Engaging with Social Work provides a comprehensive introduction to the diverse and contested world of social work. It explores the key concepts and theoretical frameworks underpinning contemporary social work practice, as well as relevant professional skills and strategies, from a critical perspective. In a rapidly changing and divided world, it locates critical social work as a part of broader and ongoing struggles for social justice and human rights, rather than a tool for managing the marginalised. Readers are encouraged to think about what social work is or should be, and what sort of social worker they would like to become.

The book covers a broad range of topics, including the history and development of social work as a profession, values and ethics, theories for practice, and the fields and context of practice. It concludes by exploring possibilities for the further development of critical social work.

Definitions of key terms, reflective exercises and case studies are integrated throughout the text, and a summary is provided to conclude and consolidate each chapter. Written by a diverse team of experienced educators and generously illustrated, this is a stimulating, rigorous and student-friendly resource for beginning as well as more experienced social workers.

Christine Morley is Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Selma Macfarlane is a Lecturer in Social Work at Deakin University (Geelong, Victoria).

Phillip Ablett is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of the Sunshine Coast.
Engaging with Social Work

A critical introduction

Christine Morley
Selma Macfarlane
Phillip Ablett
This book is dedicated to critical social workers, both past and present, whose struggles have contributed to transforming the conditions that create social inequality and impede human freedom, and to mitigating the impacts of these conditions on individuals’ lives.
Foreword

In one of the best known quotes from liberation theology, Dom Helder Camara states: ‘When I feed the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist.’ This important quote summarises the central point of this book on social work practice. Critical social work is about asking not just ‘how can I help?’, but also asking why. It is only by asking why that we can hope to ‘help’ people in ways that will be more than simply ‘band-aid’ social work, and that will seek to address the underlying causes of their problems. But asking why can be challenging. Dom Helder Camara was called a communist for asking why, and social workers have also been called derogatory names for daring to ask why the people they work with are suffering names such as do-gooders, interfering busybodies, dangerous radicals, naive, unrealistic and unreasonable. Indeed, if social workers were not called such names it would be a sign that they were not doing their job; being ‘unreasonable’ from time to time is important for a social worker. And asking why is essential; it enables us not only to seek the causes of people’s problems, but also to understand that these causes are usually well beyond the control of the person, family or community concerned. Critical social work practice, therefore, seeks to understand and address the causes of disadvantage as well as the lived experiences of people, and this means making the connection, as the sociologist C. Wright Mills argued back in 1970, between private troubles and public issues, or, to use the term made famous by feminist writers, recognising that ‘the personal is political’.

This critical approach to social work, as outlined in this book, is not new. C Wright Mills and the feminist writers were not writing yesterday, and social workers have for a long time accepted these ideas as important, and sought to use them as a basis for practice. The history of social work includes many writers who have taken a critical perspective. Pioneers include Jane Addams and Bertha Reynolds in the United States, who worked between the 1920s and 1950s; The ‘radical social work’ movement of the 1970s was led largely by British writers such as Paul Corrigan, Peter Leonard, Roy Bailey, Mike Brake and many others, mostly influenced by a Marxist analysis. They were followed in the 1980s by feminist writers, such as Helen Marchant and Betsy Wearing, postmodernist writers, such as Peter Leonard; supporters of ‘structural social work’, such as Bob Mulally; and the anti-oppressive social work writers, such as Lena
Dominelli. Australia has had a strong tradition of critical social work writers, including Jan Fook, Bob Pease, Linda Briskman, John Tomlinson, Stuart Rees, Harold Throssell, Karen Healy, Jude Irwin and Carolyn Noble. Their perspectives vary; many of these authors would disagree with each other, and they have different theoretical lenses, but they all seek to ask why, and to understand people’s problems within their political, cultural, social, racial, gendered and organisational contexts, seeking ways that social workers can initiate action to address the structures and discourses of oppression and disadvantage.

This book belongs in this critical tradition. But unlike much of the work of the above-mentioned writers, this book is aimed at the beginner student. There has been an unspoken agreement, in many social work schools, that the critical approach belongs later in the course, that students first need to be acquainted with ‘conventional’ or mainstream social work thinking before being introduced to critical alternatives. Thus, critical social work can become an add-on, an afterthought, an interesting sideline that may be accepted or ignored, but never really seen as central to the task of social work and the institutions of the social work profession. This can marginalise the critical perspective. The refreshing aspect of this book is that it starts with the critical perspective from the first day; critical social work becomes the norm, and more mainstream approaches can be introduced later for comparison. It is an approach to social work that has never been more important or necessary in these troubled times; the context for social work is characterised by runaway growth regardless of social and environmental cost; harsh neoliberal economics, global capitalism ‘on steroids’ and pervading managerialism; increasing inequality, individualism, consumerism, greed and intolerance of difference; and a blatantly unsustainable social, economic and political order supported by powerful media and corporate interests. Critical social work seeks to contribute to solutions that will address these problems, rather than simply accepting this world as the normal context for living and for professional practice.

