

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 is not about developing a blind, idealistic sense of optimism, but a 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 2004, 2001; 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 want to 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.¹

¹ 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’.

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.

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 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.

A first step in a **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 a critically reflective 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 2012).

Social or socioeconomic disadvantage refers to those who are low-income earners, temporarily unemployed, or permanently excluded from the labour market (Mullaly 2010).

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 of the others you have read? We should say from the beginning that we understand social work as a highly contested enterprise, in that it means different things to different people, encompasses a diverse range of visions and takes numerous forms.

Should we 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? Perhaps we should define critical reflection and discuss the vital importance this holds for critical social work, or talk about why critical social work is particularly important in the current political and practice context. Perhaps we should provide some background information about what the nature of the contemporary context is, 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.

■ Critical social work

Critical social work has a longstanding 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; Rossiter 1996). This book is about continuing this history and extending its ideas and practices into the future. The word 'critical' is used a lot in social work texts, sometimes with different meanings, and its interpretation depends on the context and the views of the authors. So, it is important

to understand how the term is being used here. The word 'critical' comes 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 a challenging position to take because it means defying the power of those who may benefit from existing divisions, and resist attempts for change (Agger 2013). 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 one that we will ask you to spend significant time engaging in 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 we claim to work with – those who experience **social disadvantage**, those who are **marginalised** and those who experience **oppression**.

Marginalisation is a process of decentring and/or pushing someone or something else to the margins of society (Thompson 1998).

Oppression can be defined as the domination by powerful groups of less powerful groups in ways that restrict their rights, opportunities and access to resources (Mullaly 2010).

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'.)

Obviously, the world is more complex than understanding it in terms of two sides (later, when we look at theory, **poststructuralism** certainly highlights the limitations of seeing just two sides 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 we are working with, rather than trying to protect and maintain the current systemic inequalities and power divisions. It is about being on the side of **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). 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

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).

Social change refers to transformations of societal structures and cultural patterns; not simply of individuals' lives (Van Krieken et al. 2012).

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.

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.

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).

denouncing everything that the majority of the population values. 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 response be different if we privileged a social, rather than an individualist, analysis (that ignores the structural context) (Fook 1993)?

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

An important distinction to make here is between *equity* and *equality* in the context of social work. Equality means to distribute resources equally. This may sound fair; however, consider the left-hand picture opposite, where the shortest person is given the same amount of help as the tallest person, who can already easily access something. The result only sustains the inequality. Looking at the picture on the right-hand side, we see the shortest person is given a larger (*equitable*) amount of help. That person has an opportunity to participate (access something), resulting in a more socially just outcome.

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 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 is greater, and reduce the amount given to the wealthy family, which does 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.



Figure 1.1a

[Images reproduced with kind permission of the SWAANS, USC.]



Figure 1.1b

This is not to suggest, however, that all unequal distribution is fair or equitable. Consider the federal Coalition's 2013 policy on paid maternity leave, which if made law will result in women earning very high incomes being far more advantaged than women earning lower or no incomes. This is an example of a **social policy** that causes greater social injustice. For a social policy to be just it must take into account the pre-existing inequalities and differing needs of differently advantaged groups.

Many authors have written about social justice. For Barker (1995, p. 94), social justice is 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 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1993).

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).

PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

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 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. (*Joanne Dunstan, social worker*)

The current president of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), Professor Karen Healy, suggests that to work towards social justice is 'not a matter of overcoming oppression once and for all, but an ongoing negotiation of power in the current practice context' (Healy 1999, p. 13).

The AASW is the professional body for social workers in Australia; see <http://www.aasw.asn.au>.



Figure 1.2

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 2012)
- 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; Ife 2012, 2013; Mullaly 2010)
- awareness that our own and others' personal experiences are shaped by broad inequalities and social structures (e.g. Allan, Briskman & Pease 2009; Fook 1993; Mullaly 2007).
- acknowledgement of how the words that we use to label our experiences create (inter)actions and power relations (e.g. Fook 2012; Healy 2000; Leonard 1997; Parton & O'Byrne 2000)

- openness to being reflexive (locating ourselves in the picture) and engaging in *critical reflection* about our own beliefs, theory and practice (e.g. Fook 2012; Rossiter 2005)
- an emphasis on the importance of understanding others' realities and promotion of respectful relationships (e.g. Allan, Briskman & Pease 2009).

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).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 that you feel challenged by?
- Can you start to make a list of the values that you hold that are affirmed or unsettled by the key tenets of critical social work?

■ Why critical social work?

Some of you may be questioning why we are choosing to focus on critical social work, over and above other approaches to social work. Our answer to this is very simple: for us, critical social work is social work. Although we are favouring a critical approach 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 to embrace it or not. 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

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).

² 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 prefers that it be credited to 'Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s': see <http://unnecessaryevils.blogspot.com.au/2008/11/attributing-words.html>.

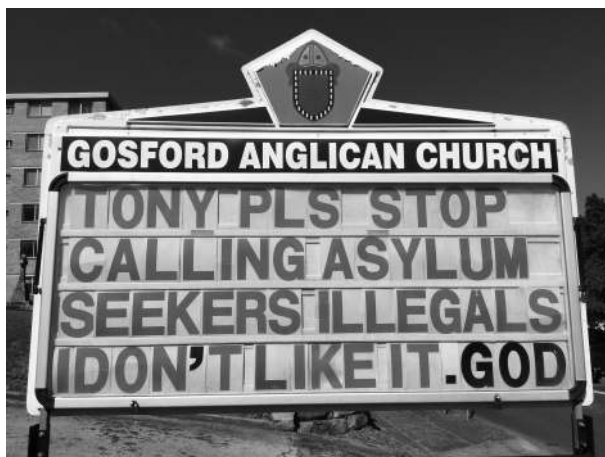


Figure 1.3
 Image reproduced with kind permission of Father Rod Bower, Anglican Parish of Gosford.

