1 The critical potential of social work

INTRODUCTION

This book is about the potential of social work, and in particular the potential of **critical social work**. It is about what social work *is*, what social work *can be* and, from a critical perspective, what social work *should be*. We use the word 'potential' quite deliberately, as it implies that there are elements of uncertainty in endeavouring to make social work critical that are yet to be fully realised and are never guaranteed. Furthermore, this book will show that to be critical is not to adopt a negative or pessimistic outlook on the world and its problems; rather, it is anchored in a spirit of discerning hope. Critical, or educated, hope

> **Critical social work** is a progressive view of social work that questions and challenges the harmful divisions, unequal power relations, injustices and social disadvantages that characterise our society, and seeks to create more socially just societal arrangements.

is not about developing a blind, idealistic sense of optimism; it is hope that is grounded in an analysis of society, and the challenges created by contemporary contexts for anyone seeking to change it for the better (Amsler 2011; Canaan 2005; Giroux 2001, 2004; Webb 2013).

In treating the writing of this book as a conversation – not just among ourselves, but also with you – we have grappled with where to begin the discussion. From the outset, we ask that you keep an open mind, and strive to be humble and courageous, as it is only with these qualities that you can be willing to genuinely consider the potentially challenging and confronting concepts that may lead you to think quite differently and to practise critically. We invite you to interrogate the ideas presented here and the application of them beyond these pages in a critical way. We also invite you to be a little transgressive – to avoid simple conformity with what most people think social work is, or should be, and instead to think critically about what sort of social worker you are or aspire to be. We should note from the beginning that in referring to 'social workers', we are using this term very broadly to include any practitioner (be they a social worker, human services worker, community-based activist, counsellor, welfare worker, social

scientist or sociologist) who uses social work knowledge and practices to work in ways that enhance a more socially just, equitable and democratic world. We sometimes also refer to these people as practitioners or simply 'workers'.

In deciding where to begin, we have asked ourselves a number of questions. Should we start by defining what we mean by critical social work, and discussing how this form of social work is different from uncritical (establishment) social work? Should we explain what we mean by **establishment social work**, so that we can offer information about the orientation of this book and how it may differ from some others you have read? We should say from the beginning that we understand social work as a highly contested enterprise, one that means different things to different people, encompasses a diverse range of visions and takes numerous forms. We describe establishment social work as 'uncritical' because it is an approach to social work that largely accepts existing inequalities and injustices, or views them as largely unchangeable. It does not explicitly look for ways to challenge such inequalities or injustices, but rather focuses on helping people to cope or manage better within existing arrangements.

We should introduce ourselves so that you know where we are coming from. After all, an important part of critical social work is **critical reflection**, and how can we ask you to critically reflect on your own values, assumptions and position in the world if we do not share something of our own reflections about these things? We will define critical reflection and discuss the vital importance this holds for critical social work, and talk about why critical social work is particularly important in the current political and practice context. Additionally, we will provide some background information about the nature of the contemporary context and why this matters to social work. Of course, we need to cover all of these things as part of this introductory chapter, and we will now work through them one by one.

Establishment social work is a conservative understanding of social work dominant in most welfare systems today, which uncritically accepts existing social inequalities and helps people to cope with the impact of injustices instead of challenging them. It is also strongly associated with objective scientific methods for managing the marginalised in the most cost-effective and least disruptive manner possible.

Critical reflection A first step in the critical reflection process involves understanding the ways our own values, beliefs and assumptions influence and shape our view of the world. The next part of the process is to question how closely aligned our values are with a social justice perspective, and to challenge them when we see a gap between them and our social justice commitments (Fook 2016).

You will come across this icon in the margin throughout the book, indicating that a useful video, resource or weblink is available on the companion website, www.cambridge.edu.au/academic/engagingsocialwork. Each icon is accompanied by a resource number to help you easily identify the item within the website material. Some items are tied to specific exercises in the book, while others are purely reference material to expand upon the content covered.

CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK

Critical social work has a long-standing and vibrant history (e.g. Allan, Briskman & Pease 2009; Ferguson 2008; Fook 1993, 2012; Healy 2000; Hick, Fook & Pozzuto 2005; Ife 1996; Moreau 1979; Mullaly 2007; Noble, Ife & Pease 2017; Rossiter 1996). This book is about continuing this history and extending its ideas and practices into the future. It adds our voices to a chorus of social work scholars who have published a spate of new works promoting a resurgence of critical social work (e.g. Fraser, Beddoe & Ballantyne 2017; Fraser & Taylor 2016; Gray & Webb 2013; Kam 2014; Kennedy-Kish (Bell) et al. 2017; Morley 2016; Pease et al. 2016; Webb 2019; Wehbi & Parada 2017).

We should start by defining what we mean by critical social work. The word 'critical' is used often in social work texts, sometimes with different meanings and interpretations, depending on the context and the views of the authors. Within our work, we understand the word 'critical' to have come from the Ancient Greek word *kritikos* (κριτικός), which literally means given to judging, or bringing into question (Liddell & Scott 1940). In Western thought, the word 'critical' has two main meanings. The first has to do with the questioning of ideas and arguments, which most academic disciplines claim to do. The second use of the word has to do with questioning our current society – its harmful divisions, unequal power relations, injustices and disadvantages – with a view to overcoming these. In this latter understanding, adopting a critical position can be challenging because it may mean defying the power of those who may benefit from existing divisions, and resist attempts for change (Agger 2013; Pease 2016). Being critical may also mean having to seriously question ourselves, where we stand and what role we play in either promoting or attempting to combat the social problems that critical social work seeks to address. We refer to this self-questioning as *critical reflection*. Critical reflection is a core part of critical social work, and something in which we will ask you to spend significant time engaging as we work through the chapters.

In simple terms, by favouring a critical approach to social work, we are putting forward a form of social work that is aligned with the people with whom we claim to work – those who experience **social or socioeconomic disadvantage**, those who are **marginalised** and those who experience **oppression**.

Obviously, the world and social work are more complex than simply consisting of two opposing sides (e.g. progressive versus conservative, establishment versus critical) and later, when we look at

> **Social or socioeconomic disadvantage** refers to those who are low-income earners, temporarily unemployed or permanently excluded from the labour market (Mullaly 2010).
>
> **Marginalisation** is a process of decentring and/or pushing someone or something else to the margins of society (excluding them from meaningful participation) (Thompson 1998).
>
> **Oppression** can be defined as the domination of less powerful groups by powerful groups in ways that restrict their rights, opportunities and access to resources (Mullaly 2010).

Poststructuralism rejects a singular view of the world to instead encourage multiple understandings based on differing cultural, institutional and individual standpoints and contexts (Seidman 2013).

Binary (or dichotomous) thinking sees the world in terms of two mutually exclusive and often opposing categories (Fook 2016) – for example, black or white; establishment or critical; male or female; able-bodied or disabled.

Social change refers to transformations of societal structures and cultural patterns, not simply transformations of individuals' lives (Van Krieken et al. 2017).

Social structures are enduring social patterns, power divisions, institutions and inequalities that make up a society. Political, economic, gendered, historical and so on, they exist independently of the action of any one individual.

Privilege is the flip-side of oppression (Johnson 2006) and can be defined as 'systemically conferred advantages individuals enjoy by virtue of their membership in dominant groups with access to resources and institutional power that are beyond the common advantages of marginalised citizens' (Bailey 1998, p. 109). Social categories that may confer privilege are related to gender, race, ability, class, sexual orientation and age, among other factors.

Social justice is an ethical norm holding that society is responsible for, and obliged to prevent, poverty and other extreme forms of inequality. Most definitions of social justice agree that it involves access, equity, rights and participation.

> ### REFLECTIVE EXERCISE 1.1
>
> What differences – subtle though they may be – are there between the terms 'disadvantaged' and 'oppressed'? You might also like to think about any differences in meaning between the terms 'needy' and 'people with unmet needs'.

theory, **poststructuralism** certainly highlights the limitations of **binary (or dichotomous) thinking** and alerts us to much more complex possibilities.

