

Chapter 6

Critical Social Science and Critical Theory



Abstract This chapter examines critical theory as a way of explaining, contesting and acting upon social injustice. Critical theories, of which there are many, have been a significant source of explanatory power and motivating action for social work. As will be shown, there are a number of different generations and formulations of critical theory. What links these different theories is that they combine explanations of social reality with practical aims for addressing social injustices. The chapter explains what makes critical social science critical, and then outlines Marxist, feminist and postcolonial theory by explaining each position in relation to a theory of false consciousness, theory of crisis, theory of education and a theory of transformative action.

Introduction

This chapter begins by describing ways to assess theories for their critical potential, and then outlines three main bodies of critical social theory: Marx' theory of alienation, feminism and postcolonialism. These theories are chosen because they have been influential in the development of radical, critical and structural social work theories that aim at addressing social injustice. But first, we need to clarify what is meant by critical theory? Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009, p. 145) state that "critical theory is characterised by an interpretative approach combined with a pronounced interest in critically disputing *actual* social realities...its guiding principle is an emancipatory interest in knowledge...[and] it maintains a dialectical view of society, claiming that social phenomena must always be viewed within their historical contexts". Fraser (1989, p. 113) suggests that Marx' explanation is that critical theory is the "self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age". At the level of initial definitions, there is no special appeal to a theory or body of knowledge, but simply a concern to speak to the everyday concerns and struggles of people everywhere (Fraser, 1989). It should be pointed out that early social workers were involved in all kinds of struggles for justice, such as workers collectives, first wave feminist actions and the socialist movement of the early twentieth century. Therefore, the history of social work has

an affinity to the development of critical theory with a shared interest in social justice and emancipation. Still, critical theories—as explanations of struggle and social relations of domination and oppression—did not really become fully translated and articulated in social work theory and methods until the 1970s (Rojek, Collins, & Peacock, 1988). This was about the same time as critical theories also made an impact in the wider social sciences (Sayer, 2011).

What do all these ideas actually mean in the context of our discussion on social justice? Moreover, what role do they have in informing social work practice? In this chapter, we will consider the issue of what makes social theory *critical* and then move to consider the varieties of critical theory that share an interest in emancipation from social injustice. First, we need to clear up some confusions about the term critical theory.

Critical Social Science or Critical Theory?

A number of authors suggests there is considerable confusion about the term critical theory (Bohman, 2005; Fay, 1987; Gray & Webb, 2009). For Bohman (2005, n.p.) this confusion is due to critical theory having both “a narrow and a broad meaning in philosophy and in the history of social sciences”. The narrow sense is where critical theory is used to describe several generations of specific theorists inspired by Marxism, which are collectively known as the Frankfurt School. Fay (1987) suggests these should be considered as *theories of society*. As theories of society, critical theories in this narrow sense can be distinguished from “traditional” social theories. *Critical* theories are typically political and ideological because they have a vision of how things could be (normative), as well as descriptions of how things are (explanatory) and they propose ideas about what needs to happen for desired change to occur (practical goals) (Horkheimer, 1993, cited in Bohman, 2005, n.p.). Because critical theories have a normative element and include ideas about social change, they can be distinguished from other kinds of social theory, such as positivism and interpretivist theories, which tend to largely stick with explanation, description and interpretation of social phenomenon (Agger, 2006). Post-structural theories are another category again. There is no single explanatory post-structural theory of everything; rather there are a number of theorists whose work has contributed resources for thinking about contemporary conditions without legislating a normative ideal.

There is a broader meaning for critical theory as well. This broader meaning can be traced back to philosophy and the way that philosophy has entailed various forms of reflection on the human condition more generally. Critical theories in this broader sense generally emerge from processes of “...philosophical reflection on and analysis of the apparent limits of thought and action in the present and, second, reflection on and analysis of the forms of thought one practices and their relation to the present” (Tully, 1999, p. 91). In other words, critical theory—in the broadest sense of the term—is an Enlightenment sensibility where the use of reason, argument and various other methods of rational inquiry may be brought to bear on the conditions under

which human beings live. Still, the purpose for doing so is not merely to describe these conditions, but to find ways of going beyond their limits as a form of transformation (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984). For Bohman, too, this broader meaning of critical theory combines the “poles of philosophy and the social sciences: explanation and understanding, structure and agency, regularity and normativity” (Bohman, 2005, n.p.). This link to an Enlightenment sensibility, *post-Kant*, gives support to Fay’s contention that we can see critical theory as a “metatheoretical analysis of social science” (Fay, 1987, p. 5). It is because of this that Fay prefers the term Critical Social Science (CSS).

In summary, Agger (2006, pp. 4–5) suggests that for a social science theory to be discussed as *critical*, it will have the following characteristics:

1. Opposition to seeing the world as waiting to be discovered and instead seeing the world, and social conditions, as “[A]n active construction by scientists and theorists who make certain assumptions about the worlds they study and thus are not strictly value-free” (Agger, 2006, p. 4). This is a criticism of positivism and is an enduring influence of critical theory on the social and psychological sciences (Agger, 2006). Positivism is a social theory aimed at providing a set of general laws that describe social life, but these laws are generally context independent. That is, such laws would be seen as applicable everywhere regardless of specific circumstances or context. Critical theory and critical social work are sceptical of such suppositions, because so much of social life and human experience is context dependent, and therefore, positivist knowledge itself can be limited when used in a context-independent way.
2. Critical social theories use ideas about the *state of nature*. Nature may be something negative from which human action can provide escape, or, more nostalgically, as a state to which people might return if only current social conditions were changed for the better; for example, if we could escape from the clutches of modernity and techno-capitalism to return to a more traditional community lifestyle in harmony with each other and with nature. Somewhat regardless of which assumption is driving the perspective, critical social science considers that “society is characterized by historicity (susceptibility to change)” (Agger, 2006, p. 4). For critical social work, the transformative aspect is to intervene in social structures and conditions, and change them for the better.
3. It follows, then, that critical social science considers that oppression and domination emerge from social structures. The term “social structure” is a central concept in sociology and it is used to describe “social relations [that] are organized along patterned lines that endure over time and that act as a constraint on the individuals living within them, even though they may not be aware of it” (van Krieken et al., 2014, p. 5). For example, class, gender and race are social structures that can be sources of oppression and injustice, and are therefore of interest to social work.
4. Critical social science has a number of explanations for why people reproduce structures that contribute to domination or oppression. These are often explained by theories of false consciousness (Fay, 1987). Agger (2006, p. 5) contends