Our **biography** is our social, economic, political, cultural, gendered and historical positioning and experiences which shape our interpretive lens of the world (Fook 1999).

Our **worldview** is the overall beliefs and assumptions that inform our interpretation of life and the world.

Critical theories are 'concerned with possibilities for liberatory, social transformation' (Healy 2000, p. 13).

Secular humanism is the belief that human beings can direct their own *progress* towards greater freedom and equality, without religion.

reflections on our social **biographies** and experiences and how these have shaped our **worldviews** later in this chapter. **Critical theory** is an approach we embrace that shares a vision of every human having equal dignity and worth. With this starting point, any social arrangement that impedes the realisation of human dignity and worth must be challenged. As Karl Marx ([1843] 1977, p. 220), writing almost two centuries ago, put it, the purpose of critical theory is 'To overthrow all conditions under which humankind is oppressed, enslaved, destitute and a despised being'.

This value base, for us, captures the essence of what social work should be, and as we will explore in subsequent chapters, holds particular implications for practice. It is a vision strongly associated with **secular** (non-religious) **humanism** but such ideas can also be found in all the world's major religious traditions and philosophies. See, for example, the photograph above – a message to the Prime Minister of Australia, Tony Abbott, about his lack of care and injustice towards asylum seekers. Without humanist views, the oppression and exploitation of others can be justified.

■ What is the approach taken in this book?

We want to assure you at this point that we are aware that you may be reacting to some of the language we are using. Many of the technical terms we have used so far need to be unpacked, which we intend to do

along the way. Over the years our students have told us that we use too many big words. Such words can be considered jargon and our aim in this book is to use the simplest language possible to explain some of the quite complex and sophisticated concepts that we will be covering. Despite this, we remain aware that learning the language of a discipline is part of becoming a professional in that discipline, and each discipline has its own language. For example, you cannot become a lawyer without knowing about torts and contracts. You cannot become a chemical scientist without knowing about molecular structures. And you cannot do social work without knowing about *social structures, dominant discourses, ideologies, hegemony, globalisation, neoliberalism, managerialism, capitalism*, and so on. Indeed, you will need to know the language of social work in order to talk to other social workers, to do your job and even to apply for a social work-related position. Understanding such terms will also be invaluable in developing a critical approach to practice. Hence, part of your experience of engaging with this book will be to learn about some of the language of our discipline. You will find key terms bolded and defined in a margin box. These definitions appear again in the glossary at the end of the text, often in extended form. We define many other important terms in the commentary – these do not appear in a margin box but their meanings are included in the glossary as well.

We are also aware that people will be reading this book at different stages of their development as social work practitioners. Some of you will be embarking on your Bachelor of Social Work, Human Services, Community Work, Social Science, or Counselling degrees and hence much of the language that we use to talk about social work knowledge and practice may be new for you. Others will be studying Masters of Social Work (Qualifying) courses, which means some students will bring a strong knowledge base from other disciplines and/or professions, while still others will have been working in the human services sector for a long time. There are also those who may be experienced practitioners who simply want to immerse themselves in the theory and practice of critical social work. Whatever your background, our goal is to introduce you to the world of social work using a critical approach as our lens in a way that is accessible and meaningful.

■ Critical reflection

Consistent with our focus on a critical approach to social work, we will also be adopting a critical approach to education in the writing of this book. You will have already noticed that a key feature of this will be using critically reflective exercises throughout this text. These are to assist you in beginning to think about your own values, assumptions and experiences that are often taken for granted, and about how these may

Transformative learning

is deep learning that potentially challenges and changes how one sees the world (Ramsdem 1998).

Socialisation is 'the process by which an individual learns the culture of a society and internalises its norms, values and perspectives in order to know how to behave and communicate' (Germov & Poole 2011, p. 522).

influence your practice as a social worker. The aim of the critical reflection exercises is to confront, disturb and unsettle in ways that promote **transformative learning**.

This learning is not simply about reinforcing what you already know, but assisting you to consider alternative perspectives and to open your mind to ways of thinking that you may not have previously contemplated. Our research indicates that students often describe this process as fun, exhilarating and exciting (Morley & Ablett unpub1; Morley & Ablett, unpub2). Many students, however, also find this process really challenging, particularly at first, as all of us have been influenced by dominant messages that we receive through **socialisation**, our peers, the media, and so on. It can also be angering, unsettling and sometimes painful to question the 'truths' that we (often unquestionably) have held dear.

'Donate to stop the Murdoch media' provides a good example of questioning the ways in which dominant ideas can shape our own views of reality: https://secure.avaaz.org/en/murdoch_fr_nd/?bbnQGab&v=28692.

As DiAngelo (1997, p. 6) states: 'Ultimately undoing oppression means that a privileged individual must come to the realization that everything they have seen as "normal", the true, fair, logical and thus, *cherished*, is actually false illogical, and brutally unfair.' Learning, like social work practice, is not simply a technical exercise; nor is it purely intellectual, but also contains practical, moral, ethical and emotional components. As such, we ask you to sit with the many potential moments of discomfort; keep reading, thinking and reflecting, persist in asking questions, and talk with your peers and tutors. Taking a critical approach requires us to become aware of our own values and assumptions and locate ourselves in our learning about social work theory and practice. Our role is to assist you to challenge not only dominant ways of thinking that are created by society, but also personally held values, biases and assumptions that may create limitations or barriers to critical social work practice.

The basic principle of our approach is that effective social work practitioners are formed through engaging in critical analysis of society and critical reflection on self, rather than the passive reception of information or techniques. Both critical analysis and critical reflection are essential for lifelong, self-directed learning and a vital