people. There have been consequences in terms of the development and strengthening of relationship-based practice, as workers spend more and more time undertaking administrative tasks and less time building relationships with people. A social worker employed in a child protection agency reflects on this tension in Reflection 1.1.

REFLECTION 1.1: THE RELATIONAL LENS

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. Children who are assessed as needing care can be removed from their parents. People assessed as being mentally ill can be involuntarily confined. 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

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 (Gilbert 2018; Ruwhiu 2018; Andrews in Chapter 7 in this book). 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

REFLECTION 1.3: THE REFLECTIVE LENS

The social work profession has paid considerable attention to the ways in which cultural 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 strategies that support reflective and reflexive practice – something to which we will return in Chapter 8. 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 cultural 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.

These first three interpretive lenses – relationship, social justice and reflection – have all featured prominently in social work literature and practice. Despite waxing

Friedman and Neuman Allen (2011: 9) also describe how broader systems influence interactional dynamics within the family:

> Within the context of a family there may be forces affecting the parental subsystem that trickle down to affect the children without the children even being aware of them. For example, if a parent is experiencing stress at work and displaces his or her frustration at home by yelling at the children, one may see how events outside the child's immediate environment may exert a pronounced effect on the child's development.

Ideas emerging from Brief Family Therapy and the work of Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974) have also been influential. These writers introduced the notion of first- and second-order change. First-order change is one that 'occurs within a given system which itself remains unchanged', while second-order change produces a change in the system itself (Watzlawick et al. 1974: 10). These ideas have been influential in social work thinking, and have shaped interpretations about the way change occurs both within and outside the immediate family. They provide a broad interpretive framework that enriches our application of theory in practice. In more recent years, two further perspectives have influenced the ways in which we think about change and how we approach theories of practice: the strengths perspective and social constructivism.

Although, in contemporary practice, the notion of building on strengths is not a new idea – it has featured in a variety of ways across a range of perspectives – it emerged first and most powerfully in the social work literature, particularly through the work of Dennis Saleebey (1997) and Charles Rapp (1998). Following these seminal works, other disciplines began to engage with strengths-based ideas – for example, positive psychology was introduced towards the end of the decade. Strengths-based ideas captured the imagination of social workers, who were keen to shift from a negative focus on problems and deficits to one exploring possibilities and solutions. From Kondrat's (2010: 39) perspective, it was developed 'to bring the practice of social work back to its foundation of valuing and collaborating with the client'. We will explore further narratives of strengths and resilience in Chapter 6, but what is important to this discussion is the core strengths-based principle relating to change: that all people have the capacity to grow and change. This process

of change is achieved through collaboration, supported by the belief that people are experts in their own lives and that they have an innate ability to change their lives for the better. This idea positions the social work role as one of professional supporter and facilitator of change. Strongly associated with the strengths-based approach is the concept of social constructivism, which brings with it another set of ideas that have influenced the social work lens of change.

In essence, social constructivism is based on the notion that reality is constructed by equal measures of individual and social factors (Teater 2014). Human experience is defined and constructed by various discourses that can enhance or limit a person's ability to live a full and rewarding life. Like the strengths-based approach, control over change rests with the client: if realities are constructed, then they can be deconstructed. Howe (2009: 89) reports messages from social work clients:

> What they say is that in conversation with warm, interested and empathic social workers they value the chance to control the meaning of their own experience and the meaning that others give to that experience … when they recover feelings of personal control [they] begin to hope.

While there will always be ideas and experience that influence knowledge and practice, in this discussion we have identified what we consider to be four 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 (for example, 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.