that there are many forms this false consciousness can take, such as “...ideology (Marx); reification (Georg Lukács); hegemony (Antonio Gramsci), one-dimensional thinking (Marcuse) and the metaphysics of presence (Derrida)”. Critical social science includes programs of education that is aimed at illuminating the relations of domination and oppression that come about from false consciousness. These programs emphasise the “power of agency, both personal and collective, to transform society” (Agger, 2006, p. 5) through education, awareness raising and collective solidarity.

5. Critical social science theories usually have a perspective that social change begins with the personal circumstances of people. Many theories in CSS emphasise that the *personal is political* (Wearing, 1996). Social work has long worked to trace the links between personal struggles and public issues, particularly in regards to social policy activism and community organising, as well as individual and group consciousness-raising and social action.
6. Most critical social science theories, especially those influenced by Marxism, emphasise the connections between *agency* and *structure*. This is sometimes discussed as a *dialectical* relation (Allen & O’Boyle, 2011). Dialectical relations stretch back to Plato but in social theory, they usually have their origins from the philosopher Hegel. The idea here is that there are opposing and contradictory sides to any relation of knowledge, thought or social condition (a thesis versus an antithesis), which combine to contribute to a synthesis and thus new relations emerge. Marx adapted this idea to consider that it is the material economy of society that is in constant tension and struggle insofar as we can see society as constantly evolving and changing. The result is that society is in a process of continual transformation, and it is from this transformation that new problems and potentials will emerge. It also means that there is a debate over the role that individual agency and social structure play in human affairs—how much of each is constraining and enabling of what human beings do and how they live their lives? It should be noted that there is a group of critical social theories that do not take a dialectical approach to structure and agency, but rather, have explored the various language, power and knowledge constructions that create limits to human freedom. These are often grouped together as post-structural theories. They include people such as Jacques Derrida (Deconstruction) Jacques Lacan (Psychoanalysis), Roland Barthes (Language) and Michel Foucault (Human Sciences, Power and Ethics) (Sarup, 1993). Post-structural theories are considered critical because they “insist on the inevitable plurality and instability of meaning, [and] a distrust in systematic scientificity...” (Macey, 2000a, p. 309).
7. Critical social science generally considers people to be responsible for their own lives and liberation, and thus, does not always advocate full-scale revolution as this has in the past led to further rounds of oppression and the birth of murderous regimes. This emphasis on responsibility can be seen as a view about human *agency* often embedded within many of these social theories.

In the next section, we will consider three broad clusters of critical social science. These are theories from the Frankfurt School, feminism, and postcolonial theorists.

There is much—indeed many volumes—that can be written about these theories. To help elucidate some key points about each theory, we draw on Fay's (1987) schema of four key elements of critical social science to organise our discussion. These points of orientation help us to consider critical theories in relation to: (1) a theory of false consciousness; (2) a theory of crisis; (3) a theory of education; and (4) a theory of transformation (Fay, 1987, pp. 31–32).

- *Theory of false consciousness*—this explains how and why “the self-understandings of a group of people are false or incoherent” (Fay, 1987, p. 31). It explains how such self-misunderstandings are acquired and maintained. The theory provides a contrasting view—or at least an alternative self-understanding—which is purported to be superior to the false consciousness.
- *Theory of crisis*—the theory should explain what a social crisis is, indicate how a particular society is in such a crisis, and explain the impact on particular groups of people affected. In addition, the theory shows how these impacts cannot be relieved under current social conditions, and therefore, the theory proposes necessary changes to social conditions to address the crisis.
- *Theory of education*—the theory “offers an account of the conditions necessary and sufficient for the sort of enlightenment envisioned by the theory” (Fay, 1987, p. 32).
- *Theory of transformative action*—the theory “isolates those aspects of a society that must be altered if the social crisis is to be resolved and the dissatisfactions of its members addressed...[and] details a plan of action indicating who are to be the “carriers” of the anticipated social transformation, and at least some general idea of how they might do this” (Fay, 1987, p. 32).

It is unlikely that all critical theories capture each of these points in their entirety (Fay, 1987). Nevertheless, the schema does provide a way of conceptualising the various social science theories for their critical potential in addressing issues of social injustice. It is also a useful way of understanding the limits of these theories. Not all theories considered will have fully developed programs of education for example, or clear programs of transformative action. Some theories may be more able to offer *explanation* for the conditions of social crisis. Thus, it gives social workers a way to analyse, evaluate and suggest programs of action that might be helpful to addressing social injustice.

Frankfurt School of Critical Theory

The Frankfurt School of critical theory is widely considered to have begun in the 1930s at the Institute for Social Research (Bohman, 2005). The school was influenced by a number of generations of critical scholars, beginning with Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) and including Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), and stretching to the present day through Jurgen Habermas (1929–) and the current Chair of the Institute, Axel Honneth (1949–). The Frankfurt

School began as a way of “defending the Marxist legacy” (Agger, 2006, p. 78) after the widespread social revolutions forecast by Marx did not occur as thought (Agger, 1991). The Frankfurt School is widely considered to have taken Marxist ideas well beyond their original economic formulations to venture into areas such as communication theory, aesthetics and psychoanalysis (Agger, 2006). In recent times, Honneth has taken the third generation of critical theory in a new direction by looking at struggles for recognition (van den Brink & Owen, 2007).

