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**Critical origins:**

The contemporary profession of social work, from its Western origins always emphasize the social side of human existence, the influence of social context in the lives of individuals. (3)

1. Radical and structural approaches to social work practice were developed between the 1960s and 1980s in Britain by Bailey & Brake (1975, 1980) and Corrigan & Leonard (1978); in the USA by Galper (1980); and in Australia by Throssell (1975), Rees (1991), De Maria (1993) and Fook (1993). Radical critiques initially criticized traditional social work (casework) for the emphasis on individualized forms of helping and, by implication, individual and social problems. The Canadians Maurice Moreau (1979) and Bob Mullaly (1993) are generally credited with the development of the structural approach. In broad terms, feminists (Brook & Davis, 1985; Dominelli & McLeod, 1989; Marchant & Wearing, 1986) agreed with the analysis of both radicals and structuralists, but added the dimension of gender as a structural concern in influencing individual lives. Feminist social work models focused more on developing the links between analysis and practice and personal and political experience, both of which dimensions were largely ignored (or poorly developed) in earlier radical formulations. (5)
2. The basic elements of a critical approach as embodied in radical, feminist and structural writings are as follows: (5)
  - ◆ A commitment to a structural analysis of social, and personally-experienced problems, i.e. an understanding of how personal problems might be traced to socio-economic structures, and that the ‘personal’ and ‘political’ realms are inextricably linked;
  - ◆ A commitment to emancipatory forms of analysis and action (incorporating both anti-oppressive and anti-exploitative stances);
  - ◆ A stance of social critique (including an acknowledgement and critique of the social control functions of the social work profession and the welfare system);
  - ◆ A commitment to social change.
3. Comments:
  - ◆ There was the quite clear and distinctive split between social work student

radicals and conservatives, apparently able to be identified by the methods one practiced (community work or casework) and possibly also in the way one dressed. (7)

- ◆ This almost simplistic valuing of collective approaches seemed to me to deny, overlook and devalue the personal experiences of myself as a social worker, and the people I worked to assist. (7)
- ◆ Structural perspectives implied a gendered nature of the value differences between 'macro' and 'micro' work, implied by the radical perspective – 'micro-work', the traditional area of work for women, was relatively devalued in a radical perspective; (8)
- ◆ Structural thinking supports a relative devaluing of social work practice experience as against radical and sociological theory. (8)
- ◆ Any empowering of workers automatically becomes a disempowering of the disadvantaged people with whom they work. Also disadvantaged groups are characterized by definition as disempowered, thus denying any power they might have. (9)
- ◆ This can be applied to some of the more epistemological questions. The way in which our past notions of radical theorizing and practice have been conceptualized can be dangerously positivistic and scientific in the ways in which theories and practices have been distinguished and oppositionally characterized. Such views automatically value the knowledge created by scientific, often male, academic researchers, and discount the learning which arises from practical experience, the reflective process in which ideas are created, as well as developed. (10)
- ◆ The assumption that workers could or should be radical solely through their actions, and that new practices should be the sole defining feature of radical social work, often led to a stultifying inaction. (10)
- ◆ The seemingly oversimplified, one-way, deductive view of how theory relates to practice. (10)
- ◆ The idea that to be an effective 'radical practitioner' you had to undergo a type of 'conversion' seemed a little too much like a type of ideological oppression of another kind. (11)
- ◆ The implicit assumption that if any client were to be effectively helped, they too had to undergo a conversion and take on board the new radical theory.
- ◆ Radical perspectives seemed to have very limited and oversimplified conceptions of power and identity, which did not seem to cover the multitude of various situations in which both clients and workers operate, and indeed may lock disadvantaged people into disempowered identities.

- ◆ It seemed to imply a very deterministic view of people and the possibilities for change and transformation. They almost seemed to have an ‘alienating’ rather than an empowering effect, denying people of personal agency, rather than creating the power to effect change.

### **Postmodern and poststructural social work possibilities?**

1. Postmodernism involves a critique of totalizing theories and the structures, boundaries and hierarchies which maintain and enact them. It represents both a critique of these structures and an actual fragmentation of them. Postmodernism is both a theory and a descriptive framework, represents a recognition that the traditional organizing frameworks are no longer valued or relevant, and that we must now acknowledge the existence of diverse and multiple frameworks or discourses. Our meaning is constructed out of the language of our multiple discourses about it. In this way, there is no one universal truth or reality, but instead ‘reality’ is constructed out of a multiplicity of diverse and fragmented stories. In this sense, the ‘grand narratives’ like Science or Reason, which sought to provide a universal explanation and basis for human action and inquiry, are now deconstructed and seen to be a mass of conflicting ways of making sense of different experiences from different perspectives. (12)

- ◆ A critique of logocentrism
- ◆ Dichotomous thinking
- ◆ The idea of difference
- ◆ Deconstruction
- ◆ Multiple discourses
- ◆ Situated subjectivity

2. Impacts on social work: (13-14)

- ◆ The emphasis on social context and the constant connection of this individual experience (e.g. situated subjectivity) provides a more detailed theoretical understanding of the individual in social context, and also considerably develops our understanding of how the social structure is part of everyday experience. It provides a stronger theoretical basis for practice at the point of intersection between ‘person-in-situation’.
- ◆ The analysis of dichotomous thinking provides an excellent basis for a critique of gender-biased thinking and related practices.
- ◆ The recognition of multiple discourses adds a complexity of understanding to the multifaceted situations in which social workers find themselves. This should allow for more effective practice.
- ◆ The recognition of how difference is constructed provides an alternative way of conceptualizing marginality and redefining it in empowering ways.

