Challenging Oppression and Confronting Privilege

A Critical Social Work Approach

Second Edition

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Chapter 1

Theoretical and Conceptual Considerations

Critical social theory conceives human liberation as the highest form of intellectual activity.

—Ben Agger

The Imperative of Theory

Unfortunately, many of those who work and study in the helping professions too often view theory as esoteric, abstract, idealistic, and something people like me discuss in universities. Practice, on the other hand, is considered common-sense, concrete, and occurring in the real world (i.e., outside the ivory towers of universities). Social work is seen by many as essentially carrying out pragmatic and practical tasks. Theory has little direct relevance and actually may obscure the practical nature of social work. Spontaneity and the personal qualities of the worker are often considered more important than theory. New graduates from social services educational programs and students in field placements are often described by some experienced practitioners as naive, idealistic, and in need of 'seasoning' (i.e., practical experience). These experienced practitioners are sceptical of the theory being taught in educational programs, especially progressive theories, and emphasize instead the value of experience (Barbour 1984).

David Howe (1987) contends that this tendency to elevate theoretical ignorance to a level of professional virtue is wrong for two main reasons: (1) theory is part of everyday life—we all use theory; and (2) theoretical ignorance is not a professional virtue but a convenient excuse for sloppy and dishonest practice. We often use theories in our everyday life without being aware that we are doing so. If we see dark clouds and tell ourselves it is going to rain, we have expressed a theory about the relationship between dark clouds and rain. Without such a theory, we would often get wet if we saw clouds and did not prepare for rain, because we did not deduce that it might rain (Williams and McShane 1988). Just as we often use theory in our personal lives without realizing it, so too do social workers often use theory in their professional lives without realizing it.

Howe (1987) takes to task those 'practical folk' social workers who declare that their practice is not related to theory and demonstrates how all social work practice is related to theory. Everyone (including social workers) sees people and their situations in one way or another. These perceptions are never theory-free because they are based on certain fundamental beliefs and assumptions about people, society, and the relationship between the two. These beliefs and assumptions enable workers to make sense of any situation, and making sense is a theory-saturated activity. And just because a social worker cannot imagine any other way of viewing a situation does not mean that his or her perspective is unrelated to theory. It just means that this one taken-for-granted reality (theory) is the worker's entire world of sense. In other words, social workers who call themselves eclectic, pragmatic, or commonsensical base their practice on personally constructed theory (i.e., based on their own experiences) rather than on a systematic construction of theory.

Personally Constructed Theory

Lesley, a social work student, was placed in a child protection agency as her final placement. Part of her orientation to the agency was to meet with several staff members individually and find out what they did. Dan, an experienced practitioner, told Lesley in a somewhat patronizing manner that she should forget all the theory that the School of Social Work taught her. Dan said that he had been practising for years using only his common sense and his experience and that they had served him well. Lesley asked Dan in a respectful way where his common sense and experiences came from. Dan looked perplexed and asked, 'What do you mean?' Lesley replied, 'I was just wondering whether your common sense and experiences, which you say guide your practice, would be the same as those of people who are not male, white, middle-class, and English-speaking.'

Theory carries out four basic functions: description, explanation, prediction, and control and management of events or changes. Social work is practice-based and pursues all four of these functions: it describes phenomena; it attempts to explain what causes them; it predicts future events, including what will happen if certain interventions occur (or do not occur); and it attempts to control and manage events or changes at all levels of human activity (Reynolds 1971). Howe (1987, 17) asserts that 'If drift and purposelessness are to be avoided, practice needs to be set within a clear framework of explanation, the nature of which leads to a well-articulated practice.'

It is important to remember that theories are not laws. They do not contain ironclad guaranteed explanations of social phenomena, because the human condition and

social conditions are too complex to permit the formulation of universal laws. The social sciences do not have any laws (although some economists and members of the business establishment present market forces as economic laws), but they do have some very good theories. Currently, there is much discussion on the nature, dynamics, forms, functions, and causes of oppression, but there is no dominant theory of oppression or dominant approach to anti-oppression. Indeed, an examination of the current literature, along with a look at the curricula of social services educational programs and just listening to practitioners talk about the subject, could lead one to conclude that everyone believes that he or she is writing about or teaching or practising anti-oppressive social work. I am not suggesting that there should be only one theory of oppression or one anti-oppressive approach to practice, but at present anti-oppressive practice seems to be whatever one wants it to be (as happened with the concept of empowerment in the 1980s and 1990s). This unfocused analysis of oppression on the part of social work involves a tacit recognition by most social workers that oppression does indeed exist, but consistent with social work in general, three broad approaches are used to deal with this oppression: (1) helping oppressed persons cope with their oppression; (2) attempting to modify/reform the system so that oppressed persons can better fit into it; and (3) contributing to a total transformation of society. Although the three approaches are not inherently mutually exclusive, most social workers have adopted the first and/or the second approach, while a minority have adopted the third approach.

I agree wholeheartedly with Macey and Moxon (1996), who call for more theoretical and analytical rigour in developing anti-oppressive practice and, conversely, for less attention to theoretical fashion. It is in this spirit that I write this book, which reflects a particular theoretical position (i.e., critical social theory). It is not intended as the only or the definitive treatment of the subject, but its development is meant to be analytical and rigorous.

Social Problems: The Great Paradox of the Helping Professions

The work of the social services sector is to treat, ameliorate, and/or attempt to eliminate the causes and consequences of social problems such as poverty, crime, alienation, homelessness, child abuse/neglect, spousal abuse, runaway adolescents, and so on. However, although there is a long and voluminous social science literature on social problems, there is no agreed-upon definition or explanation of what a social problem is or why it occurs. For example, in their frequently cited book, *The Study of Social Problems*, Rubington and Weinberg (1995) present seven competing sociological perspectives on social problems (outlined below).

In spite of the multiplicity of views, a review of the sociological literature reveals that attempts to define social problems contain several common elements (Fleras 2001; Jamrozik and Nocella 1998). There has to be: (1) a condition that is societal in nature

(2) that affects a significant number of people (3) in ways considered undesirable (4) about which something can be done to rectify the condition. These elements are not self-evident, however, since many questions remain unanswered. Is the condition real or imagined? Does it affect a significant number of people or a number of significant people? Who considers the condition undesirable? What can be done to rectify the condition, and who decides this? Should a social problem imply the primacy of human agency, or should it focus on values and social structures? Should the magnitude of an event or condition be the criterion for calling it a social problem? There are, of course, no standard answers to these or similar questions. Like all social phenomena, social problems are, in whole or in part, social constructs based on subjective, objective, and ideological factors (Berger and Luckmann 1966). As such, social problems will have different definitions, interpretations, and proposed remedies.

Evidence of the contentious and pluralistic nature of social problems lies in Rubington and Weinberg's (1995) presentation of seven current theoretical perspectives on social problems that have been developed over time. They are: (1) the social pathology view; (2) the social disorganization perspective; (3) the value conflict perspective; (4) the deviant behaviour perspective; (5) the labelling perspective; (6) critical theory; and (7) the constructionist perspective. Although a comprehensive explanation of these perspectives on social problems is well beyond the limits of this book, the following presents a brief outline of each of them.

1. The social pathology view originated at the end of the nineteenth century. It attributes social problems to character flaws in the individual experiencing the social problem and uses the medical analogy of a sick or maladjusted person who must be treated. In social work, this approach is often called the medical model (diagnosis of character flaws and a prescription to deal with them) with the goal of 'changing the person.' Although this was the dominant approach to social problems and those experiencing social problems adopted by early social workers, it still remains in various forms today, as illustrated in Table 1.2.
2. The social disorganization perspective developed in the 1920s. It ascribes social problems to the social disorganization that emanates from large changes in people's living and work environments, such as rapid industrialization and urbanization or globalization of the economy. This social disorganization, in turn, causes personal disorganization that is often manifested in alcoholism, family breakdown, domestic violence, and so on. The approach to social problems from this perspective is to provide humanitarian social care to persons disrupted by large changes and to bring equilibrium back to the system by way of minor social reforms. In other words, its purpose is to fine-tune rather than overhaul the system. General systems theory and ecological models are correlates of this perspective.
3. The value conflict perspective developed in the 1930s as a result of the Great Depression. It attributes social problems to competing interests, differential

access to resources, and other social conflicts that arise in a pluralistic society. As in any competition, there are winners and losers. The resolution of social problems from this perspective is to ensure that no group in society is deprived of opportunities and resources and that everyone is subject to the same rules (even though the rules are made by and favour the dominant group).