However, if we simplify our analysis for the moment in order to begin the discussion somewhere, critical social work is about positioning ourselves alongside the people with whom we are working, rather than trying to protect and maintain the current systemic inequalities and power divisions. It is about being on the side of progressive **social change**, arguing for human betterment rather than keeping the system (with its associated injustices and inequalities) as it is. This is because critical social work is critical of the existing **social structures** that cause some groups (those with power) to be advantaged and others (those with less access to formal power structures) to be marginalised (Fook 1993). Those groups that reap unearned benefits in terms of power, legitimacy and access to resources are sometimes referred to as experiencing **privilege** (Pease 2016).

Critical social work is critical of social arrangements that are socially unjust, inequitable and undemocratic, but it is not about simply taking a negative or pessimistic stance; nor does being critical mean denouncing everything valued by the majority of the population. Critical social work is about acknowledging the limitations of our current society and the systems that characterise it, and exposing oppressive conditions that impede human freedom and **social justice** (Mullaly 2010) in order to think about how things might be different. For example, imagine if we saw the social issue of poverty as being the result of social, political and economic systems that have failed, rather than the fault of the people who are impoverished. How would our analysis of this situation, and therefore our practice response, be different if we engaged in a social, rather than an individualist, analysis (that ignored the structural context) (Fook 1993)?

While recognising that the problems with our current systems can feel overwhelming at times, being critical involves a constant

PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

Ezra Thomas, social work graduate, University of the Sunshine Coast

I remember feeling inspired in my very first social work lecture. The lecturer asked the students what they thought caused poverty. Students offered various responses like 'drug-addiction', 'mental illness' or 'unemployment'. But this was not what the lecturer was looking for. Instead she started a dialogue that framed capitalism and patriarchy as major contributors to poverty, and so began my critical social work journey . . . I realised that society was ultimately designed to preserve an inequitable status quo that functioned to benefit a privileged minority. I now understood injustice existed not merely due to lack of intelligence, awareness or compassion, but as a result of complex intersections between social, political and economic structures that shape the behaviour and experience of individuals . . . I learnt to make connections between the personal and the political, and developed a sharp power analysis of socially constructed hierarchies that engrain difference (O'Connor et al. 2016, p. 291).

questioning of unjust and harmful practices based on the hope that they might be otherwise. It prompts us to consider how we might be able to work towards a society that is more socially just – where people have access to the resources and services they need, resources are more equitably (rather than equally) distributed, **human rights** are protected and everyone has the opportunity to meaningfully participate in **self-determination**.

> **Human rights** concern the basic entitlements of every human being.
>
> **Self-determination** may be defined as 'the belief that the individual or the group has the right to make decisions that affect her/himself or the group' (Berg-Weger 2013, Glossary 1–10).

Human rights can take many forms, including civil/political, legal, social and economic, and these categories are not mutually exclusive:

- Civil/political human rights include the right to vote, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of religion.
- Legal human rights include the right to equal treatment before the law.
- Social human rights include the rights to housing, food, education, health and so on.
- Economic human rights include the right to income security and employment.

