1 SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE, THEORY AND PRACTICE

Introduction

Social workers practise across a wide range of settings, with all kinds of different people who have diverse cultural experiences. 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 practice 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 health and human services. Theories explored in this book are not the sole purview of the social work profession, and they cannot be claimed as necessarily emerging from within a social work paradigm. Professional interpretations of knowledge and theory overlap and interweave (Trevithick 2012). 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 are critically influenced by disciplinary attachments and the underpinning values and nature of the profession itself. In the following chapters, we explore a range of practice theories that have been influential in social work. First, however, we tease out the disciplinary nature of social work's interpretative lenses to see how they influence the application of knowledge and theory, what we understand theory to be, and how contemporary debates have influenced the application of theory over time.

Social work's interpretive lenses

We propose that social work is characterised by five lenses that together influence the ways in which we apply theory in practice – the relational, social justice, cultural, reflective and change lenses.

THE 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 2014). 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. Writers have noted a dichotomy 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 sought to marry social action and casework approaches (Howe 2009); however, 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 twentieth century, and a good deal has happened since then.

It is clear that relationship-based practice is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, it has been argued that 'relationship underpins social work practice in all its forms' and that it is particularly important in times of contemporary austerity (Bryan, Hingley-Jones & Ruch 2016: 229). The managerial audit culture (Power 1996) that has dominated social work in recent years has given rise to a strong focus on compliance, which in turn has impacted on the ways in which social workers work with people. There have been consequences in terms of the development and strengthening of relationship-based practice, as workers spend more and more time undertaking behind-the-scenes

administrative tasks and less time building relationships with people. As a social work student on placement in a hospital, Hanh reflects on this tension for her in Reflection 1.1.

REFLECTION 1.1: THE RELATIONAL LENS

During my placement at a hospital, I went to see a patient. Initially, she appeared standoffish, unsure of what my role was, demanding quick answers. Despite being under pressure to quickly discharge the patient, I asked her if I could sit down, and I took my time. I asked how life had been for her in and out of the hospital. I found out her husband had died only two years ago, and intense grief and loneliness continued to be a part of her everyday life. She ate on the couch instead of at the dining table as she didn't want to think about him. She struggled to get household tasks done because she had only ever done them with him. Even seeing her daughters was just another painful reminder of her loss. I sat next to her as she cried, reflecting at times, simply remaining silent at others. She told me that she hadn't talked to anyone about this before, but that she trusted me, and that she could see compassion in my eyes. What started as a rushed interaction turned into half an hour of thoughtful reflection. In the end, I could not help her with anything concrete – all referrals and available supports had already been put in place – yet I felt that my presence was meaningful, and that I had made a difference to someone's life.

Hanh, social work student on placement

Notwithstanding the tensions in contemporary practice, 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 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 long-standing commitment to social justice and social change (Briskman 2014). 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 epitomises 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; 2017), perspectives that will be discussed more fully in Chapter 8. When systems are considered unjust, social work advocates change, at least according to more radical theorists. 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/she] 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 cross a range of domains, their 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, particularly through the assessments and recommendations that we make to legal and health authorities. For example, children who are assessed as needing care and protection can be removed from their parents. 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, an 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 Reflection 1.2, social justice and emancipatory practice can also exist even within the most constrained of statutory environments.

REFLECTION 1.2: 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 upwards of 60 men, 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 ideas 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 twentieth 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 organisational context. Identifying social justice as a key theme across practice domains, Harms, Connolly and Maidment (2018: 265) note that:

> 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 First Nations peoples. Indigenous peoples of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand have experienced a devastating cultural dislocation through processes of colonisation, a legacy that creates continued disadvantage (Andrews in Chapter 3 of this book; Gilbert 2018; Ruwhiu 2018). Social work acknowledges the impact of this on the cultural fabric of Indigenous communities and is committed to developing deeper understandings 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 interpretive lens, a focus on social justice challenges individualistic responses that can negatively merge with notions of individual culpability, blame and stigmatisation. An equally critical interpretive lens that intersects with social justice and relationship practice is the cultural lens.

THE CULTURAL LENS

Issues of culture have long been a concern of the profession, particularly in the context of colonisation and the ways in which people of different ethnicities have been disadvantaged by systems and mainstream services over time. Like many human services professionals, social workers have been challenged to increase their responsiveness to cultural diversity (Nipperess & Williams 2019). The challenge is, however, more acute for the social work profession given its deep commitment to social justice, social action and human rights. Despite this commitment, it is clear that throughout history social work's humanitarian ideals have been compromised, particularly in the use of its statutory powers that can result in culturally marginalised people being further disadvantaged by the actions of social workers. For example, social workers can use legislation to remove children from their families. They can also influence who gets what resource and when. When a disciplinary core is predominantly Anglo (Nipperess & Williams 2019) this, perhaps inevitably, has consequences. People may fear or mistrust social work interventions lest they impact negatively on them, causing a reluctance to seek help. For First Nations peoples, a social worker may represent considerable threat given the historical legacy of colonisation and the devastating impact it has had on generations of Indigenous communities, now recognised as 'a long term process involving bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power' (Tuhiwai Smith 2021: 112).