The legacy of critical theory from the Frankfurt school offers much for a radical and critical social work approach to social justice. However, in light of the breadth of critical theories we can discuss, we restrict our example to Marx’s theory of alienation. Our reason for doing so is that alienation provides an explanatory and critical analysis of social and labour conditions in the contemporary neoliberal period.

Theory of False Consciousness

Alienation is the idea that people (notably workers who lack control over their work) experience psychological and social estrangement, a loss of a sense of direction or purpose from life and a general disconnection from themselves and other people. For Marx, the root cause of this problem is the capitalist mode of production, particularly our relationship with work and consumption in the modern era. Although touted as an essential part of human fulfilment and meeting one’s needs, modern workplaces, consumer culture and their associated by-products can actually be detrimental to human and ecological well-being. Personal and social problems associated with alienation may appear to us as though the fault somehow lies within us as individuals, but in fact, the root of alienation is in the capitalist system and the conditions of the labour market.

Alienation is actually based on an older and perhaps nostalgic idea about a past state of nature when it was thought people were able to live in harmony with nature, and each other, an idea expounded by philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The assumption here is clear: processes associated with work, consumption, accumulation and the general modes of production are not natural, but are human-made. And if they are human-made, they are not inevitable and should be amenable to change. For Marx (1844, p. 31) this state of nature was displaced by the establishment of a political economy based on a “...separation of labour, capital and land, and of wages, profit of capital, and rent of land”. In Marx’ view, when this kind of political economy emerges, workers themselves become commodified. This commodification results in different forms of alienation as the products of human labour became appropriated by others through these relations of production. Hence, people cease to be human in the broader sense of the word and become more like cogs in a giant machine.

This is not to say that work is unimportant, on the contrary. Marx viewed labour as a central way in which human essences become expressed and a key route to ways that people realise themselves. But this only happens if workers are able to

see themselves in the products and efforts of their labour; when they have some attachment or investment in their labour and its fruits. When they cannot see their own essences, and have no control over the shape or form of their work or product of their efforts, then Marx suggested this result in an alienation. In other words, people start to see their labour as *external* to themselves, which is very dispiriting.

Second, workers can also become alienated from the very act of labouring, especially when they have no control over the way in which the work is to be undertaken. An example of this is found in factories or offices where each component part of a product or enterprise is produced or worked on by many different workers with none of them having control over the process because their time and attention is completely regulated and overseen by others not engaged in the work. This actually happens in social work workplaces where the practice is routinised, heavily regulated, and conducted in piecemeal fashion. In such a situation, workers are only themselves outside of work; work becomes “a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification” (Marx, 1844, p. 35). Far from being a space of self-realisation and fulfilment, work is a space of dread. For Marx, a key aspect of this problem is that control over labour rested with the owners or managers of the means of production, who appropriate the value of the labour of workers by paying them less than the actual value of the product they create. This results in people experiencing forms of estrangement from not only the products of their efforts but also from their own essences as human beings because they are unable to enact their capacities as sentient beings endowed with reason and sentiment (Marx, 1932/2000).

The third way in which workers can become alienated is through the estrangement from their subjectivity that occurs when workers must subordinate their *human nature* in the process of working for others. People are forced to engage in labour even against their best interests because they must satisfy their needs for income. In other words, people sell their labour and sell themselves in order to live.

Lastly, workers become alienated from each other as they are reduced to competing against each other in a market to sell their labour. This leads to a fracturing of community and is implicated in the experience of isolation. Marx considered this relation to be one of false consciousness because it prevents the development of class consciousness and collective solidarity, because people eventually believe they have no choice but to sell their labour, and in doing so, see competition against themselves and each other as natural (Marx & Engels, 1967).

Theory of Crisis

The crisis that informs this theory of alienation relates to how capitalism operates (see chapter four, this volume). Briefly, capitalism results in a separation between capital, workers and land. Part of this separation process is the formation of different but antagonistic classes. Marx and Engels (1848) described two main competing classes: the *proletariat* (working class) and the *bourgeoisie* (ruling class). The proletariat are the labouring class who must sell their labour in the market. The bourgeoisie

are the owner class who generally own the means of production and thus are able to appropriate the value of the labour produced by the proletariat. This leads to inequality, unfairness, and gross differences in power between different classes, groups and individuals. It makes society conflictual, and is the breeding ground for a good deal of human anguish and suffering. As more and more work becomes mechanised this leads to less work available for the labouring class. Work that can be found is generally demeaning, repetitive, boring, dangerous, poorly paid and insecure (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 43). The inherent conflicts between class groups, the problems of worker alienation, and the overall instability of capitalism are seen as the root causes of various social, ecological and economic crises.

Theory of Education

Education in the form of consciousness raising is key to a theory of transformation and addressing the false consciousness that gives capitalism its supposed natural veneer and social and political acceptability. Marx (1844) considered that only when workers came to see themselves as having common interests and were able to stand in solidarity with each other would they be able to fight the effects of alienation and capitalist exploitation. This is difficult given that alienation tends to turn people against each other. However, Marx thought that collective action is possible, but only if people in the proletariat are able to develop a class consciousness centred on their common interests and in opposition to the bourgeoisie interests. This would mean becoming a *class for itself* (van Krieken et al., 2014, p. 211), rather than a *class in itself*. In other words, critical education helps people to organise in solidarity around collective and shared interests by forming social and political movements towards workers' rights and social justice. Education can be transformative and may lead to substantial changes in the capitalist system, to at least ameliorate the worst effects of capitalism, if not overthrow it entirely.