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An important distinction to make here is between *equity* and *equality*. Equality means to distribute resources equally. This may sound fair; however, consider Figure 1.1, where the shortest boy is given the same amount of help as the tallest boy, who can already access something easily. The tall boy is privileged because he can see over the barrier with no assistance. The short boy is disadvantaged and still cannot see, even with the help he has received. The result only sustains the inequality. Looking at the picture in the middle, we see the shortest boy is given a larger (*equitable*) amount of help. He has an opportunity to participate (access something), resulting in a more socially just outcome. The middle picture is somewhat consistent with a critical social work approach, but even more, the picture on the right (liberation) aims to dismantle the structural barriers causing inequality and oppression for the most disadvantaged people, creating the conditions for liberation, where all people can access resources (in this case, the view of the game) and share an equal opportunity to participate.
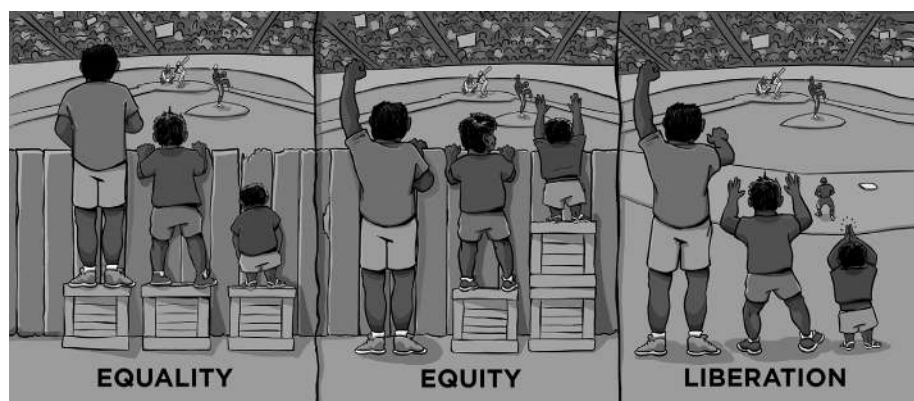
Figure 1.1   Equality, equity and liberation
Source: A collaboration between Center for Story-based Strategy and Interaction Institute for Social Change.

Similarly, consider a scenario in which one family has a combined income of more than $100 000 per year and another family is trying to survive on less than $17 000 per year. If we gave the same amount of resources to each family, then our intervention would be equal, but would only serve to reproduce existing inequalities. If, however, our resourcing of these families was equitable instead of equal, we would give more resources to the poorer family whose need was greater, and reduce the amount given to the wealthy family, who did not need them. This involves distributing the resources unequally, but more fairly, according to need. Hence, *equitable* distribution may appear unequal in allocation, but ultimately results in greater *equality* of outcomes for everyone.

Decisions about whether social arrangements reproduce existing inequalities, attempt to promote equality through equitable measures or seek to eradicate oppression to create the conditions for liberation are often implemented through **social policy**. For a social policy to be just, it must take into account the pre-existing inequalities and differing needs of differently advantaged groups. We will refer to social policy in most chapters of this book, as it is profoundly consequential in shaping the contexts within which social workers practise, and the kinds of social problems with which we work. We will focus particularly on this in Chapter 3.

> **Social policy** is 'a process of authoritative allocation of material and human resources . . . for the purpose of achieving certain social, economic, cultural and political outcomes in society' (Jamrozik 2009, p. 49).

Many authors have written about social justice. For Barker (1995, p. 94), social justice comprises the 'conditions in which all members of society have the same basic rights, protections, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits'. For former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson (1993–98):

> Social justice is what faces you in the morning. It is awakening in a house with adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and understanding of their cultural inheritance. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health: a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination (Dodson 1993).

PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

Joanne Clarke, social worker

The [above] quote typifies social justice, as it is about being able to participate in an education system that develops and celebrates cultural understandings that dictate life chances and the ability to participate in meaningful employment – rather than forcing participation in a system that denigrates difference and denies the need for equity – in the name of equality.

Social justice is, of course, a problematic concept, despite its centrality to social work practice. While it is often assumed to be universal, 'considerable ambiguity persists over its meaning and application' (Reisch 2013, p. 718). Because of the way the term 'social justice' has been adopted to justify various, often competing, diverse interests, Reisch

(2013, p. 718) argues that 'practitioners struggle to translate the profession's most compelling ethical imperative[s] [such as freedom, equality, democracy and human rights] into real world terms'.

PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

Christine Craik, President of the Australian Association of Social Workers

Social work practice is as much about working towards social and structural change as it is about the application of knowledge to assist in addressing particular situations. Critical social work theories and the practice that comes from these theories enable us as social workers to identify and address these systemic disadvantages as an integral part of our work with individuals, families and communities. I have often been told that you can't practise critical social work everywhere, but with patience, respect and perseverance, my experience has been that you can practise as a critical social worker even in the most hierarchical, neoliberal and medical-model institutions.

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body for social workers in Australia. Social workers living outside Australia will likely have their own national professional body, with its own website.

In summarising how we understand a critical approach to social work, a number of important elements emerge:

- an emphasis on questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and developing an openness to a range of different sources of knowledge and alternative perspectives (e.g. Fook 2016)
- an emphasis on possibilities for *social change*, and concern with how our everyday actions contribute to social change and *social justice* (or maintaining social arrangements that cause injustices) (e.g. Allan, Briskman & Pease 2009; Gray &

Webb 2013; Pease et al. 2016; Ife 2012, 2013; Kennedy-Kish (Bell) et al. 2017; Mullaly 2010; Wehbi & Parada 2017)

- awareness that our own and others' personal experiences are shaped by broad inequalities and social structures (e.g. Allan, Briskman & Pease 2009; Fook 1993; Gray & Webb 2013; Mullaly 2007; Pease et al. 2016)
- acknowledgement of how the words we use to label our experiences create (inter) actions and power relations (e.g. Fook 2016; Healy 2000; Leonard 1997; Parton & O'Byrne 2000)
- resistance to dominant social forces and power relations that create inequality and oppression (Ferguson 2008; Fraser & Taylor 2016; Garrett 2010; Gray & Webb 2013; Pease et al. 2016; Kennedy-Kish (Bell) et al. 2017; Mullaly 2010; Wehbi & Parada 2017)
- openness to being reflexive (locating ourselves in the picture) and engaging in *critical reflection* about our own beliefs, theory and practice (e.g. Fook 2016; Rossiter 2005)
- an emphasis on the importance of understanding others' realities and promoting respectful relationships (e.g. Allan, Briskman & Pease 2009)
- an emphasis on decolonising social work, and respecting and embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ways of knowing into social work (Bennett et al. 2013a; Gray et al. 2016). This is captured by the following quote: 'If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together (Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s). This quote has served as a motto for many activist groups in Australia and elsewhere, including United Students Against Sweatshops. A possible origin for the quote is a speech given by Lilla Watson at the 1985 United Nations Decade for Women Conference in Nairobi. Watson has said of this quote that she was 'not comfortable being credited for something that had been born of a collective process', and preferred that it be credited to 'Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s'.

Videos 1.1 and 1.2

REFLECTIVE EXERCISE 1.2

- How comfortable do you feel with the critical ideas that have been presented here?
- Do they sit comfortably with your own values, or are there aspects by which you feel challenged?
- Can you start to make a list of the values you hold that are affirmed or unsettled by the key tenets of critical social work?

WHY CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK?

You may be questioning why we are choosing to focus on critical social work, over and above other approaches to social work. Our answer is very simple: for us, critical social work *is* social work. Given universally espoused commitments by professional bodies, codes of ethics and education standards documents throughout the world to social justice, human rights, social change and the liberation of people (e.g. AASW 2012), it is difficult for social work to enact its goals without taking a critical stance. However, as we have mentioned, social work is diverse and contested. Within current contexts, which we explore extensively in Chapter 2, much mainstream social work practice has been co-opted by dominant social forces and therefore the establishment in its functions.

Bias is a partial and subjective view that is often seen as negative or undesirable. However, from a critical perspective, all information (including scientific evidence) is connected with values, assumptions and constructions, and is therefore biased (Morley 2013).

Biography refers to our social, economic, political, cultural, gendered and historical positioning and experiences, which shape our interpretive lens on the world (Fook 1999).

Although we favour a critical approach, just because this is our preference, it does not have to be yours. We do, however, hope to make a compelling case for choosing a critical perspective, and ask only that you attempt to understand it before making your own decision about whether or not to embrace it. Our reasons for choosing a critical approach relate to our philosophical and ethical positions; in the spirit of critical reflection and a desire to make our **biases** transparent, we share our reflections on our social **biographies** and experiences, and how these have shaped our

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