Regardless of where a social worker may practice – whether it is at the community or professional frontline, within areas of policy development, human service management, or education – there is an expectation that the

discipline has an important role to play in advancing the interests of culturally marginalised communities. This has resulted in the development of global and national standards that are designed to reinforce a decolonising agenda at all levels of social work activity (McNabb & Connolly 2019). In Australia, the *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (ASWEAS) (AASW 2022) embrace responsiveness to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. This commitment was further developed in the important report *Getting It Right Teaching and Learning Framework*, 'an evidence-informed road map for the development and delivery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing in the Australian social work curricula' (Zubrzycki et al. 2014: 5). Similarly, in Aotearoa New Zealand, the professional body has long confirmed its commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) as the country's founding document. Over time, it has embedded Māori values within the social work standards framework, and has indigenised the social work code of ethics (McNabb 2020). Based on his research, and influenced by the Getting It Right Teaching and Learning Framework, McNabb (2019) offers a Tiriti-based framework for practice that incorporates Ngā Mōhiotanga (knowing and understanding Kaupapa Māori at a deep level), Ngā Whakaahuatanga (integrating Te Tiriti values and principles into the very being of practice), and Te Whakatinanatanga (operationalising Te Tiriti and kaupapa into all aspects of the 'doing' of social work).

These developments in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand are a good illustration of the fundamental significance of the cultural lens when working with marginalised people. Social workers' practice in what Mignolo calls the 'borderlands' (Weier 2017). It is a fraught space, not necessarily geographical, although it may be so, but it is where differing cultures meet, where encounters with 'the Other' take place, and where cultural misunderstandings occur. It is a space where people do not share a common cultural framework, where assumptions and interpretations of peoples' actions are made and often misread. Adopting a reflective lens invites you to appreciate that people inhabit two sides of a border, and to consider what side of the border you inhabit: 'You have not chosen it; you came to the world when the world was already delineated by international relations, global linear thinking, racism, sexism, and so on' (Mignolo in Weier 2017: 23). But you can interrogate and understand it, and through an increased awareness you can also understand the reasons why people, including you, think and behave as they do.

REFLECTION I.3: THE CULTURAL LENS

I learned a lot about white privilege and cultural identity during my social work training, where I was challenged to think about how privileged my own life has been. Then in practice, I find myself not always appreciating cultural diversity and how this influences the expectations I hold about the people I'm working with and the expectations and assumptions they are living with. Reminding myself of the importance of examining my own privilege helps me to better understand why I behave in certain ways and other people do what they do. I hope it helps to find better ways of practising as a social worker.

Social worker

THE REFLECTIVE LENS

Cultural thinking shapes the way we feel, think and act so our reflective lens is also vital. 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 vitally important to the way we understand the world and the people within it. Our own thinking may include these multiple interpretations. Our views about the world are also likely to be influenced by many other experiences and interpretations of our childhood – the influence of family and the way in which we were raised, our education and the influence of our peers. These all contribute to the ways in which we understand and appreciate the world of another. Reflecting upon the ways in which personal and professional 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 practises are now well understood, the influence of professional ideologies and the professional self has received less attention; however, it is every bit as important. This is where the notion of 'institutional attachments' (Wacquant 1998: 226) is relevant. The professional self, infused with explanatory theories, professional attitudes and beliefs (reflected in practice standards and codes of ethical practice), also creates 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. Such differences in professional thinking can run very deep, and may influence our capacity to 'change lenses':

> 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: 403)

A traditional feminist interpretation of relationships of dominance and subordination contrasts starkly with an alternative response that attributes greater importance to cultural dimensions and reflective imperatives, as is highlighted in Reflection 1.4.

REFLECTION 1.4: 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 academic from Asia 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. The presenter was accused of shifting responsibility for male violence onto women, and of accommodating and supporting gender inequality within the family. She 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 our thinking influences practice and how practitioners can develop reflexive responsiveness. Writers have argued for the importance of self-reflection, greater awareness of the influence of personal and professional values, and the development of strategies that support reflective and reflexive practice – something to which we will return in Chapter 9. The discipline's commitment to supervision is an example of the 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:

> 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 personal and professional landscapes has provided 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.

Our interpretive lenses considered to date – relational, social justice, cultural and reflective – 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.

While there will always be ideas and experience that influence the development of knowledge and practice, in this discussion we have identified what we consider to be four of the five critical lenses underpinning 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 disciplinary lens, creating theoretical appreciations and applications that are different from those of someone outside the profession. See, for example, Sharon Berlin's (2002) important discussion of clinical social work within the context of a cognitive-integrative approach. While Berlin specifically focuses on cognitive theory, there is no mistaking her disciplinary background as she incorporates key social work ideas: the person-in-environment; human agency; socially derived meanings; culture and change. The result is a book that is fundamentally different from other cognitive theoretical treatments that have emerged from professions outside the discipline of social work (e.g. see Kazantzis, Reinecke & Freeman (2010), writing from a psychology perspective). This is not to say that one disciplinary approach is superior or inferior to another; it is just that they differ in important ways. Although we have discussed influencing lenses individually in this chapter, it is more helpful to consider them in the context of a set of related ideas that intersect and interact with each other (see Figure 1.1). We would argue that together they have the potential to provide a unique social work perspective that shapes our understanding and application of theory in practice.

Throughout this book, we will highlight the ways in which these social work interpretive lenses influence the particular application of theory and illustrate how their application creates practice that is characteristically