interested and empathic social workers they value the change to control the meaning of their own experience and the meaning that others give to that experience . . . when they recover feelings of personal control [they] begin to hope.'

While there will always be a variety of ideas and experience that influence knowledge and practice, in this discussion we have identified what we consider to be four critical influences with respect to the interpretive lens of social work. When a social work writer discusses a theory, it is likely that they will filter their ideas through the specifics of the social work