4. The deviant behaviour perspective became popular in the 1950s and 1960s when law and order seemed to be the dominant social problem. It explains social deviance as the means for many (disadvantaged) people to overcome the structural barriers to achieving culturally propagated and cherished social goals such as the American (or Canadian or Australian) 'dream.' Social deviance, then, is seen as a form of adaptation to structural arrangements that preclude the achievement of social goals and expectations by legitimate and acceptable ways. The strategy to combat social problems from this perspective is to open up the opportunity structures to persons who are disadvantaged by social structures.
5. The labelling perspective developed in the 1950s. It turned attention away from deviant acts or deviant people towards those who had the power to define or label certain conduct or people as deviant. The study of social problems from this perspective focuses on how powerful people (including professionals) can preserve their privileged social positions by authoritatively defining (i.e., labelling) social reality as good/normal or bad/deviant.
6. Critical theory had its origins in the 1930s but became prominent in the 1970s with respect to the study of social problems. It attributes social problems to social structures that favour certain groups in society and oppress others along lines of class, race, gender, and so on. The oppressed or subordinate groups are susceptible to all manner of social problems. The solution is to transform society into one in which social equality replaces dominant–subordinate relationships.
7. The constructionist perspective is an elaboration and extension of the labelling perspective. It is applied to a wide range of social phenomena today, including social problems. However, it does not focus on the social condition that is perceived as a social problem but on the processes through which social phenomena and social problems are constructed and interpreted. Much attention is given both to the social actors who make claims that a particular condition constitutes a social problem and to the effects of such claims. The identification of social problems is therefore a 'claims-making activity' (Fleras 2001; Spector and Kitsuse 1987). By identifying those who make their claims stick, the constructionist perspective enables the identification of some aspects of the power structure in society (Jamrozik and Nocella 1998).

Although postmodernism has not developed a general perspective on social problems, Foucault's analysis of criminology converges with labelling theory and constructionism in that he argues that criminology is a practice or discourse that creates the category of criminality (Anleu 1999). Given postmodernism's rejection of grand

theories or generalized explanations, it remains to be seen whether or not it can ever develop a 'general' perspective on social problems. Jamrozik and Nocella (1998) contend that postmodernism has limited value for the study of social problems because the notions of class division and of an overriding structure of inequality are not accepted. Conversely, postmodernists such as Bauman (1998) and Lyman (1995) would argue that the imposition of an interpretation of a social problem might not take into account the subjective awareness of those persons judged to be experiencing social problems. Surely the views and experiences of those negatively affected by social problems would constitute an important element in the study and treatment of social problems.

What perspective of social problems, then, does this book adopt? My approach is not to adopt one particular perspective and then to defend it to the death. Rather, it is to select aspects of different perspectives (mainly conflict and social constructionist informed by postmodern insights) without sacrificing consistency and compatibility. This approach is similar to the one espoused by Fleras (2001, 3):

> Social problems are thought to involve conditions that are socially constructed and contested, yet reflect objective reality; vary over time and place; frequently exhibit a life-cycle from birth to demise to rebirth; are inseparable from the broader context in which they are located; and respond differently to treatment.

Unlike the sociological literature, there is a dearth of discussion or explanation of the nature and causes of social problems in the social work literature. David Gil (2004) makes the point that many social work authors seem to view social problems as a normal feature of society to be dealt with by social policy measures and/or social work practice. He contends that social problems are not normal features of any society but are consequences of societies characterized by hierarchy, inequality, and oppression. It is an unfortunate paradox that the helping professions in general, and social work in particular, which deal with the victims of social problems on a daily basis, tend to accept social ills as an inherently problematic given. Consequently, they fail to provide a general definition of or explanation for social problems. For example, in a recent content analysis study of 14 introductory American social work textbooks[1] published between 1988 and 1997, Wachholz and Mullaly (2000) found no discussion of the concept, nature, or explanation of social problems, although most of the books contained entire chapters on working with people experiencing problems of housing, domestic violence, unemployment, poor health, poverty, racism, and so on. In the absence of any theories or discussions on the nature and causes of social problems, social workers in general, and beginning social work students in particular, will tend to adopt the prevailing lay or agency-based definitions of social problems, which have traditionally been victim-blaming (Rose and Black 1985). This is not to say that social work or other social services areas are totally devoid of any literature or theoretical work that discusses the nature, causes, and effects of social problems. Explanatory accounts of social problems may be found in the social services literature, but only in an exceptional and inconsistent way.

Of the various theories and perspectives that do exist in the social work literature, there are three major competing but unequally held explanations for the existence of social problems in liberal democratic societies such as Canada, Australia, and the United States (Coates 1991; Mullaly 2007). Broadly speaking, they include the personal deficiency explanation, which corresponds to the social pathology view and which was the dominant social work view up to the 1960s and 70s; the liberal-humanist explanation, which corresponds to the social disorganization and deviant behaviour views and which is the dominant social work view today (it includes general systems theory and ecological approaches); and the social conflict (or change) explanations, which correspond to the critical and labelling views and which underpin transformative social work approaches such as feminist social work, structural social work, and anti-oppressive social work. This does not mean that other perspectives are entirely absent, but these three perspectives are currently dominant in the social work literature.

Parking Lots and Social Problems

A few years ago, I was involved in the social policy controversy regarding workfare programs for unemployed social assistance recipients (Mullaly 1995, 1997b; McFarland and Mullaly 1996). It seemed to me that the attitudes towards workfare and unemployed persons corresponded with the above three explanations of social problems. These perspectives were particularly evident in a media panel discussion on workfare in which I participated. One panel member attributed people's unemployment to unemployed persons being irresponsible, shy or fearful of work, and dependent on social assistance and therefore advocated a tough, mandatory, and simple 'work-for-welfare' scheme. A second panel member attributed people's unemployment to lack of education and job skills and advocated a workfare program that would emphasize training and job search counselling. My position was that as long as there were more people looking for and needing work than there were jobs, then workfare would not decrease unemployment or reduce welfare costs. I presented the analogy of a parking lot to make my point. If you have a parking lot that holds 100 cars and 120 cars to be parked there, then the attendants may shift cars in and out of the lot all day, but there will still be 20 cars outside the lot unless it is expanded. I argued that one could blame unemployed people for unemployment or blame unemployment on a lack of skills and education, but until the labour market (like the parking lot) was enlarged enough to accommodate everyone who needed and wanted work, there would always be people left outside of it. And workfare does nothing to make the labour market bigger.

Although classification schemes of any kind tend to be arbitrary to a degree, they can be helpful in making some sense of what Carniol (1979) calls 'the jumble of confusion' taught to social work students in the form of an eclectic knowledge base. How do students make sense of social problems when there are so many competing perspectives but so little discussion or analysis or definition of the nature of social problems in the classroom or in the literature? Since many writers of social work textbooks seem to take societal ills as a given, the only question addressed in the books is how to tackle them. And since there are so many competing answers to this question, the student and/or worker is continuously confronted with the 'jumble of confusion.' The classification scheme used here to make sense of social theory in general and social problems in particular consists of two competing perspectives of society and social problems: the order perspective and the conflict (or change) perspective.[2] Order theories are sometimes called mainstream, conservative, or traditional, while change theories are sometimes called radical, critical, progressive, or conflict. Order theories focus on and support the current social order, while critical/change theories focus on the lack of social justice in a society and lead us to change it.

Order and Conflict/Change Perspectives

Order and change perspectives represent two opposing views on the nature of people, society, and social problems. The former views society as orderly, stable, and unified by shared culture, values, and a consensus on its form and institutions. The latter views society as a continually contested struggle among groups with opposing views and interests. From a change perspective, society is held together not by consensus but by differential control of resources and political power. Individuals or groups who benefit from the maintenance of the status quo employ order models of society and social problems, whereas dissident or subordinate groups, striving to institutionalize new claims on society, favour a conflict or change analysis (e.g., Horton 1966; Reasons and Perdue 1981).

Reasons and Perdue have set forth two sets of logically interrelated and essential assumptions, one underpinning the order view of society and one underpinning the change view. Table 1.1 contains a modified version of both sets of assumptions, which concern: (1) the nature of human existence, (2) the nature of society, (3) the nature of the relationship between the two, and (4) the nature of social problems. It is important to note that the order and change perspectives are not absolute categories requiring that people fall into one or the other. Most people will hold views that belong to both sets of perspectives. For example, progressive social workers can utilize psychodynamic and/or systems theories in their practice. The difference is that the progressive social worker would recognize the limitations of order theories in that they do not adequately deal with structural variables such as class, race, and gender, nor do they adequately deal with power relations or conflict. Order and conflict/change perspectives represent two ideal types or ends of a continuum along which

there is fluidity back and forth rather than two discrete categories with impenetrable boundaries between them (i.e., a dualism or binary).

Order Perspective

The order perspective, which currently dominates social thought in Anglo democracies, is associated with Durkheim and Weber and more recently with Talcott Parsons. Parsons is usually regarded as the founder of an explicitly functionalist theory of society (McDaniel and Agger 1984), which is synonymous with a systems analysis (i.e., structural–functional analysis) of society and social problems (Horton 1966).

Society. Any society is comprised of people who are by nature competitive, acquisitive, self-absorbed, individualistic, and therefore predisposed towards disorder. To establish and maintain order, enduring social institutions are created and rules (laws) established so that human interaction can be regulated. In this way, all parts of society can be coordinated so that members of society and society's organizations and institutions all contribute to the support, maintenance, and stability of the social system. The basic assumption is that there is agreement on the values and rules of society so that they, along with the social institutions regulating the system, must be learned, respected, and revered by everyone. 'We learn what is expected of us in the family, at school, in the workplace and through the media' (Howe 1987, 35).