One common criticism of critical social work has been that it is fine in theory, is strong on analysis and sounds good in university seminars, but it does little to help the social worker in the ‘real world’. It should be noted that the rhetoric of the ‘real world’ is not just atheoretical but anti-theoretical; it assumes that somehow discussion of ideas takes place in some unreal space, and that ideas can be dispensed with when the ‘real’ work has to be undertaken. Critical social work must resist this ‘real world’ narrative; the world of ideas is very real. It is intimately related to the day-to-day work of social workers, and the problems of the people with whom they work. Indeed, the world of the modern university is all too ‘real’, and the same structures and discourses that are described in the book (neoliberalism, managerialism, outcome focus, ‘evidence-based practice’, structural inequality, and so on) also impact on the experiences of both
students and academics, generally not for the better. There must, therefore, be a clear link between critical social work practice and critical pedagogy; the classroom, the social agency, the welfare bureaucracy and the community group must be seen as connected, and critical analysis and practice must address them all.

This book achieves that end by constantly relating everyday social work practice to critical ideas and analysis. The book’s approach cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the ‘real world’, however artificial such a construction may be.

Social work is not a value-neutral profession, or a simple set of technical tasks. It has always been premised on ideas and ideals, which have been variously described in terms such as social justice, human rights, values of humanity, interdependence, caring society, public good, liberation and emancipation. These idea[l]s are challenging in the neoliberal managerial world in which social workers have to practise; their values are often out of step with the dominant values portrayed by conservative media, or enacted by managers and political leaders. Hence, social work is a constant challenge: how to help people, families and communities while at the same time addressing those structures and discourses. Some social workers seek to deal with this challenge by working ‘below the radar’ in their day-to-day work, seeking to articulate and enact the values of humanity and social justice while deliberately not confronting powerful interests overtly. Often this can be the most effective way to work, remembering the importance of the ‘little things’ that can affect people’s lives and have a cumulative effect in bringing about change. However, social workers also need to address issues of disadvantage more strongly than this, through either individual or collective action; often a worker has little capacity to address underlying causes of disadvantage as an individual working in an organisation, but by linking with others and working collectively much more is possible. Social workers can readily become affected by the dominant individualism and forget the power of collective understanding and collective action.

This book will be, for many readers, the start of a journey: an exciting, challenging journey, which will not be easy, but which can be immensely rewarding. It is a very important journey, even though those who take it will never ‘arrive’ at their ideal world; critical social work will always be a work in progress, and there is always much more to learn on the journey. It is about involving social workers, and the practice of social work, in the wider project of building a better, fairer, more sustainable world, where the values of humanity underlie all institutions, structures, processes and practices. This book is just a first step on that journey, but it is a really good place to start.

Jim Ife
Melbourne, December 2013
## Contents

Foreword                                
Acknowledgements                        
List of abbreviations/acronyms          

### Chapter 1  The critical potential of social work

- Introduction                         | 1
- Critical social work                 | 2
- Why critical social work?            | 7
- What is the approach taken in this book? | 8
- Critical reflection                  | 9
- Our reflections on social work       | 12
- Social work: diverse possibilities for justice for this work | 21
- Challenges to critical social work and the increased need 
  Structure of this book                | 26
- Summary                              | 29

### Chapter 2  Where in the world are we? The contexts of practice

- Introduction                         | 31
- Global capitalism                    | 32
- Neoliberalism/economic rationalism and managerialism | 35
- Social inequality and the Australian education system | 39
- Globalisation                        | 42
- Government and the law               | 45
- Patriarchy                           | 46
- Biomedical discourses                | 50
- The (inter)connections of dominant social forces | 54
- Summary                              | 56

### Chapter 3  What can we do? A critical response to social contexts

- Introduction                         | 58
- Responding to challenges posed by contemporary contexts | 58
- Responding at global and local levels | 64
- Social policy as a vehicle to respond to contextual challenges | 65
- Participation in social movements    | 68
Chapter 4 How did we get here? The history of critical social work

Introduction
Historical perspectives on social justice
Social justice and modernity
Social work origins
Charitable Organisation Societies (COSs)
The settlement movement: reformers and revolutionaries?
Australia and social work, 1788–1970
Radical social work in the 1970s
Critical social work: renewing the social justice tradition

Chapter 5 Values and ethics for critical practice

Introduction
Codes of ethics
A critical analysis of the codes and their limitations
Leaving my values at home? An objectivist view of ethics
Critical reflection
Epistemology
A critical approach to ethics
Ethical practice as critical practice
Critical evaluation of ethical decision-making models
Critical reflection as ethical practice
A critical reflection on practice

Chapter 6 Theories for practice

Introduction
What is theory?
Why is theory important for practice?
Individualist theories in social work
Systems theory
Giuseppe: what do students think?
Adopting a critical lens: limitations of establishment theories
Critical perspectives
Developing a critical response to Giuseppe