Theory of Transformative Action

According to van Krieken et al. (2014), Marx viewed trade unions as a key mechanism for transformative action in relation to addressing alienation. Indeed, in many countries, the development of common interests has happened through worker cooperatives and unionised labour (Fay, 1987). Such cooperatives and unions have been able to argue for better working conditions and pay for workers all around the world (International Labour Organization, 2017). This may manifest in organised strike action, advocating for change in legislation, or public protests and demonstrations. Given the problems of alienation, false consciousness and exploitation described earlier, the gains made by organised labour and unions should not be taken for granted. The early union movement was also responsible for providing support in workplaces

as well as the means for workers to participate in learning and education activities through the establishment of learning institutes. It remains today an important program of action to redress the effects of exploitative labour conditions in many places in the world (International Labour Organization, 2017).

Marx' theory of alienation continues to be an important theory about the effects on working for people who must sell their labour in conditions often characterised by exploitative social relations. Marxist theory has been both influential *and* challenging to social work, particularly by embarking on a deeper consideration of social work in relation to the position of women, capitalism and the nation-state. For example, the premises of Marx' theory of alienation rests on presumed *natural* relations of production that ignores the labour of women. This means that women's labour was considered to "fall outside of a capitalist 'economy'" (Nicholson, 1987, p. 18) and, therefore, much of the experiences of women—such as reproductive and household work—was largely ignored within Marxist analyses. Marxism has been applied in various ways to social work practice. The first is a progressive position, where social work (following Marxism) can be seen as a profession that promotes social change and reform (Rojek et al., 1988). The second position was the *reproductive* position, in which social work is critiqued for being co-opted as part of the machinery of the capitalist state. In this analysis, social work may unwittingly end up assisting in maintaining the subordination of working-class interests by smoothing over capitalism through the use of individual therapeutic interventions on what are really structural problems. This problem is often expressed in a criticism of what has been called "traditional" or conservative social work. The last position is a contradictory position in which social work stands *Janus-faced* with regard to worker interests. Here, social work is both an agent of the state *and* an agent of social change (Rojek et al., 1988) because it is trying to deal with individual problems even at the same time it is holding a structural analysis of the deeper social, economic and political origins of personal matters. These positions have influenced a range of radical, critical and postmodern theories inspired by Marxist ideas (Rojek et al., 1988).

Feminisms

You may notice that we are using the plural with regard to feminism. This is because it is widely accepted that there is no single feminist theory, but rather, there are different kinds of feminism. These were originally tied to particular ideological positions—liberal and socialist feminism, for example (Hekman, 1999). Indeed, Jaggar and Struhl (1978, 1984, cited in Mullaly & Keating, 1991) posit four different positions: radical, liberal, socialist and Marxist. Since then, different theoretical positions have emerged in addition to these positions—these are postmodern or post-structural, standpoint and intersectional or Africana feminism (Agger, 2006). What these perspectives share in common is a concern with the status of women. Each perspective has different explanations about the current state of women and are shaped by their position with regard to global–local relations (Demos & Segal, 2006).

The earliest feminist perspectives were tied to first wave feminism and came out of the metropole, by which we mean they emerged as part of the Anglophone adoption of natural and political rights that were extended from men to women (Lake, 2003, p. 349). Likewise, second-wave feminism emerged in many Anglophone countries across the 1960s and 1970s. However, it has been said that much of this early theorising and activism did not adequately address the issues concerning Black women and women in postcolonialist or settler colonialist countries. Hence, later waves of feminist scholarship have attempted to address this through studies of intersectionality (for a description, see Hodgson & Watts, 2017, pp. 90–94; Mehrotra, 2010). In terms of the overall historical development of social theory, women and the experiences of women were barely considered. As a result of a legacy of feminist activism and scholarship, feminist theories nowadays are widely regarded as a core to the entire corpus of critical social science because they have provided important explanations and challenges to the women's domination and oppression in society. This scholarship has demonstrated quite clearly the invisibility of women from every sphere of social life, except perhaps the household and family.

Grounded in the experiences of women, feminism is less doctrinaire perhaps than Marxist critical theory (Agger, 2006). Nevertheless, there has developed a range of feminist positions as well as several generations of feminist theorising that utilise the concept of *patriarchy* as a key explanatory idea in the oppression and experience of women. Generally, patriarchy can be defined as “the dominance of men and the subordination of women in society at large” (Heywood, 1998, p. 335).

Another significant theory that has been able to explain women's absence from public life is the *sexual division of labour* (Pateman, 1988). Agger (2006) suggests that this division between the public and private spheres of life can be traced back to the Greek notion of household. As mentioned above, women's participation in reproductive relations that support capitalist production was ignored but it has become a core feature of a radical and socialist feminist activism and theorising. Feminists have made the point that women's invisibility is also an artefact of being non-citizens in the historical creation of nation-states (Lister, 1997). It has taken significant activism to achieve even the minimal voting franchise for women in Western countries across the early decades of the twentieth century. Activism to extend the voting franchise for women outside the metropole has continued across the world.

Contemporary social work scholars have embedded various aspects of the extensive feminist corpus of theorising into anti-oppressive, radical, structural, critical and critical post-modern social work theories. For example, due to a “resurgence of feminism and the women's movement in the 1970s” (Ablett & Morley, 2016, p. 11), early radical social work took up the issue of “patriarchy as the fundamental cause of oppression” (Mullaly & Keating, 1991, p. 55). By the 1980s gender had become “widely recognised as a major form of structural oppression” (Ablett & Morley, 2016, p. 11). Due to the influence of structural social work emerging from Canada (Mullaly, 1997, 2007), and anti-oppressive perspectives (Baines, 2007; Dominelli, 2002a, 2002b), present-day critical scholars have adopted an intersectional framework to encompass the dynamic interplay between social structures and categories in order to understand oppression and discrimination.

Theory of False Consciousness

The theory of false consciousness here concerns the assumed natural divide between the public and private spheres of life. This divide resulted in feminists turning their attention to aspects of women's experience that did not traditionally garner the attention from male social theorists: sexuality, intimate relations, childcare and power (Agger, 2006). This focus has resulted in extensive feminist scholarship that cemented the connections between the personal and the political (Griffiths, 1995), the role of gender and sexuality (Butler, 2011; Pateman, 1988), and violence and oppression operating in women's lives (Dominelli, 2002a, 2002b). One area of false consciousness was located within feminism itself where much early theorising suppressed the views of Black women about the "intersection of race and class in structuring gender" (Collins, 1990, p. 7). Kimberle Crenshaw would coin the term intersectionality in order to "grapple with the overlapping race and gender discrimination that often confronts Black women" (MacLean, 2017, p. 1). As mentioned above, intersectionality is a key theoretical body of work that informs anti-oppressive social work perspectives; however, it is not without its challenges. One of these is the increase in complexity that accompanies analyses that include "multiple dimensions of social life" (McCall, 2005, p. 1772). This has resulted in critiques emerging that suggest that "intersectionality is often misapplied in ways that accommodate neoliberal practices and/or re-marginalize the ideas and experiences of women of colour" (MacLean, 2017, p. 2). As a result, McCall (2005) suggests that intersectionality makes particular demands for complexity, and as such, there have emerged three distinct categories for addressing this complexity. Mattsson (2014) suggests that forms of critical reflection may offer a way to encompass this complexity for social work practitioners, so long as structural analysis remains central to the reflective process.

Another area that has also come about as a result of feminist work is the increasing literature and theorising on sexuality and how patriarchal social relations cement social norms associated with heterosexism. This has paved the way for a significant body of theorising in the area of Queer theory and activism on challenging sexual norms that contribute to oppression for both genders (Demos & Segal, 2006). In sum, feminist perspectives offer an extensive corpus of critical social science from which to consider the relations of gender, power, sexuality, and family. Moreover, this corpus of critical social science continues across the fronts of explanatory theory, education and transformative action, as we will see below.

Theory of Crisis

Fay (1987) suggests critical social science theories spell out what kind of crisis is resulting from current social arrangements. For feminists, this has been most challenging—explicating why the oppression of women is a crisis when in fact gender and gendered relations are widely viewed in society as part of a "natural order". Recently,

feminist philosopher Allen (2010, p. 22) asked critical theorist Axel Honneth to consider in his critical theory of recognition, relations of domination that interweave forms of recognition resulting in the possibility that domination can “function so seamlessly...that it produces no signs of struggle in its targets.” Allen is referring to forms of domination experienced by women through processes and structures of gender subordination. Nevertheless, feminists have been instrumental in describing the oppression of women and detailing the significant “felt” dissatisfactions, including the violence and harm that women routinely face in all societies (for example, sexual assault in homes and workplaces), and pointing out that many aspects of gender and gendered relations are socially constructed and maintained. In this respect, feminist theories of all kinds have demonstrated how ongoing gendered oppression, discrimination and violence threaten the cohesion of a given society and ought to be addressed (Dominelli, 2002a, 2002b; Young, 1990).

Theory of Education

In the early history of feminism, education was seen as an important way in which to change attitudes to women and this approach continues today. This can take many forms such as advocating for access to education for women and girls. It could also mean working to increase the participation of girls completing high school or taking up higher education through universities, or it could be through offering community education programs through libraries, health and community facilities. Education may also include programs that challenge rigid and dominant gender and sexual norms and stereotypes, or educating around safe, respectful and consensual relationships.

Theory of Transformative Action

Much feminist action often involves group work and community organising, but it has also encompassed individual therapeutic work. Collective action has certainly been a key strategy in the movement through successive waves of feminist action. Areas that need transforming are relations between the genders, access to equal citizenship, changes in attitudes to women and children to protect them from exploitation and violence, and to pave the way for an expanded role in public and private institutional life.

While social work has a long engagement with feminist theories of various kinds, the discipline was slow to incorporate these into its mainstream work, even despite the fact that a majority of social workers are women and a majority of social work practice occurs with female service users (Rojek et al., 1988). However, more recent feminist work has been foundational to anti-oppressive social work frameworks developed by Dominelli (2002a, 2002b). In Australia, the radical social work movement was

substantially informed by early feminist theorising (Fook, 1990, 1993; Wearing & Marchant, 1986). As mentioned earlier, critical and critical postmodern social work theories incorporate intersectional ideas and also often utilise post-structural feminist analysis on the issue of power (Fook, 2002; 2016).

Postcolonialism

Postcolonial theory is a wide and varied body of literature and scholarship concerned with a critical examination of the effects and aftermath of the long history of colonisation and its postcolonial legacies. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, cited in Go, 2013, p. 6) states that “We live in a post-colonial neo colonized world”. Spivak is pointing out a simple fact, but one that was barely considered by metropole social theorising at the time of Marx or even by early twentieth century social theorists. Postcolonial writing and theorising began in the 1950s and 1960s, first in the humanities, and leading to a movement across many other disciplines such as history, philosophy, art and anthropology. Different postcolonial theorists have been influenced by different social theories effectively meaning the field is “far from being...unified” (Williams & Chrisman, 1994, p. 5). For example, while postcolonial thinker Edward Said is said to have been influenced by the discourse analysis of Michel Foucault, others like Homi Bhabha were influenced by psychoanalysis. Feminism influenced Chandra Mohanty, and Spivak utilised deconstruction to consider the relation between imperialism and colonialism (Williams & Chrisman, 1994).

Ghandi (1998) suggests that postcolonialism can be seen as another major body of critical theory, taking its place with post-structuralism, feminism, and psychoanalysis. Yet, the place of postcolonial thinking in social work is just emerging and yet to be fully developed. Go (2013) suggests sociology (which is his focus) was also rather late in engaging with postcolonialism. The same might be said for psychology. According to Macleod and Bhatia (2008), postcolonial psychology is at the embryonic stage, although this may have changed in recent years.

Theory of False Consciousness

Postcolonialism has become a very important framework contesting the assumptions of universalism embedded within a great deal of social theory concerned with human beings, society and by extension, issues of justice and human well-being (Connell, 2007). Thus, postcolonial scholars challenge the blindness of “European myths of progress and humanism” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 21). They do so by presenting alternative histories, literatures and narratives that include the colonial *others* who have been excluded, oppressed and colonised by the grand narratives of European modernity. In following the work of Edward Said—and the later work of Michel Foucault—Tully

(2008) argues that human beings should be thought of as existing and arising from within relationships of power, which is influential on the meaning we give our lives, and how human subjectivity is formed. Human relations in the postcolonial theoretical context are *agonistic*. That is, they are characterised by struggle (for example, Indigenous struggles for reconciliation, land rights, cultural recognition and justice). Such struggles are situated within the contested histories of *imperialism*, and it is this relation to imperialism that occupies various postcolonial projects of research, scholarship and activism. This emphasis on agonism means that postcolonial theories see even the imposition of *principles* of social justice and Enlightenment epistemology as a symptom of colonisation, and thus something to be examined and possibly resisted, especially if such principles carry with them “imposed image[s]...that are degrading, subordinating and alienating” (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007, p. 120).

A key theoretical idea in postcolonial thought is expressed by the term *subaltern*, which came into the postcolonial lexicon through the scholarship of a South East Asian collective, known as the Subaltern Studies Group (Macey, 2000b). The term subaltern is used to denote “...groups that have been made subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender, office or ‘in any other way’” (Macey, 2000b, p. 362). Subaltern positions and subordination can only become understandable through an analysis of power and ruling authority, and how this power and authority intersects with and oppresses and silences subaltern others.

The kind of power used to explain how subordination occurs is known as hegemony, which is derived from the Greek term *hegemon*. Broadly speaking, in the Greek conceptual field, hegemon means a ruling class. The theory of hegemony has been elaborated further by Antonio Gramsci, and it has come to be used in a wide range of contexts to describe the process by which some groups become dominant through the cultural engineering and legitimising of certain dominant ideas, norms and knowledges (Heywood, 1998). Gramsci’s term hegemony has been applied in popular culture studies (Durham & Kellner, 2004) and in studies of gender (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemony has come to refer to a form of power deployed by people in society who occupy positions of dominance in relation to other people who are conversely positioned as subaltern subjects. Particularly, hegemony refers to the use of dominant kinds of knowledge and norms (for example, we may say that psychiatric and medical knowledge is hegemonic when used to subordinate and perhaps belittle alternative understandings of what constitutes health and well-being). This positioning that goes on is precisely the relation described by postcolonial scholars as “mutually constitutive”, which means the hegemonic actors and the subaltern subjects are equally products of history (Tully, 2008). Thus, Tully (2008, p. 160) asserts that subjects in these relations are positioned differently where “...subalterns are constrained to act ‘tactically’ ...because of their unequal and subordinate position, [and] hegemons act ‘tactically’ ...[to] structure the field of possible responses”. It is in this way that Spivak (1999, cited in Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007, p. 121) is able to build a conception of justice that is not built on pre-existing principles or presuppositions of western Enlightenment thought, but is instead cre-

ated out of an “orientation to the other, a duty to the other...making room for the other to speak and be heard”. In other words, to subvert top-down hegemonic power so that different forms of justice can arise from agnostic struggle from below.

Theory of Crisis

The crisis outlined in postcolonial thought is the history of early European colonisation, which continues in various iterations today. The issue of “colonisation” versus “settlement” continues as a form of contest over history (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007; Williams & Chrisman, 1994) and current ongoing projects of colonisation. For example, in the US context scholars Arvin et al. (2013, p. 12) draw attention to settler colonialism as a “persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous people that are there”. They further suggest that this settler colonialism interacts with structures of gender and heteropatriarchy that make invisible the lives and struggles of Indigenous women (Arvin et al., 2013). This same pattern can be seen in many places around the world. Go (2013, p. 3) suggests that two great events have occurred, and this has situated the present relation between the metropole and periphery, the North and South, the West and the rest of the world. The first event is “the violent imperial expansion of the European and Anglo-American states...in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the early twentieth century...” (Go, 2013, p. 3). This expansion spread these practices and structures that made European modes of human social life appear natural and thus elided other forms. The second event was the withdrawal from, and dismantling of, the same colonial empires built during early colonisation. This second event largely took place after World War Two (Go, 2013) and in the place of colonial empires has seen the rise of nation-states and the shoring up of state power. Therefore, it is within both nation-states and the current and ongoing imperialist globalisation project that the crises and contestations of post-colonisation continues. It is perhaps not surprising in the wake of these events that theories of social justice and calls for human rights started to become more widespread and urgent across the late twentieth century.

Theory of Education

In light of the history of colonisation, it becomes clear that for postcolonial scholars the educative space for addressing colonisation is bottom-up through diverse forms of struggle and the development of local knowledges that contest the universal assumptions of Enlightenment thinking. These may be through literary interventions or through the educative process itself (see for example the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in social work education in Australia, Australian Association of

Social Workers, 2010; Bessarab et al., 2014). One of the most developed articulations of a postcolonial theory of education is that of Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972). Freire's book sparked a critical pedagogical movement in education and it has influenced social work too. Freire's approach contends that education should be a process of conscientisation and liberation derived from engagement in dialogue about the conditions in which people find themselves. This dialogical process of learning is thought to offer the best route to achieving freedom from false ideologies and alienation associated with colonisation, and freedom from modes of mass education that rely on expert knowledges delivered in didactic, uniform and sometimes brutal ways. This postcolonial theory of education has been influential in critical and structural social work, particularly developing processes of critical reflection (Bay & Macfarlane, 2010; Brookfield, 2009; Fook, 1990, 2016; Smith, 2008).

Theory of Transformative Action

Ashcroft (2001) suggests that not all postcolonial theories are transformative. Some are aimed at the diagnosis of present conditions, and involve detailed descriptions of the relations and conditions that have arisen from colonialism and imperialism. These are usually more engaged with postmodern discourse theory. Others are more explicitly aimed at processes of conscientisation, and emphasise the activist struggle through which societies can be transformed. Such postcolonial theories with this aspect are often engaged with Marxist and structural theories. We can see that *postcolonial* theorists are diverse, and consequently, efforts at transformation and struggle occur across many fronts, in history, language, art and narratives, as well as through interventions in social processes and structures. Such efforts are by their nature historical and dependent on the specific contexts from which they emerge.

Conclusion

Critical social science is characterised by a concern with the social conditions that contribute to relations of domination and oppression. Moreover, this cluster of theories incorporates explanation, evaluation and programs of action for addressing injustice by pursuing social change. It is this focus on social change that has made critical social science so important to social justice work. These broad social theories (such as Marxism, feminism and postcolonialism) have been operationalised for the practical-moral purposes of addressing social injustice through social work practice (Dominelli, 2002a, 2002b; Fook, 1993; Howe, 2009; Lundy, 2011; Pease & Fook, 1999). In social work, radical, critical, structural and anti-oppressive social work have their origins in the critical social sciences that became more prominent in the 1970s, (Galper, 1975; Rojek et al., 1988; Turbett, 2014), and each of these approaches

can be traced back to core ideas developed at different times in the social sciences. By this, we can say that each of the anti-oppressive approaches in social work has incorporated the evaluative, practical and explanatory aspects of wider critical social theory.

The critiques from radical, critical and structural social work traditions also speak to one of the enduring problematics of social work: where and *how* should social work act in the world on issues of social inequality and conditions of exclusion and injustice. Such approaches in social work have sought to apply these ideas to various contemporary social dilemmas facing service users for the purpose of social change and reform. This also dovetailed with many social and political movements that continue today, such as those concerned with women's rights, workers and union movements, recognition and justice movements for Indigenous and First Nations peoples, LGBTIQA movements for equality and tolerance, disability rights movements, peace movements, environmental and animal rights activism and movements, and the establishment of NGOs concerned with human rights across the globe. Hence, critical social science provides important theoretical and practical resources for social work, and inspiration for working towards social justice.

References

- Ablett, P., & Morley, C. (2016). Towards a history of critical traditions in Australian Social Work. *Social Alternatives*, 35(4), 7–13.
- Agger, B. (1991). Critical theory, poststructuralism, postmodernism: Their sociological relevance. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 17(1), 105–131. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2083337>.
- Agger, B. (2006). *Critical social theories: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers.
- Allen, A. (2010). Recognizing domination: Recognition and power in Honneth's critical theory. *Journal of Power*, 3(1), 21–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540291003630338>.
- Allen, K., & O'Boyle, B. (2011). *Marx and the alternative to capitalism*. London, United Kingdom: Pluto Press.
- Alvesson, M., & Skoldberg, K. (2009). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE.
- Arvin, M., Tuck, E., & Morrill, A. (2013). Decolonizing feminism: Challenging connections between settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy. *Feminist Formations*, 25(1), 8–34. <https://doi.org/10.1325/ff.2013.0006>.
- Ashcroft, B. (2001). *Post-colonial transformation*. Florence, US: Taylor and Francis.
- Australian Association of Social Workers. (2010). *Code of ethics*. Canberra, Australian Capital Territory: Australian Association of Social Workers.
- Baines, D. (2007). Anti-oppressive social work practice: Fighting for space, fighting for change. In D. Baines & A. Benjamin (Eds.), *Doing anti-oppressive practice: Building transformative politicized social work*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing Co Ltd.
- Bay, U., & Macfarlane, S. (2010). Teaching critical reflection: A tool for transformative learning in social work? *Social Work Education*, 30(7), 745–758. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2010.516429>.
- Bessarab, D., Green, S., Jones, V., Stratton, K., Young, S., & Zubrzycki, J. (2014). *Getting it right: Teaching and learning framework* (115 pages). Canberra: Office of Teaching and Learning.

- Bohman, J. (2005). Critical theory. Retrieved June 23, 2016, from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/>.
- Brookfield, S. (2009). The concept of critical reflection: Promises and contradictions. *European Journal of Social Work*, 12(3), 293–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691450902945215>.
- Butler, J. (2011). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of “sex”*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge.
- Capeheart, L., & Milovanovic, D. (2007). *Indigenous/postcolonial forms of justice*. In *Social Justice: Theories, issues and movements* (pp. 108–139). New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Connell, R. (2007). *Southern theory*. Crow’s Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin.
- Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity in association with Blackwell.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society*, 19(6), 829–859.
- Demos, V., & Segal, M. T. (2006). Introduction. In V. Demos & M. T. Segal (Eds.), *Gender and the local-global nexus: Theory, research, and action* (pp. vii–xii). Online: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Dominelli, L. (2002a). *Anti-oppressive social work theory and practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dominelli, L. (2002b). *Feminist social work theory and practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Durham, M. G., & Kellner, D. M. (2004). Introduction to part II. In M. G. Durham & D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keyworks* (pp. 91–98). Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, Incorporated.
- Fay, B. (1987). *Critical social science*. Oxford, UK: Polity Press.
- Fook, J. (1990). Radical social casework: Linking theory and practice. In R. Thorpe & J. Petruchenia (Eds.), *Social change and social welfare practice* (pp. 20–47). Marrickville, New South Wales: Hale & Iremonger.
- Fook, J. (1993). *Radical casework: A theory of practice*. St. Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin.
- Fook, J. (2002). *Social work: Critical theory and practice*. London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Fook, J. (2016). *Social work: A critical approach to practice*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Foucault, M., & Rabinow, P. (1984). What is enlightenment? In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault reader* (pp. 32–50). London, UK: Penguin Books.
- Fraser, N. (1989). *Unruly practices: Power, discourse and gender in contemporary social theory*. Minneapolis, USA: University of Minnesota Press.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Galper, J. H. (1975). *The politics of social services*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Gandhi, L. (1998). *Postcolonial theory: A critical introduction*. St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin.
- Go, J. (2013). *Postcolonial sociology*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Gray, M., & Webb, S. A. (2009). Critical social work. In M. Gray & S. A. Webb (Eds.), *Social work theories and methods* (pp. 76–85). London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Griffiths, M. (1995). *Feminisms and the self: The web of identity*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Hekman, S. J. (1999). *The future of differences: Truth and method in feminist theory*. Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press.
- Heywood, A. (1998). *Political ideologies: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Houndmills: Macmillan Press.
- Hodgson, D., & Watts, L. (2017). *Key concepts and theory in social work*. London: Palgrave, Macmillan.
- Howe, D. (2009). *A brief introduction to social work theory*. Basingstoke, England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- International Labour Organization. (2017). About the ILO. Retrieved August 3, 2017, from <http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/lang-en/index.htm>.
- Lake, M. (2003). White man's country: The trans-national history of a national project. *Australian Historical Studies*, 34(122), 346–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10314610308596259>.
- Lister, R. (1997). *Citizenship: Feminist perspectives*. Houndmills: Macmillan.
- Lundy, C. (2011). *Social work, social justice and human rights: A structural approach to practice*. Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Macey, D. (2000a). Poststructuralism. In D. Macey (Ed.), *Dictionary of critical theory* (p. 309). London: Penguin Books.
- Macey, D. (2000b). Subaltern studies. In D. Macey (Ed.), *Dictionary of critical theory* (p. 367). London: Penguin Books.
- MacLean, L. (2017). *On the relation between Iris Young's conception of structures and intersectional approaches to subordination*. Paper prepared for presentation at the 2017 CPSA meeting in Toronto, Ontario. Retrieved from <https://cpsa.acsp.ca/documents/conference/2017/MacLean.pdf>.
- Macleod, C., & Bhatia, S. (2008). Postcolonialism and psychology. In C. Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Marx, K. (1844). Estranged labour. In C. Lemert (Ed.), *Social theory: The multicultural and classic readings* (4th ed., pp. 32–38). Philadelphia, USA: Westview Press.
- Marx, K. (1932/2000). Economic & philosophic manuscripts of 1844. Retrieved June 21, 2018, from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf>.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848). The manifesto of class struggle. In C. Lemert (Ed.), *Social theory: Multicultural and classic readings* (pp. 39–43). Philadelphia, USA: Westview Press.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1967). *The communist manifesto*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Mattsson, T. (2014). Intersectionality as a useful tool: Anti-oppressive social work and critical reflection. *Affilia*, 29(1), 8–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109913510659>.
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs*, 30(3), 1771–1800. <https://doi.org/10.1086/426800>.
- Mehrotra, G. (2010). Toward a continuum of intersectionality: Theorizing for feminist social work scholarship. *Affilia*, 25(4), 417–430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109910384190>.
- Mullaly, R. P. (1997). *Structural social work: Ideology, theory, and practice* (2nd ed.). Toronto, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mullaly, R. P. (2007). *The new structural social work* (3rd ed.). Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press.
- Mullaly, R. P., & Keating, E. F. (1991). Similarities, differences and dialectics of radical social work. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 2(2), 49–78. https://doi.org/10.1300/J059v02n02_04.
- Nicholson, L. (1987). Feminism and Marx: Integrating kinship with the economic. In S. Benhabib & D. Cornell (Eds.), *Feminism as critique* (pp. 16–30). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Pateman, C. (1988). *The sexual contract*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Pease, B., & Fook, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Transforming social work practice*. St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin.
- Rojek, C., Collins, S., & Peacock, G. (1988). *Social work and received ideas*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Sarup, M. (1993). *An introductory guide to post-structuralism and postmodernism* (2nd ed.). New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Sayer, A. (2011). *Why things matter to people: Social science, values and ethical life*. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, L. (2008). South African social work education: Critical imperatives for social change in the post-apartheid and post-colonial context. *International Social Work*, 51(3), 371–383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872807088083>.

- Tully, J. (1999). To think and act differently: Foucault's four reciprocal objections to Habermas' theory. In S. Ashenden & D. Owen (Eds.), *Foucault contra Habermas* (pp. 90–142). London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Tully, J. (2008). On law, democracy and imperialism. In J. Tully (Ed.), *Public philosophy in a new key: Volume 2, imperialism and civic freedom* (pp. 127–165). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Turbett, C. (2014). *Doing radical social work*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- van den Brink, B., & Owen, D. (2007). Introduction. In B. van den Brink & D. Owen (Eds.), *Recognition and power: Axel Honneth and the tradition of critical social theory* (pp. 1–32). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- van Krieken, R., Habibis, D., Smith, P., Hutchins, B., Martin, G., & Maton, K. (2014). *Sociology* (5th ed.). Frenchs Forest, New South Wales: Pearson Australia.
- Wearing, B. (1996). *Gender: The pain and pleasure of difference*. Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman Australia Pty Limited.
- Wearing, B., & Marchant, H. (1986). *Gender reclaimed: Women in social work*. Sydney, New South Wales: Hale & Iremonger.
- Williams, P., & Chrisman, L. (1994). Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: An introduction. In P. Williams & L. Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial discourse and postcolonial theory* (pp. 1–20). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.