Social problems. If a person does not behave in ways expected of, say, a parent, a wage-earner, or a law-abiding citizen, it is assumed that something went wrong in that person's socialization process. To guard itself against disequilibrium, society will attempt to return the person to normal functioning through its social institutions. If society's official agents, such as teachers, social workers, or police, fail to correct or control the malfunctioning or out-of-step person, then he or she may have to be removed from society and the individual's behaviour neutralized by institutionalization. This removes a threat to social stability and also serves as an example to other would-be non-conformists and deviants.

Because the order view assumes that there is essential agreement among members of society on the nature of the prevailing institutions and dominant ideology, their existence is taken for granted and the existing order legitimated (Reasons and Perdue 1981). And because these institutions and their supporting ideology fend off disequilibrium, discontinuity, and disorder of the system, their preservation becomes a social imperative. The assumption that social institutions are good, necessary, and agreed to, as well as the belief that people are contentious and must be controlled, leads order theorists to conclude that social problems are best described and understood by focusing on lower levels or plateaus of society rather than on the societal or structural level. In other words, order theorists look at three levels of society for describing, analyzing, and explaining social problems: (1) the individual level, (2) the family level, and (3) the subculture level (Reasons and Perdue 1981).

Table 1.1 Assumptions of Order and Conflict Perspectives

	Order	Conflict/Change
Beliefs about human beings	competitive, contentious, individualistic, acquisitive	co-operative, collective, social
Nature of social institutions	must endure and regulate human interactions (political,economic, educational, religious, family) to avoid disorder	dynamic, with no sacred standing; facilitate economic co-operation, sharing, and common interests
Nature of society	consists of interdependent and integrated institutions and a supportive ideological base; viewed as an organism or system with each part contributing to the maintenance of the whole	in a society of structural inequality, the social nature of human existence is denied, with social institutions seen as serving private rather than public interests
Continuity of social institutions	prevail because of agreement (consensus) among society's members	prevail in a society marked by dominant–subordinate relations because of control and coercion
Nature of relationship between people and society	members are expected to conform and adapt to consensus-based social arrangements	acceptance, conformity, and adaptation to a coercive and hierarchical social order is questioned; faulty socialization is more a matter of discriminatory institutions and defective rules that promote the interests of the dominant group
Nature of social problems	socialization will occasionally fail whereby reverence for institutions and respect for rules will not be learned; such occurrence on a large scale is a social problem	institutions, ideology, and social processes and practices must be changed to protect the social nature of human existence and promote the celebration of cultural diversity
Approach to social problems	a) behaviour must be changed through resocialization (rehabilitation, counselling) or neutralized through formal systems of state control (criminal law, prisons, asylums, etc.) b) social reform can only involve minor adjustments that are consistent with the nature of the existing system	behavioural change can only involve minor adjustments consistent with co-operative and collective nature of society; massive commitment to behavioural change is a form of blaming the victim
Social work theories and approaches	psychodynamic, systems, ecological, behavioural, problem-solving, strengths perspective	feminist, radical, structural, anti-racist, narrative therapy, just therapy, anti-oppressive

At the individual level, it is believed that the source of social problems lies within the person himself or herself. This is consistent with the social pathology view of social problems. A person is not conforming to the rules, norms, and expectations of society because of some individual trait. Poverty, mental illness, drug addiction, and criminal activity are blamed on supposed personal defects. As Reasons and Perdue point out, at the individual level social problems are personalized. Poverty and crime, for example, are blamed on some defect of the person, and what emerges is 'a biographical portrait that separates the individual from society' (1981, 8). Individuals are carefully scrutinized (diagnosed, assessed) to discover the explanation for the problem.

Examples of this level of explanation would include Cesare Lombroso's explanation of criminal activity as the result of persons who were physically distinct from non-criminals and Freud's psychoanalytic theory in which intra-psychic phenomena were hypothesized as the determinants of maladjusted behaviour. Much of social work's earlier casework and psychodynamic practices were based on individual explanations for social problems. Sociobiology is a contemporary development of a theory that holds that genetic information explains social behaviour. For example, in 1988 a psychology professor at the University of Western Ontario in Canada created international controversy when he published an article alleging that race was connected to intelligence, sexual restraint, and personality, among other personal characteristics (Rushton 1988).

Most order theorists (and many social workers), because they operate from a systems perspective or employ an ecological model when dealing with social problems, are not satisfied with individual levels of explanations for social problems. From this comes the liberal-humanist concept of social disorganization. This concept is based on the notion that the present liberal–capitalist social order contains some defects that create disorganization and bring harm to some people and that it is the job of social services workers to rectify these defects (i.e., to fix the parts of society not working properly so that society can work better and is able to persist). Systems theory and an ecological approach to social work, however, do not try to change the fundamental (oppressive) nature of the system but deal with individuals and/or environmental influences within the system. The types of environmental influences most frequently dealt with by 'order social workers' are the family and the subculture.

The family as an important social unit has received enormous attention from social workers and others since the early 1960s. Family disorganization has been cited as an explanation for most of the social problems with which social workers deal. The family is routinely analyzed in an attempt to identify its contribution to situations of poverty, juvenile delinquency, mental illness, alcoholism, family violence, poor school performance, and so on. Family therapy was at one time (and still is, by some social workers) viewed as almost a panacea to society's problems, and 'family dysfunction' replaced 'individual pathology' as the popular explanation for social problems (but did not eliminate individualistic explanations). Rather than blaming social problems on some defect of the person, as neo-conservatives would, order theorists and social workers

saw the source of problems as lying within the family and attributed these problems to poor parenting, undeveloped communication skills, and the like—in other words, on 'maladaptive' or 'dysfunctional' families. Social problems became family problems.

Explanations for social problems at the subcultural level of society focus on various categories of people who are distinct from the larger majority population by reason of such features as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Subculture theorists believe that these subcultural groups have distinctive values that put them at a disadvantage to or in conflict with the larger or dominant culture (Reasons and Perdue 1981). Social problems are not blamed on a defective individual or a dysfunctional family but are attributed to an inferior culture. Today, many mainstream explanations for social problems tend to blame one's culture (i.e., cultures associated with race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and so on or any combination of these factors) (Dant 2003; Dominelli 2002; Gil 1998; Nelson and McPherson 2003; van Wormer 2004).

An example of a subcultural theory is the 'culture of poverty,' or what is often termed 'the cycle of poverty theory,' which attempts to explain poverty by assuming that there are common traits among poor people (feelings of inferiority, apathy, dependence, fatalism, little sense of deferred gratification). These traits are said to be passed on to subsequent generations through the process of socialization so that by the time poor children are of school age, they have internalized the basic traits of poverty and are not psychologically prepared to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. Little, if any, thought is given in this theory to the possibility that many of these so-called traits of poor people are actually adaptations and adjustments on the part of the poor to cope with poverty rather than actual causes of poverty.

Another subcultural theory is the 'cultural deprivation theory,' which attempts to explain the situation of Aboriginal peoples and other minority groups. This theory attributes the second-class status of indigenous people and other minority groups to an inferior culture. In other words, Aboriginal culture is inadequate to prepare Aboriginal persons to function properly (successfully) in the larger society. Examples include: Aboriginal parents do not read to their children; they do not take vacations abroad to expand their children's horizons; motivation for school achievement or for work is low; Aboriginals have no concept of the importance of time; welfare and alcoholism are part of this inferior culture. The inevitable conclusion of this subcultural theory is that children of Aboriginal ancestry are culturally deprived. Once so labelled, of course, they are expected to fail in school and often do.

Both of the above subcultural explanations for social problems are part of a larger process of 'blaming the victim.' William Ryan (1976) outlines this process:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Study those affected by the problem and discover how they are different from the rest of society.
3. Define the differences, which are in fact often the effects of injustice and discrimination, as the causes of the social problem.

4. Assign a government bureaucrat to invent a humanitarian action program to correct the differences by changing the people affected by the problem.

Thus, the solution to social problems originating at the subcultural level is to try to untangle, correct, and make up for the deficiencies of these inferior cultures by altering the behaviours of the people themselves. This strategy involves counselling, resocialization, cultural enhancement services, upgrading, rehabilitation, and community education programs. In effect, people are worked on so that they can better fit into the mainstream, into the culture of the majority or dominant group. This process of acculturation or assimilation leaves society's social institutions unchanged. It is considered better to change a minority culture than to change social institutions so that they can accommodate the minority culture.

Social work and the order perspective. Most current social work theories and practices are based on the order perspective. Major activities are personal reform, limited social reform, and advocacy, all of which are carried out in an effort to humanize capitalism, not to change it (Mullaly 1997a). The major theories—psychoanalytic, family therapies, general systems theory, and the ecological approach—all emanate from the order perspective. In the case of psychoanalytic theory, the major task, clearly, is personal reform. In the case of family therapy and general systems theory, the major task is to repair the harm or disruption that has upset the healthy functioning of the family or the equilibrium of the system. The ecological approach aims to find the best fit between the person and the system. In none of these theories or approaches is any thought given to the possibility that the source of the problem lies not within the system but is the system itself. This critical omission is the Achilles heel of conventional, mainstream social work carried out in the order tradition.

This is not to say that progressive social workers would never use general systems theory or the ecological approach. These perspectives are useful in that they provide the social worker with a snapshot of the situation with which they are dealing. They can identify the relevant actors and organizations in an individual's life situation and help to clarify the relationships among them. However, by themselves they only describe situations and do not provide any causal explanations for a problem or situation. Although these approaches may include the person's immediate environment in their examination of a particular situation, they do not deal with larger-order structural phenomena. By emphasizing only those aspects of the social environment considered amenable to social work practice, systems theory and the ecological approach ignore broader structural social forces, and this in effect reinforces social inequality (Gould 1987).

Conflict/Change Perspective

The harmony and consensus extolled in the order perspective as characterizing society are not recognized in the conflict/change perspective. Or if they are, they are seen as the result of an illusion created by the dominant group in society to lead the less powerful into accepting an unequal social order in which the dominant group is

the main beneficiary (Howe 1987). The conflict or change perspective is strongly identified with critical theory, which attributes social problems to social structures, processes, and practices that favour certain groups in society and oppress others along lines of class, race, gender, age, and so on. Examples of critical theory (or theories) are feminism, Marxism, political economy, anti-racism, the structural approach, post-colonialism, and anti-oppression.

Society. Conflict theorists accept the view of society as a system of interrelated parts but do not believe that the parts are held together by consensus and shared interests and values. Rather, they see society comprising inherently opposing groups with respect to interests, values, and expectations. These groups compete for resources and power, and those who win exercise their control and power by imposing an ideological world view that holds capitalism as the best of all economic systems (McDaniel and Agger 1984). The ideological climate or hegemony established by the dominant group involves the formulation of laws, the creation of social institutions, and the distribution of ideas that favour the dominant group. This results in structured inequality marked by vast differences in wealth, status, and power, and consequently the social nature of human existence is denied (Reasons and Perdue 1981).

Conflict theorists do not accept the present social order. They want radical change, reasoning that a truly just order can only come about through the radical reorganization of society, not through the extension of social control (Horton 1966). Conflict theorists' vision of society is one in which a new set of social relations is attained, with no one group dominating another (Howe 1987).

Social problems. Conflict theorists do not believe that social problems normally[3] originate within the individual, the family, or the subculture, as do order theorists, but rather 'arise from the exploitive and alienating practices of dominant groups' (Horton 1966, 704). Given the nature of a society marked by inequality and structured along lines of class, gender, race, age, and ability/disability, the explanation for social problems must lie at a higher societal plane than those perceived by order theorists. For conflict theorists, the structural level is where social problems are more realistically described, analyzed, and explained (Reasons and Perdue 1981). This level includes society's institutions and its supportive ideology. At this level a social problem is defined as:

> a condition that involves the social injury of people on a broad scale. The injury may be physical in manifestation (as with disease stemming from a health service geared to income), social-psychological (as with alienation), economic (as with poverty), political (as with the oppression of dissident groups), or intellectual (as with nonexistent or inadequate education). Social problems ensue from institutional defects and are not to be best interpreted or understood through individuals, families, or subcultures. Thus, the social problem as such is not an aberration but rather a normal consequence of the way in which a society is organized [Reasons and Perdue 1981, 12].

Reasons and Perdue point out that the above definition of social problems does not mean that conflict theorists ignore individuals, families, and subcultures as areas for study. The difference is that conflict theorists will always connect these societal planes with the broader structural order of society. In other words, the conflict theorist will always look to public issues (i.e., social institutions and their supportive ideology) as the source of private troubles. And because social problems are rooted in the social order, they cannot be resolved by technical or administrative reforms. They can only be resolved by a massive reorganization or transformation of the social system. In sum, the major postulates of the conflict perspective are:

- Society is the setting within which various struggles occur among different groups whose interests, values, and behaviours conflict with one another.
- The state is an important agent participating in the struggle on the side of the powerful groups.
- Social inequality is a result of coercive institutions that legitimate force, fraud, and inheritance as the major means of obtaining rights and privileges.
- Social inequality is a chief source of conflict.
- The state and the law are instruments of oppression controlled and used by the dominant groups for their own benefit.
- Classes are social groups with distinctive interests that inevitably bring them into conflict with other groups with opposed interests. (Reasons and Perdue 1981, 13–14)

Social work and the conflict perspective. The conflict-oriented social services worker must fight for change at all social, economic, and political levels. A conflict analysis of society reveals who is benefiting from established social arrangements; it shows how domination is maintained; and it suggests what must be done to bring about changes in power and resources. To assist the victims of an oppressive social order, the social worker needs to know who holds the power, whose interests are being served by maintaining the status quo, and what devices are being used to keep things as they are (Howe 1987).

As suggested above, the conflict perspective of social problems does not preclude social intervention at the individual, family, and subcultural levels. The difference between the mainstream and conflict social services worker is that instead of dealing with each of these levels separately, the conflict worker in every case would search for a connection between people's private troubles and the probable structural source of these troubles. Rather than looking to the individual or family or subculture for the source of distress, the conflict worker—with the person or group experiencing the distress—would seek to understand how the larger social order perpetrates and perpetuates problems. Although the conflict practitioner would do many of the same things as the order practitioner, many differences emanate from the different explanations each holds about the nature of society and for social problems. These differences will be highlighted throughout this book.

Whereas the order perspective underpins much of traditional social services work, the conflict perspective underpins progressive forms of social work practice. For example, most feminists subscribe to the view that society is set up and operates in ways that privilege males (the dominant group) over females (the subordinate group). Correspondingly, anti-racist social workers hold that our laws, social institutions, and ideological climate favour white people as the dominant group over people of colour. Similar positions of privilege are enjoyed by dominant groups with respect to class, sexuality, age, ability, and so on. Conversely, the subordinate groups experience social problems in greater number and with more severity than their privileged counterparts. In other words, dominant groups enjoy their privilege at the expense of subordinate groups by way of an oppressive system of social relations and an unjust set of social conditions (Gil 1998).

The fundamental argument underpinning the conflict perspective of society in general, and anti-oppressive social work in particular, is that 'the contemporary social order is characterized by a range of social divisions (class, race, gender, age, disability and so on) that both embody and engender inequality, discrimination, and oppression' (Thompson 1998, 3). In their development of anti-oppressive practice using the law, Dalrymple and Burke support this argument. They point out that we live in a society characterized by difference but that differences are not always regarded positively. 'Differences are used to exclude rather than include. This is because relationships within society are the result of the exercise of power on individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels' (Dalrymple and Burke 1995, 8). From the conflict perspective, then, oppression—not individual deficiency or social disorganization—is the major cause of and explanation for social problems. This, of course, necessitates an anti-oppressive form of social work practice to deal with these problems in any meaningful way. Such a practice requires an understanding of the nature of oppression, its dynamics, the social and political functions it carries out in the interests of the dominant groups, its effects on oppressed persons, and the ways that oppressed people cope with and/or resist their oppression. These are some of the topics discussed in the next chapter.

Critical Social Theory

The conflict perspective is part of a larger body of social theory known as critical social theory (or critical theory). Critical social theory is a macro theory that examines social structures, institutions, policies, practices, and processes with respect to how they treat all groups in society; it contains an explanation for social problems and a political practice to deal with them. One of the foremost writers on critical social theory today, Douglas Kellner, contends that the job of critical theorists is to provide criticisms and alternatives to traditional or mainstream social theory. Critical theory is motivated by an interest in those who are oppressed, is informed by a critique of domination, and is driven by a goal of liberation (Kellner 1989). It is concerned with moving from a society characterized by exploitation, inequality, and oppression to one that is emancipatory and free from domination.

Karl Marx is arguably the founder of critical social theory. His entire intellectual life was devoted to showing how capitalism was both inhuman and unworkable, with the intention of changing it. His ideas and emancipatory intentions with respect to class and capitalism have been extended by such notable theorists as Lukács, Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, and its heir apparent, Jürgen Habermas (see Agger 2006; Jay 1973). This analysis has been further extended into non-class forms of oppression by feminists, critical race theorists, gay and lesbian liberation writers, cultural studies, and post-colonial theorists. One writer defines critical social theory in the following way:

> A critical theory of society is defined as a theory having practical intent. As its name suggests, it is critical of existing social and political institutions and practices, but the criticisms it levels are not intended to show how present society is unjust, only to leave everything as it is. A critical theory of society is understood by its advocates as playing a crucial role in changing society. In this, the link between social theory and political practice is perhaps the defining characteristic of critical theory, for a critical theory without a practical dimension would be bankrupt on its own terms [S. Leonard 1990, 3].

Critical theory, then, is different from most social science theory constructed according to the canons of scientific inquiry. Traditional social theory may describe and explain social processes and practices, but it is quite independent of any attempts at political practice to change the social processes and practices that are exploitative and discriminatory. Its commitment is to the advancement of knowledge by attempting to understand the world as it really is. Conversely, critical theory is committed to changing the world 'in ways that can help "emancipate" those on the margins of society' (Leonard 1990, xiii). Agger (1998, 15) sums it up best when he says that critical social theory 'conceives human liberation as the highest purpose of intellectual activity.'

Stephen Leonard (1990) outlines three undertakings of a critical social theory: (1) it must locate the sources of domination in actual social practices; (2) it must present an alternative vision (or at least an outline) of a life free from such domination; and (3) it must translate these tasks in a form that is intelligible to those who are oppressed in society. Agger (1998) argues that for a theory to be considered a critical theory, it must have (to some degree) the following features:

- It opposes positivism because knowledge is an active construction by scientists and theorists who necessarily make assumptions about the worlds they study and thus are not strictly value-free.
- It attempts to raise consciousness[4] about present domination, exploitation, and oppression and to demonstrate the possibility of a future society free of these phenomena.
- It argues that oppression is structural—that people's everyday lives are affected by politics, economics, culture, discourse, gender, race, and so on.

- It also argues that structures of oppression are reproduced through the internalization of dominant–subordinate relationships, and it attempts to cut through this internalization of oppression by emphasizing the power of agency, both personal and collective, to transform society.
- It avoids determinism and endorses voluntarism by arguing that social change begins in people's everyday lives—in their family roles, workplace, consumer patterns, and so on.
- It rejects economic determinism by conceptualizing a dialectical relationship between structure and agency—structure conditions everyday life, but knowledge of structure can help people change social conditions.
- It holds people responsible for their own liberation and warns against any revolutionary expediency of oppressing others in the name of some future liberation.

To Agger's set of critical theory beliefs, Tim Dant (2003, 163) adds another that emphasizes culture and further clarifies the nature and political intent of critical theory:

- The lives of individual human beings in modern societies are unnecessarily dominated, constrained, and restricted, in terms of both what they can do and what they can think, by the cultural forms through which they must live their lives together as a society.
- These restrictions are not the result of natural or supernatural forces but the product of human history.
- These restrictions may have their origins in the patterns of economic arrangements for collectively meeting material needs that Marx describes as 'capitalism,' but they are sustained, refined, and experienced at the level of culture—that is, as ideas, signs, images, beliefs, rules, injunctions, and so on.
- These restrictions, which constitute a degree of 'unfreedom,' could be undone to liberate individual lives without creating chaos or increasing the restrictions on the lives of other people.
- The way by which these restrictions can best be undone is by collective recognition and rejection of them through cultural means—through refusal to accept what is taken for granted, resisting what is not desired, criticizing and negating received ideas and values that are presented as universal.
- The theoretical strategy of 'critique' exposes the cultural form of constraints and restrictions in a way that can contribute to their recognition and rejection.

Critical social theory is not a singular or unified body of thought. Rather, it is a theory cluster. Several current examples of theory contain enough of the above characteristics to be considered a critical theory—liberation theology, Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, some forms (i.e., transformative forms) of feminist theory, structural

social work theory, and post-colonial theory. Some critical social theories focus on a singular form of oppression, while others adopt an umbrella approach and include all sources and forms of oppression in a single framework. Examples of the former are feminism, which perceives patriarchy as the source of women's oppression; critical race theory, which perceives racism as the cause of oppression of people of colour; and queer theory, which perceives heterosexism as the fundamental cause of homophobia. Theorists in the latter category include cultural studies theorists, who believe that oppression occurs because of a dominant or ruling culture; structural social work theorists, who believe that it is mainly the social structures that oppress by privileging dominant groups over subordinate groups; and anti-oppressive theorists, who believe that all subordinate groups are oppressed on personal, cultural, and institutional levels by visible and invisible structures and by conscious and unconscious means.

My own treatment of oppression and anti-oppression falls unambiguously in the critical social theory cluster. No attempt is made to formulate an overarching (or totalizing) theory of oppression, because one theory cannot possibly account for the many forms and sources of oppression, their dynamics and impacts, their interactions and internalizations, their subjective and objective aspects, and so on. And as Chris Weedon (1997) points out, theory itself is constantly in process. This book focuses on theories and ideas that seem to have explanatory power at this point to help us better understand the oppressive social structures, processes, and practices within which we live and our position within them. In the critical social theory tradition, the political aim of this understanding is to change these structures, processes, and practices.

Critical Social Work Theory

Critical social work theories, perspectives, and approaches fall within the critical social theory camp. They are all critical of existing systems of social arrangements as unjust (and oppressive); they have a vision of a society based on a set of egalitarian values; and they are committed to social work practices to move from the current unjust society to one that is free of dominant–subordinate relations. Table 1.2 presents some selected social work perspectives or approaches indicating those that are order- or consensus-based and those that are conflict- or change-based. Other terms for order- or consensus-based approaches are mainstream, conventional, or traditional, whereas other terms for conflict- or change-based approaches are progressive, critical, or transformative. As described above in the section Order Perspective, the personal change approaches (see Table 1.2) seek to bring about change in the person or in the family as the way to deal with social problems. The person-in-the-environment approach assumes that there is a 'goodness-of-fit' between the individual and society and that the job of social work is to find this fit by changing the person and/or bringing about change in the immediate environment that the individual inhabits. And although change in one's environment may occur, it is usually limited change—for example, removal of a family member or a change in a policy or the establishment of a program to better accommodate the

individual's needs. However, in the final analysis, no substantive change has been made to the larger system or structures of society that tend to favour the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups. Amelioration may have taken place, but fundamental social change has not.

Historically, tension has existed between social workers who subscribe to the order- or consensus-based approaches and those who subscribe to social transformative approaches. The conventional or mainstream group was seen by its social change counterparts as conforming to established institutions, thus reinforcing, supporting, and defending the very system that caused problems for individuals and families in the first place. The progressive or change-based group was seen by its counterpart as idealistic and unrealistic with no workable solutions for social problems, because although the system might not be perfect, mainstream social workers believed it was the best one possible and that it could not be transformed but only fine-tuned to help meet human need.

In contrast to the conventional view, the progressive or critical view does not hold that our present social institutions are capable of adequately meeting human need. Social workers holding this view are quick to point out that in spite of the existence of a social welfare state as well as social work interventions over most of the past century, social problems are not decreasing but on the contrary appear to be worsening. They also point to the growing gap between rich and poor, to the worsening plight of traditionally disadvantaged groups in the face of globalization, to the resurrection of conservatism, and to the social control functions of welfare programs and social work practice as proof that the present set of social arrangements does not work for large numbers of people. Although there has always been a progressive or radical contingent within social work, theirs has been a minority voice. However, the contingent's numbers have been growing over the past three decades, as have their challenges to the conventional view. For example, whereas only a few radical or progressive social work courses were offered in Canadian schools of social work 30 years ago, today the standards of accreditation of the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work, now called the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), require that schools of social work demonstrate their commitment to social justice and anti-oppressive social work in their curricula, admissions, faculty complements, policies, and procedures. Table 1.2 illustrates the breadth and rich diversity of progressive social work approaches, all of which share the goal of social transformation but with different emphases. All are based on and contribute to the larger field of critical social theory.

It is worth noting that general systems theory and the ecological approach, which are still considered core social work theory in many social work programs and by many social work practitioners, are not even theories. A theory by definition has descriptive, explanatory, and predictive capacities. Both of the foregoing approaches are descriptive only and contain no explanatory or predictive capabilities. Neither of them, for example, contains a theoretical explanation for poverty, domestic violence, racism, or any other problem that social work encounters. Nor do they accommodate

Table 1.2 Selected Conventional and Progressive Social Work Perspectives/Approaches

Conventional (consensus/order-based)		Progressive* (conflict/change-based)
personal change (goal = change the person)	*person-in-environment* (goal = personal change and/or limited social change)	*fundamental social change* (goal = social transformation)
• psychodynamic • behavioural • client-centred • psycho-social • clinical • family therapies • casework	• general systems theory • ecosystems (ecological) • life-model • problem-solving strengths • perspective	• feminist social work • Marxist • radical • structural • anti-racist • anti-oppressive • critical postmodern • post-colonial • indigenous (decolonization) • narrative therapy • just therapy

Note: Any of the above can be used within a critical or progressive framework, although traditionally this has rarely occurred.

* Progressive social work today recognizes that fundamental social change cannot occur without fundamental personal change also occurring. Earlier versions of progressive social work tended to emphasize structural changes and psychological preparation to participate in social change activities but gave little or no consideration to the impact of oppressive structures on oppressed groups and how to respond to them in a way that was meaningful.

or explain such social work concerns as conflict within the system, power relations or differentials within the system, cultural variables, or larger oppressive social structures. Their focus on the here-and-now situation and possibilities for intervention contributes to a neglect of history, and social problems are believed to result from a breakdown between individuals and the subsystems (e.g., family, school, welfare office) with which they interact. They operate to maintain the status quo, since the goal is to restore (not transform) the system back to normal functioning. General systems theory and ecological perspectives have been the subject of critique now for more than 30 years, and it is time that social work took that critique seriously. This is not to say that we should abandon these perspectives, since they do have analytical utility in terms of presenting a snapshot in time of a particular system or systems, but it does mean that we should stop considering these perspectives as core social work knowledge in our curricula and practice.

Modernism and Postmodernism

Modernism has been defined as 'a particular view of the possibilities and direction of human social life [that] is rooted in the Enlightenment and grounded in faith in rational thought' (Johnson 2000, 232). A modernist perspective holds that truth and

Not All Theories Are Created Equal—In Spite of What the Instructor Implies

Over the years, I have been struck by the realization of how many (too many) social work educators teach social work theories. The impression sometimes given to students is that there is a large warehouse containing all the social work theories that exist or that there is a smorgasbord of theories from which the student or practitioner can select those that seem most appealing. Indeed, one of the reviewers of an earlier edition of one of my published books on structural social work faulted it because it did not expose students to all the other social work theories they had to learn. (It might have helped if the reviewer had thought about the title of the book.) The suggestion seems to be that all social work theories are basically the same, since they contain the same properties of a theory, were developed to assist social workers in helping people, and are relatively equal in merit. Therefore, the job of the theory instructor is to expose students to as many theories as possible and leave it up to them to make their choices. The decision regarding which theory to use really depends on the social worker's personal preference; after all, social work is social work. Table 1.2 above should dispel the myth that all theories are created equal. For example, some are macro theories that analyze the place of social work in society (whether it supports or challenges the status quo) and contain an explanation for the existence of social problems. Others are micro theories that focus on the relationship and interactions between a social worker and service users and contain no social analysis or social problem explanation. In other words, there are lower-order and higher-order theories (as well as other ways to categorize social work theories; see Mullaly 2007). The conventional social work theories in Table 1.2 are examples of the former, and the progressive theories are examples of the latter. Micro theories of practice can be carried out as part of the larger strategy of the macro theories, but by themselves they have no political mission, which in effect supports the way things are.

knowledge exist as objective reality (as do morality and beauty) that can be discovered, examined, understood, and explained through rational and scientific means and then controlled, used, and exploited for the betterment of the human condition (Howe 1994; Johnson 2000). Postmodernism, a rival perspective to modernist thought, has assumed major attention over the past three decades (Harvey 1989). It proposes that truth, beauty, morality, and social life have no objective reality beyond how we think, talk, and write about them. No social units are fixed entities, and although some

representations of social life are more privileged and/or given more legitimacy than others, ultimately no one version of reality is better or truer than another. The debate between these two perspectives strikes at the heart of two basic sets of competing assumptions that underpin the attempts of each to understand the world and our experience of it (Johnson 2000).

For more than a decade and a half now, a substantial literature on postmodernism and post-structuralism has developed in both the humanities and the social sciences.

However, there is still a tendency on the part of some to impose a complete, clear, and time-defined break (i.e., a great divide) between anything written in the period now known as modernity (which includes most critical theory writings) and writings in the era of postmodernity. Such a position is, of course, neither informed nor critical nor scholarly. Although there are major differences and antagonisms between the two, what is often ignored, overlooked, or not known in the first place is that postmodernism and critical social theory share a common intellectual heritage. The postmodern writers Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard all wrote within the period of modernity, none rejected leftist causes, and all based their critiques of the Enlightenment on the thinking of Nietzsche and Heidegger. The latter is seen by many as the archetype and trend-setter of postmodernism. Similarly, Nietzsche and Heidegger influenced the Frankfurt School's critique of civilization. Both sets of critiques reject the Cartesian philosophy of identity (with its omission of the Other), the emancipatory myth of teleology, and positivism (Nietzsche declared not only God dead but all impostor gods such as science and philosophy as well).

Homi Bhabha (1994, 4–5) takes to task those people who would use the prefix 'post' in the jargon of our times—postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-feminism—to indicate sequentially 'after' (e.g., after-feminism) or polarity (e.g., anti-modernism). He contends that these uses of 'post' are profoundly parochial. Bhabha takes up Heidegger's (1971) view that a boundary (such as that inherent in the concept of 'post') is not the point at which something stops but rather the point from which something begins its 'presencing.' For example, Bhabha argues that the broader significance of postmodernism is not that we recognize the fragmentation of the grand narratives of post-Enlightenment rationalism, but that the epistemological limits of such ethnocentric ideas are also the 'enunciative boundaries' at which a range of other dissonant and dissident voices and histories begin—women, people of colour, colonized nations, and so on.

There are many books worth consulting for general overviews and critiques of postmodernism (e.g., Agger 2006; Bauman 1992; Best and Kellner 1991; Harvey 1989; Seidman 1998), and it is not my intention to reproduce these overviews and critiques. It is important to note that postmodernism includes but is not restricted to postmodern social theory (Agger 1998). It also encompasses postmodern architecture, art, and design, as well as postmodern literary and cultural theory. With respect to postmodern social theory, there are a variety of perspectives. At one end of the continuum, postmodernism is a conservative, individualistic, and nihilistic doctrine,

which holds that there is no potential for solidarity among oppressed persons or for social change efforts because every person is his or her own moral agent—a position that Ife (1997) calls an 'anything goes brand of politics' and what Geertz (1986) calls 'witless relativism.' At the other end of the postmodern social theory continuum are writers who have taken postmodern analyses and criticisms of modernity on board and are attempting to use them as essential ingredients in a necessary (in my view) revitalization of critical social theory. Examples of such social theorists are Ben Agger, Stanley Aronowitz, Nancy Fraser, David Harvey, Frederic Jameson, Douglas Kellner, and Timothy Luke. Theorists within the social work and social welfare areas include Jim Ife (1997), Peter Leonard (1997), Bob Mullaly (2007), and Bob Pease and Jan Fook (1999). This book and its treatment of oppression/anti-oppression follow this 'critical postmodernist' approach. It is informed mainly by the critical theories of Marxism, the Frankfurt School, transformative forms of feminism, critical race theory, the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, critical postmodernism, and post-colonialism.

Major Concepts Associated with Oppression/Anti-oppression Framework

Because I am developing a framework of oppression/anti-oppression based on two bodies of social thought (modernist and postmodernist) that are often antagonistic towards one another, it is necessary for me to explicate some of the major concepts that will become part of this framework. These concepts will be used regularly in subsequent chapters of this book.

Structures of Oppression

All societies set up organizations to carry out certain functions necessary for them to maintain themselves. Examples include an economic system to ensure the production, distribution, and consumption of needed (and desired) goods and services; a legal system to protect people's rights and to facilitate peace and order; a welfare system to attend to the plight of economically deprived people; an education system to provide persons with the knowledge and skills required to participate in the labour force; and religious organizations to tend to the spiritual needs of the population. These organizations are called social institutions. With their patterns of organization, their procedural rules of operating, their policies governing the delivery and use of their services, and their social practices, they constitute what are known as social structures. These structures affect everyone in society.

Traditional critical social theory has always emphasized social structures as a major source of oppression. Because they were originally established by and for the most part are still dominated by a particular social group—bourgeois, Christian, heterosexual males of European origin—they primarily reflect and reinforce the assumptions, views, needs, values, culture, and social position of this group. Furthermore, this

group enjoys its privilege at the expense of other groups in society—people of colour, the working class, non-Christians, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, women, and so on. Our social structures are imbued with racism, sexism, patriarchy, and classism in that there is a privileged or dominant group within each one of these social divisions that has more political, social, and usually economic power than the subordinate groups. The dominant relations of men over women, white people over persons of colour, affluent people over poor people, heterosexual over homosexual and bisexual persons, physically able persons over physically and mentally challenged persons 'have been so internalized into the structures of society that they have also become intrinsic to the roles, rules, policies and practices of [social] institutions' (Haney 1989, 37).

This internalized phenomenon is part of an 'invisible structure' of oppression. In addition to visible social institutions, there are also invisible structures of oppression. In fact, these invisible structures are probably more important and effective today than visible structures in promoting conformity to a system that oppresses people on the basis of gender, race, class, sexuality, age, and so on. The major invisible structure is a dominant ideology or a world view, which is discussed below.

Domination is not necessarily a conscious or intentional choice on the part of the dominant group (nor is subordination a conscious choice of subordinate group members), since few people in society would consider themselves oppressors. Freire (1994 [1970]) argues that it is more a matter of the dominant group not seeing or not being aware of any viable alternative social, economic, or political structures that might be antithetical to dominant–subordinate social relations. Members of the dominant group perceive their monopoly on 'having more' not as a privilege that might dehumanize others but as their inalienable right for having taken advantage of the opportunities that exist for everyone (in their view) in society. Those who do not take advantage of opportunities are either lazy or incompetent, and it is only right that they occupy a subordinate position in society. Little thought is given in this perspective to the possibility that access to opportunities and resources is based largely on one's social position or location rather than strictly on merit or effort. Awareness of the oppressive nature and functions of our current social structures is an essential element of anti-oppressive theory and practice.

Structural Determinism and the Autonomous Subject

Is the individual a relatively autonomous moral agent who is able to act on the surrounding world either to maintain or to change it? Or is the individual's sense of self, of identity, and of autonomy a product of dominant structures and their supportive ideologies? In other words, are human subjects the creators or the products of the social structures that surround them? Whereas traditional critical social theory has tended to emphasize the significance of structural determinants in forming subjectivity and constraining individual agency (i.e., structural determinism), postmodernism has tended to focus on the micro-processes of people's lives and the everyday choices they make (i.e., human agency).

To be sure, there are extremists in both the modernist and postmodernist camps. For example, some Marxist theorists (e.g., Althusser) reject the human actor as a significant factor in any social change and see changes as the results of impersonal historical factors—even though Marx himself argued that humans produce change and that all history could be seen as the 'history of class struggle'—that is, as the result of human agency (Leonard 1997). Conversely, some postmodern writers, in my view, overemphasize the role of human agency in social change and thereby reinforce the conservative notion that people are self-directed individuals able to act in societies with relative freedom of choice and will make decisions to maximize their well-being. The danger here is that people who are resource-poor or living on the margins of society will be viewed as irresponsible, deviant, and not worthy of any assistance because they did not make use of their human agency.

The position taken in this book is that an emphasis on one position only is reductionist in that either micro or macro issues are overlooked, ignored, or rejected. Consistent with the approaches of such writers as Peter Leonard (1997) and Neil Thompson (1998), my approach here is that both structural forces and human agency are integral in developing an understanding of oppression and anti-oppressive practices. To adopt one position as the only viable approach is to create a 'false dichotomy' in critical social theory terms, and to see them as 'either-or' oppositionals is to create an 'invalid binary' in postmodern terms. Sibeon (1991, 24) states the case for including both in any understanding of society, human action, and social change:

> To attempt to account for 'structure' in terms of agency is (micro) reductionist . . . equally, to attempt . . . to 'explain' human agency in terms of structure is (macro) reductionist. . . . Social life is not reducible to a single reductionist principle of 'micro' or 'macro' explanation. Neither is it possible to arrive at an 'accommodation' or 'compromise' based on a synthesis of both of these forms of reductionism [cited in Thompson 1998, 48].

Power and Resistance

Related to social structures and human agency are the concepts of power and resistance. Traditional critical social theory tended to view power as a social phenomenon that resided or was concentrated mainly in large structures (e.g., institutions of the state, big business, the church) and was used or abused by powerful individuals and institutions to maintain dominant–subordinate relationships. To counteract or overcome this use of power, critical theorists advocated for large-scale social movements to mobilize and change the power structures (e.g., the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the trade union movement). A corollary to this belief in collective action to bring about social change is that the individual, by himself or herself, has no power and thus has to collectivize to obtain some power. Much of the community organization or development literature is predicated on these assumptions of power.

Postmodern theorists have a different view of power. They do not believe it is ultimately concentrated in large structures; rather, power can be found in different localities, contexts, and social situations. The prison, the school, the hospital, the social worker's office are all examples of places where power is dispersed and built up independent of any systematic strategy of class or gender or ethnicity. What happens at each locality cannot be explained by some overarching meta-theory (Harvey 1989). Foucault saw power not as something that people either did or did not possess but as an aspect of all social relations, a feature of the interactions between individuals, groups, and organizations. It is a fluid phenomenon open to constant influence and change (Thompson 1998). Because power can be either constraining or enabling (Rojek, Peacock, and Collins 1988), an ongoing assessment must be made of who is exercising the power, in whose interests, and who has defined the interests (Healy and Leonard 2000).

Foucault, in his later writings (e.g., 1988), argued that power is always faced with resistance, that every exercise of power is contested, and that resistance itself is an act of countervailing power. This idea has enormous potential for anti-oppressive practice. It challenges the view that individuals or subordinate groups are helpless to do anything about the dominant discursive practices that subjugate and oppress them. Such dominance can be challenged through acts of resistance (i.e., through the use of countervailing power) to undermine the ideas, assumptions, paradigms, and discourses that constitute the dominant discursive practices.

Given the above two competing or contrasting views of power—that it is concentrated within large structures or that it is dispersed and a critical part of every social relationship—which view is most appropriate for an understanding of oppression and for developing strategies to overcome oppression? My position here is that both views have merit and must be considered in developing anti-oppressive social work practice. Both social structures and individuals are able to exercise power. However, it is patently obvious that a social institution is able to exercise more power than an individual and that an individual from the dominant group is, for the most part, able to exercise more political, social, and economic power than a member of a subordinate group. Power may be dispersed throughout society, but it is not dispersed equally. I agree with Baines (2003) who argues that power is possessive as much as it is relational, which means that people can have power as well as exercise it. It also means that in relative terms, some people are more powerful than others, no matter how confident, talented, expressive, or assertive the latter may be. Addressing this point, Fraser (2008) contends that the relational aspect of power can be confronting, especially for those who want to believe that power resides exclusively within the individual and within his or her interpersonal realm. Furthermore, it poses particular difficulties for those who may want to wish the possessive aspects of power away by suggesting that it all comes down to how people exercise power individually. Although the notion of 'acts of resistance' would seem to be a powerful tool for anti-oppressive workers (especially, but not exclusively, in the micro-practice area), one must still be

sensitive to the need for collectivization and mobilization as social change strategies. We will return to these issues in the final chapter of the book when an anti-oppressive social work practice is outlined.

Discourse and Language

Traditional critical social theory tended to hold that language simply reflected reality and that knowledge (obtained or given through language) was empowering. The task of progressive social services work from this perspective was to increase one's knowledge of oppression and use this knowledge when working with oppressed groups. However, postmodernism has helped to show us that there is no one universal reality but many realities and that language does not have the properties of absolute truth but is historically, culturally, and socially contextualized and largely reflects the interests and world views of dominant groups (Mullaly 2007). Language is not politically neutral, as evidenced by Howe's (1994, 522) summary of the relationship between power and language:

> Whereas modernity believes that increasing knowledge of the essential and true nature of things produces power, postmodernity reverses the formula, recognizing that the formation of a particular discourse creates contingent centres of power which define areas of knowledge, passing truths and frameworks of explanation and understanding. Those with power can control the language of the discourse and can therefore influence how the world is to be seen and what it will mean. Language promotes some possibilities and excludes others; it constrains what we see and what we do not see.

A concept related to language is discourse. Discourse includes not only language but the rules governing the choice and use of language and how the ideas and language will be framed. A discourse is a framework of thought, meaning, and action (Thompson 1998), which does not reflect knowledge, reality, or truth but creates and maintains them. Knowledge, according to Foucault, is produced by discourse—it is 'the way in which power, language and institutional practices combine at historically specific points to produce particular ways of thinking' (Featherstone and Fawsett 1994, cited in Stainton and Swift 1996, 77). Although there is always more than one discourse at any point in time, there is usually one dominant discourse. The current dominant discourse consists of a set of assumptions about the social world that largely reflects the interests of capitalism, patriarchy, and people of European descent. As Agger (1989) points out, even our textbooks are largely written within this dominant discourse. The knowledge that appears in the social science literature assists in the reproduction of the existing social order through: (1) the incorporation of ideas that support the current socio-political order and (2) the suppression and/or marginalization of scholarship that seeks to challenge or transform it (Agger 1989, 1992; Wachholz and Mullaly 2000).

The concept of discourse is another important tool for understanding oppression and for developing anti-oppressive practices. For example, in our own personal and work lives, we can avoid language and discourses that reflect and reinforce inequality (Thompson 1998). By understanding a dominant discourse, we can deconstruct it and expose any discriminatory or oppressive assumptions, ideas, and beliefs that may underpin it. And we can develop counter-discourses based on the ideals of equality, fairness, and social justice. These ideas and practices will be examined at greater length in Chapter 8.

Ideology

A concept related to discourse is ideology. The meaning of ideology here goes beyond the narrow Marxist view of it as a set of ideas that serve to hide the exploitative and alienating aspects of capitalism. Rather, an ideology is defined here as any consistent set of social, economic, and political assumptions, beliefs, values, and ideals[5] (Mullaly 2007). Ideologies provide frameworks for making sense of the social world; in other words, they provide us with a world view. Our thoughts, actions, and interactions are filtered through one or more ideologies (Thompson 1998). Donald and Hall (1986, ix–x) refer to ideologies as 'frameworks of thought' that 'enable us to make sense of perplexing events and relationships—and, inevitably, impose certain "ways of looking" . . . on those events and relationships which we are struggling to make sense of' (cited in Thompson 1998, 20). Through the process of socialization, dominant ideologies become so ingrained that we consider them as taken-for-granted views or common-sense knowledge. An ideology will determine the nature and causal explanations ascribed to social problems, as well as the solutions to these problems, including the types of social interventions and social work activities to be used (Mullaly 2007). Thompson (1998) defines ideology as the power of ideas that sustains or confronts discrimination, oppression, and inequality. Although there is some overlap between the two, a discourse may be viewed as the linguistic embodiment of an ideology (Foucault notwithstanding).

More than one ideology tends to exist at any one time, but as with the concept of discourse, there is usually one 'dominant' ideology, with the others 'subordinate' to it. A dominant ideology is the one that represents the position and supports the best interests of the dominant group. For example, capitalism as a social and economic system serves the bourgeoisie more than it does the working class. A subordinate or countervailing ideology is not as prominent as the dominant ideology and is usually in opposition to it. Ideologies based on collectivism and equality (e.g., various forms of socialism, anarchism, non–Soviet Union forms of communism) are subordinate to capitalist ideology (based on individualism and inequality), which is found in all Anglo democracies. Because the dominant ideology is so ingrained, both within the dominant group and within many people in the subordinate groups, any other ideology or world view is seldom given credence as containing a workable social or economic system. The existing systems are seen as natural, normal, and inevitable.

Any alternatives are either not recognized or deemed to be mystical, unrealistic, or too problematic to be worth the effort of even considering. Gramsci (1971) refers to the unquestioned dominance of all conformist ideas and beliefs that support the interests of the group promoting them as 'hegemony' (more will be said about this in Chapter 4).

Obviously, ideology is an important component in understanding oppression and developing strategies of anti-oppression. An analysis of the dominant ideology enables us to identify and expose the thought structures that rationalize oppression and, conversely, to promote countervailing ideologies based on social justice and equality. It also helps us to better understand 'internalized oppression,' which is why people often develop loyalty to and defend a social system that discriminates against them. This is not to say that ideological analysis is straightforward today, if it ever was. Critical social theorists have always argued that ideology has been routinized in everyday life through various discourses and practices that suggest the inevitability and rationality of political conformity (Agger 1998). In talking about the dominant group's preferential access to social opportunities, Adam (1978, 10) says, 'The privileged develop ideologies and the coercive means to protect the[ir] hierarchy of access.' Ideology in postmodern capitalism has become even more dispersed into the symbols and discourses of everyday life (a subject to be taken up in Chapter 4). Featherstone (1991) argues that postmodern ideology is so deeply implanted in daily popular culture that it is difficult to differentiate truth from falsehood and reality from illusion, which is required in any program of consciousness-raising. However, Agger argues that the interpretative tools of deconstruction (another postmodern concept) should be invaluable in detecting and debunking oppressive ideologies.

A Politics of Difference and a Politics of Solidarity

Traditional critical theory emphasizes solidarity among oppressed people but does so through various meta-narratives and by assuming the notion of a fixed identity. For example, orthodox Marxism calls for solidarity of the working class against capitalism, and early second-wave feminism called for solidarity among women against sexism and patriarchy. Solidarity among those who have had common experiences of oppression has been the essence of critical social theory's political practice. Solidarity has underpinned all significant social movements. It is the glue that holds alliances and coalitions together and provides them with their strength as measured by the numbers of people participating. Without solidarity among oppressed people, resistances to the dominant social order are dispersed and weakened.

However, the politics of solidarity has often neglected the politics of difference by reflecting in their own organizations and culture the very forms of domination and exclusion that existed in the wider society (Leonard 1995). Marxism, for example, has often overlooked other forms of oppression, such as patriarchy and racism, and has tended to view the working class as a homogeneous group whose members possess a fixed identity (i.e., an exploited and alienated worker) and who are all equally exploited,

not recognizing stratification, ethnicity, gender, and other types of differences among them. Similarly, early second-wave feminism also called for solidarity and unity among oppressed 'sisters' without regard to differences in race, social position, and so on and without recognizing or acknowledging other forms of oppression experienced by many women. These examples demonstrate the need to reject the notion of an essential subjectivity (e.g., women, workers) and to substitute the concept of 'fractured identities' to refer to individual diverse subjects. The notion of fractured identities also helps us in anti-oppressive work to avoid the common practice of identifying and classifying people as either oppressors or oppressed. Everyone in society occupies both roles (identities) at various points in time, although one's principal status will tend to be one or the other. This notion of fractured or multiple identities and the multiplicity of oppression (and domination) are the subjects of Chapter 7.

Postmodernism has been especially important in acknowledging the multiple forms of 'otherness' as they emerge from differences in subjectivity, gender, class, race, and the like. It is this aspect of postmodernism that Stephen Leonard (1990) says gives it a radical edge. Postmodernism helps the anti-oppressive worker to develop a new politics of solidarity—one that pursues the idea of fractured identities in which differences within particular oppressed groups 'are always given attention, contextualized with reference to their specific geographical location in the world, their class position, and their places within the structures of race and ethnicity . . . age, sexuality, and differences of ability' (P. Leonard 1995, 7). As an early writer on oppression argued, identities are social constructions whereby 'the minority situation is more a matter of social definition than of social difference' (Adam 1978, 10). Traits such as gender, skin colour, sexuality, and class are seized upon as bases for inequality. Differences of skin colour, class, gender, and age are today's social realities, but how we deal with these differences is one of the great issues of the day. So far, we (Western society) have tended to use them to rationalize situations and practices of oppression and social inequality. In sum, solidarity within and among oppressed groups is crucial in the struggle for emancipation, but to avoid various forms of oppressive inclusions and exclusions that have occurred in the past, it must incorporate a progressive politics of difference (to be discussed in subsequent chapters). Peter Leonard (2001, 5) underscores this belief:

> Neither a belief in interdependence nor a belief in difference can, I believe, stand alone. Exclusive emphasis on interdependency, on solidarity, can lead to the smothering subordination of the diverse Other as the earlier history of Left politics demonstrates. Exclusive emphasis on difference, on the other hand, can lead to continuous fragmentation into smaller, and perhaps increasingly excluding, communities of identity, eventually ending in new forms of individualism.
>
> When we try to anticipate a future for critical social work, I think that these beliefs, in a dialectical tension with each other, are likely to prove valuable in working out where we might want to head.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have emphasized the need for clear theoretical frameworks of explanation in which to locate good (informed and well-articulated) social work practice. Without analytically and rigorously developed social work theories, practitioners are left with their own personally constructed theories that reflect only the individual worker's particular experiences, social position, and associated biases. The specific school of social theory adopted in this book is critical social theory informed by postmodern, post-structural, feminist, and post-colonial insights. As opposed to the victim-blaming assumptions inherent in the order perspective of society, critical social theory is consistent with the conflict perspective, which locates social problems in systems of dominant–subordinate relationships. Critical social theory is concerned with people who are oppressed, informed by critical analysis of oppression, and driven by a goal of emancipation from oppression.

Although the book follows the critical social theory tradition of advancing our knowledge and understanding of the world of oppression in order to change it, it moves beyond the critical theory that belongs to a historical period known as modernity. It makes no claims to universality, reason, and order—claims that in the past have often masked the interests of those making them. Rather, the book is consistent with the 'critical postmodernist' approach that was adopted and developed in the 1990s by several social theorists and social work theorists. This approach represents an attempt to revitalize critical social theory, using some of the insights of postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and cultural studies.

Critical Questions for Discussion

1. How would you respond to a politician or editor of a newspaper who is calling for social work positions to be filled by people who have no formal social work education, claiming that all you need to do social work is to possess common sense and be a good people person (i.e., like people and have people skills)?
2. How would you respond to fellow students who say that they get all their satisfaction in their field placement because that is where their real learning occurs and the theory presented in the classroom has nothing to do with the real world?
3. How would you explain the existence of the following problems, using each of the seven theoretical perspectives presented in this chapter: poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, mental illness, racism, drug abuse, child abuse?
4. Looking at Table 1.2, how do you think a social worker can combine (i.e., use simultaneously) a conventional social work theory/perspective with a progressive approach?

5. What is an invisible structure of oppression and how does it work?
6. Can you think of a few subtle 'acts of resistance' to classroom material or to an instructor that students can carry out in the classroom that minimize the risk of retaliation?

Further Readings

Agger, Ben (2006). *Critical Social Theories: An Introduction*, 2nd edition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. One of the leading critical theorists in North America, Agger provides a cogent and accessible explanation of critical social theory. Students are introduced to social and cultural theories such as the Frankfurt School, feminist theory, postmodernism, cultural studies, theories of multiculturalism and difference, and communication theory. Agger argues for an integration of these theories.

Lundy, Colleen (2004). *Social Work and Social Justice: A Structural Approach*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press. This book situates the Canadian welfare state and social work within the historical context of the globalized capitalist economy. An analysis of the structural forces that cause social problems is presented, along with practice skills and strategies for working with individuals, groups, and families that at the same time present a process of social change based on empowerment, critical consciousness, and provision of material resources.

Mullaly, Bob (2007). *The New Structural Social Work*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press. This book reveals the shortcomings of traditional mainstream social work, which accepts and participates in the present social order rather than addressing the systemic social problems and oppressive relationships that result in privilege for a minority at the expense of the majority.

Payne, Malcolm (2005). *Modern Social Work Theory*, 3rd edition. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books. The most comprehensive book on the market on social work theory. The author poses general questions about the definition of theory, its uses, and how it is put into practice. Current debates about social work theory are presented, as are individual schools of theory in terms of their major themes and applications, ranging from psychodynamic approaches to radical and critical perspectives, including anti-oppressive social work.

Rubington, Earl, and S. Martin Weinberg, eds. (2002). *The Study of Social Problems*, 6th edition. New York: Oxford University Press. This critically acclaimed book has long been a standard in its field. It presents seven perspectives used to examine social problems—social pathology, social disorganization, value conflict, deviant behaviour, labelling, the critical perspective, and social constructionism.