Summary

Critical practice in organisations
Community development
Undertaking social research
Summary

Contents
### Chapter 7  Social work practice
- Introduction 173
- Practice processes 174
- Practice methods 176
- Practice skills 183
- Constructing a professional narrative (assessment) 187
- Individualist theories 188
- Systems theory 189
- Critical theories 192
- Summary 200

### Chapter 8  Missing voices and working across difference
- Introduction 202
- The voice of the client/service user/consumer 203
- Our use of language 209
- Including the voices that have been missing 211
- Diverse knowledge systems and alternative discourses 213
- Working across difference 219
- The voice of the planet (through a human lens) 224
- Summary 229

### Chapter 9  Fields of practice
- Introduction 231
- Aged care 232
- Mental health 238
- Child protection 245
- Summary 250

### Chapter 10  Challenges and opportunities for critical social work
- Introduction 252
- The challenge of the ‘failed activist’ 253
- The challenge of the ‘lone crusader’ 260
- The challenge of embracing uncertainty and discomfort 263
- The challenge of believing that ‘there is no alternative’ 266
- Summary 268

Glossary 270
References 299
Index 330
Acknowledgements

We would not have considered writing this book without the encouragement and support of Professor Jim Ife. Thank you, Jim, for suggesting this book might be possible, connecting us with Cambridge and writing such a thought-provoking foreword.

A number of social work students at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) have undertaken library research to assist us with this project, including Lyndall Hall, Tiffany English and Kirsty Roberts. Thank you to each of you for your generous contributions and interest in our work. Other USC social work students, namely Scott Mitchell, Judi Moir and David O’Connor, provided valuable student feedback on a number of chapters, which has been most helpful. We would also like to acknowledge the SWAANs (Social Work Action Advocacy Network of Students) at USC, particularly Liz Duce, Emma Persich, Rachel Dowling, Jennie Briese and Adam Thomas for their positivity and creativity in producing the equality/equity images. A number of friends – Kitty and David Geldard, Julie Matthews, John O’Malley and Trin Davies – have dutifully shared our enthusiasm for the book and given us feedback and encouragement.

Joanne Dunstan, Karen Marshall and Carey Shaw, our much valued research assistants, deserve a special mention for the contributions they have made. Thank you, Jo, for sharing your feedback on the chapters and undertaking the in-depth research, often within very pressured timelines, to help us source definitions and citations for some of the key terms. Thank you, Karen, for assisting us with the compilation of the references section, and for the tireless searches you have undertaken to locate copyright holders across the globe to secure permission for the reproduction of many of the images in this text. We also wish to acknowledge the copyright holders who have kindly granted permission for us to reproduce their material. And thank you Carey for preparing such a comprehensive index.

We wish to acknowledge the Faculty of Arts and Business publication grants scheme at USC, which assisted us to employ the research assistants (named above) who contributed to this book. We also wish to acknowledge the Open Learning and Teaching Grants Program, sponsored by the Centre for Support and Advancement of Learning and Teaching (C-SALT) at USC, for funding a number of projects that enabled some of the research presented in this book to be undertaken.
We also wish to thank Isabella Mead and Tara Peck from Cambridge University Press for their guidance and support in the composition of our manuscript. We would also like to thank the peer reviewers for their insightful comments and feedback, much of which we have gratefully accepted, and which has helped improve this resource.

Thank you Mike Buky and Angela Damis for your thoughtful comments about our writing and for copyediting the text.

There are too many other people to whom we are indebted to name specifically – they have engaged in the conversations and fuelled the ideas that have contributed to this book. We are grateful to you all, including our students and colleagues who continue to challenge us, and from whom we continue to learn.

**Publisher’s acknowledgements**

The publisher would like to thank the following individuals and organisations for contributing to the artwork of this book: Shutterstock.com/Balqis Amran; Michael D Brown; amenic181; panco971; arindambanerjee; Cafebeanz Company; ml; wrangler; master_art; Dooder; Hollygraphic; ChameleonsEye; Zurainy Zain; Raywoo; gdvcom; cobalt88; Nicku; Sadik Gulec; Adam Gregor; Sergey Baykov; wavebreakmedia; tomaso79; Monkey Business Images; VLADGRIN; Ocskay Bence; Howard Klaaste; Alexey Mhoyan; kwest; Amir Ridhwan; Twin Design; Dirk Ercken; alexmillos; Juliya_strekoza; Harvepino; amasterphotographer; nmedia.
List of abbreviations/acronyms

Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)
Australian Community Workers’ Association (ACWA)
Australian Council for Social Services (ACOSS)
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)
Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC)
Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC)
Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs)
Charitable Organisation Society (COS)
Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC)
International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)
lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI)
National Council of Women (NCW)
National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS)
non-government organisation (NGO)
Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)
Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA)
Radical Women’s Group (RWG)
Social and Community Services (SACS) (part of the Australian Services Union)
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA)