



Engaging with Social Work

A Critical Introduction

Second edition

Contemporary global challenges require practitioners to confidently analyse the dominant discourses and develop frameworks and strategies for future change. *Engaging with Social Work* equips students with a critical perspective and develops their skills and understanding of social work and human services practice, with an emphasis on the principles of social justice and human rights.

This fully revised second edition includes a new chapter on the emerging challenges and opportunities for social work, covering the prominent topics of rising global inequality, reinvigorated possibilities for addressing violence against women, and threats to the planet, including climate change. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and examples are integrated throughout the text to provide a more in-depth understanding. Reflective exercises, key definitions, case studies and unique practitioners' perspectives are also integrated into each chapter to support learning and engage readers.

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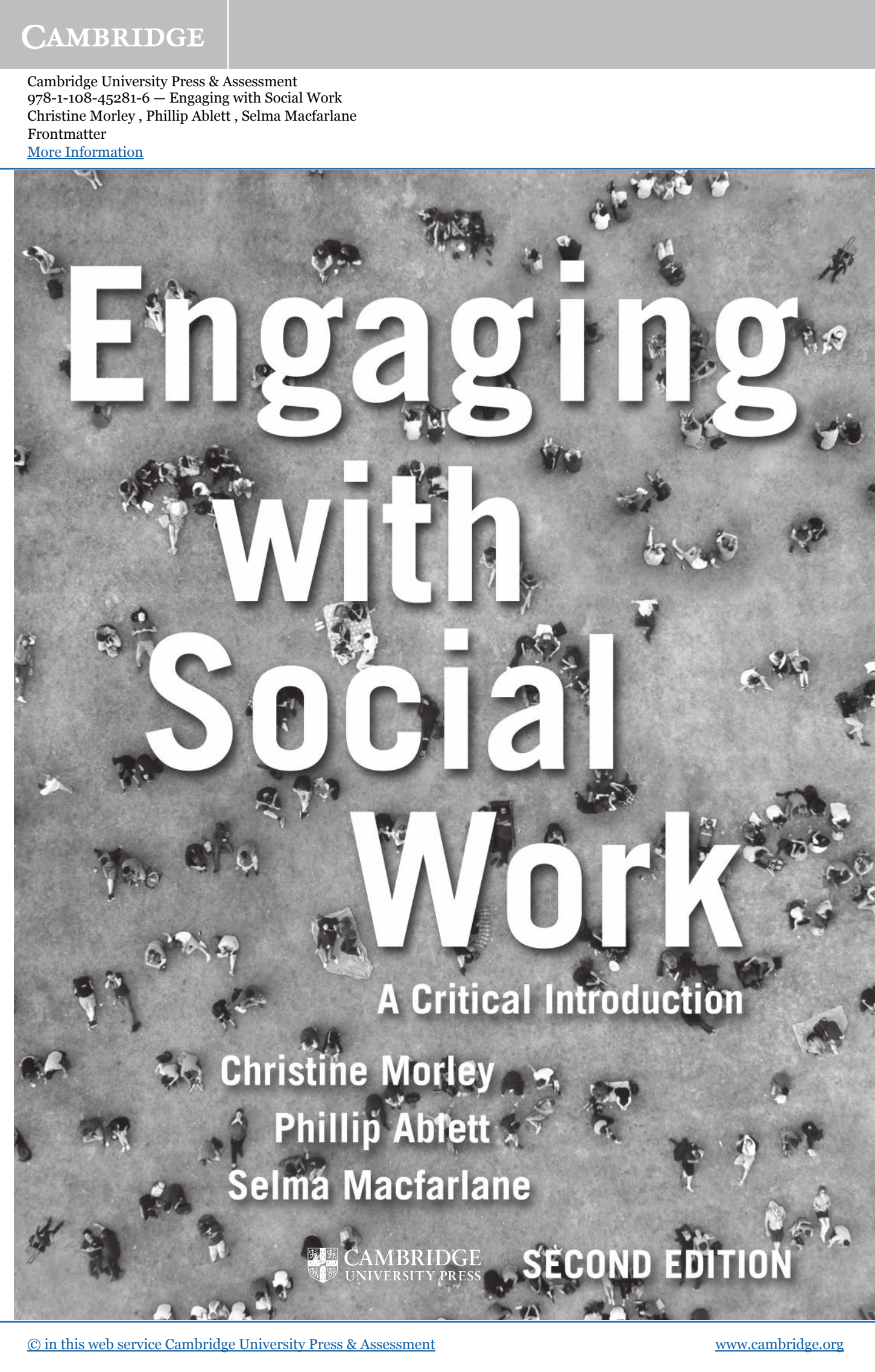
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A Critical Introduction

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*This book is dedicated to critical social workers,
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, now in its second edition. Critical social work is about asking not just 'How can I help?', but also asking 'Why should I help?' 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 with whom they work are suffering – names such as 'do-gooders', 'interfering busybodies', 'dangerous radicals', 'naïve', '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, because 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 a phrase 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 for a long time social workers have accepted these ideas as important and have 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, and the 'radical social work' movement of the 1970s, led largely by British writers such as Paul Corrigan, Peter Leonard, Roy Bailey, Mike Brake and others, mostly influenced by a Marxist perspective. 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, Jude Irwin and Carolyn Noble. Their perspectives vary – many of these authors would

disagree with one another, 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 by which social workers can initiate action to address the structures and discourses of oppression and disadvantage.

This book belongs in this critical tradition. Unlike much of the work of the above-mentioned writers, however, it is aimed at the beginner student. There has been an unspoken agreement in many social work schools that students first need to be acquainted with ‘conventional’ or mainstream social work thinking before being introduced to critical alternatives. Critical social work can thus become an add-on, an afterthought, an interesting sideline that may be accepted or ignored, but that is 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 most 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. Since the first edition, this has only been exacerbated by such factors as the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, authoritarian governments, the rise of right-wing populism, increasing precarity yet more inequality, impending environmental and economic crises, and increased digital surveillance. Critical social work seeks to contribute to solutions that will address these problems, rather than simply accepting this unjust and unsustainable world as the normal context for living and for professional practice. Critical social work in today’s context is needed more than ever.

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 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. Equally, this book's approach must not be read as itself beyond criticism. A critical stance should also apply to the reading of any text, including this one. To accept the idea of being critical, but then not to apply that to what one is reading, is a contradiction; there are, after all, different and sometimes conflicting strands within critical social work that readers must resolve for themselves. Any critical reader will come up with their own version of critical social work that, while incorporating the important themes of this book, does so with different emphases and nuances.

Social work is not a value-neutral profession, or a simple set of technical tasks. It has always been premised on ideas and ideals that 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: the dilemma is 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 in an overt way. 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, far more is possible. Social workers can readily become affected by the dominant individualism and forget the power of collective understanding and collective action.

For many readers, this book will be the start of a journey – an exciting, challenging journey that will not be easy, but that 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
Sydney, June 2018

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AASW	Australian Association of Social Workers
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACE	Adverse Childhood Experience
ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Service
ACWA	Australian Community Workers' Association
AIG	Australian Industry Group
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ALRC	Australian Law Reform Commission
ANZASW	Aotearoa New Zealand Association for Social Workers
ASIC	Australian Securities and Investments Commission
CALD	culturally and linguistically diverse
CASAs	Centres Against Sexual Assault
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
COS	Charitable Organisation Society
CSO	customer services officer
DFV	domestic and family violence
DSM	<i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i>
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FSV	Family Safety Victoria
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
IASSW	International Association of Schools of Social Work
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers

ILO	International Labour Organization
LETS	Local Energy Transfer System
LGBTIQ	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer
NCW	National Council of Women
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NGO	non-government organisation
NRAS	National Registration and Accreditation Scheme
NTEU	National Tertiary Education Union
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PACFA	Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
QUT	Queensland University of Technology
RCFV	Royal Commission into Family Violence
RWG	Radical Women's Group
SACS	Social and Community Services (part of the Australian Services Union)
SWWB	Social Workers Without Borders
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
WAR	Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance
WGEA	Workplace Gender Equality Agency
YPO	Young Presidents' Organization