- ◆ The allowance for changing subjectivities and identities represents a little more of the complexity of human life, and the ways in which living is mediated continuously by context. This may allow us to match our understanding of people's lives more closely with their own perceptions and experiences.
- ◆ The understanding of how knowledge is produced and 'hierarchised' provides an alternative way to reconceptualise and value the 'marginal' voices of services users and practitioners.
- ◆ The upending of the 'theory/practice' binary leads to the revaluing of practice and lived experience as ways of knowing. This also potentially empowers previously marginal people, because it acknowledges and legitimizes their experiences and identities. It also allows for more complex forms of theory which incorporate new perspectives to be developed.
- ◆ The possibilities for knowledge and theory to be generated and used in multiple ways make for potentially more flexible practice.
- ◆ The critique (deconstruction) of mainstream practices potentially upends taken for granted hierarchies and power differences, and allows for the possibility of new forms of empowerment.

#### **Doubts about postmodernism:**

1. Many social workers are concerned that postmodern thinking supports a moral relativism which potentially undermines the strong social justice, indeed the critical ideals, of social work. In this sense, when it provides an attractive framework for the incorporation of multiple and marginal perspectives, it is argued that there still needs to be a privileging of a single perspective, in order to make decisions about how (and why) to act. Having a guide for action implies a moral framework which justifies that action. Many people feel that postmodern thinking fragments this framework, and therefore provides no clear basis for action. (15)
2. In pointing up that every perspective is 'positioned' in fact removes the privilege of any position. Therefore postmodern analysis does not provide guidance about appropriate or desirable knowledge and ways to act. (15)
3. Foucault provides a starting point for the way out: 'My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous'. The issue at stake is to focus on the potential 'dangerousness' of practices and situations. The way I like to understand the contribution of postmodernism is that the values of ideas is in how they are enacted or expressed in a given situation or context, rather than in any inherent value in the ideas themselves, regardless of context. (16)

### **Critical approach to social work (17)**

1. 'Domination' is structural, yet also personally experienced, it is achieved by ruling groups through a mixture of external exploitation plus an internal self-discipline or self-deception. This is the idea that people also participate in their own oppression. As some feminists might term it, people hold and perpetuate 'self-defeating' beliefs and customs.
2. Thus the notion of 'false consciousness' is important. There is a recognition that a process of false consciousness operates within capitalist societies so that members of the society cannot recognize that social relations are in fact historically constructed, and therefore transformable.
3. A critique of positivism as a major ideology, since this encourages passivity and attitudes of fatalism. Social members see themselves as removed from, disengaged or alienated from the power to act on and in their situation. Therefore there is a need to develop a consciousness which is able to view 'facts' as pieces of history which can be changed. 'This emphasizes the power of agency, both personal and collective, to transform society'.
4. The possibility for progress is inherent in critical social theory. It is political in that it sees a role for critical social theory in raising awareness about domination and the possibilities for social change. Because it links this awareness of structural domination with everyday experience, critical social theory is voluntaristic rather than deterministic.
5. As part of the critique of positivism, there is a recognition that knowledge is not simply a reflection of 'empirical reality', but is also actively constructed by those studying it. There is therefore a need to distinguish between knowledge which comes from causal analysis and that which comes from self-reflection and interaction. This means that there needs to be reliance on communication as a major transformative process.
6. Similarity between postmodern thinking and a critical approach: (17-18)
  - ◆ The recognition of interactive and reflective ways of knowing,
  - ◆ The recognition of the connections between structural domination and personal self-limitations;
  - ◆ The recognition of possibilities for both personal and social change.,
  - ◆ Such an approach might incorporate an understanding of how social realities are constructed both externally and internally. The emancipatory possibilities are opened up through a critical analysis of the interaction between individuals and society which situates the interest group and power relations operating in both external structures and constructed in these ways.

## **New Ways of Knowing**

1. Postmodern and critical thinking challenge this idea of immutable scientific knowledge in a number of ways: (33)
  - ◆ By asking what constitutes ‘acceptable’ knowledge, and whether and why some forms of knowledge are valued over others,
  - ◆ By focusing on how we know, as well as what we know,
  - ◆ By drawing attention to different perspectives on what and how we know,
  - ◆ By drawing attention to the perspective of the knower, and how it influences what is known and how it is known (reflexivity).
2. Professionals therefore stand to lose quite a bit of power if alternative perspectives are accepted, so a challenge to the exclusive knowledge of professionals is a direct challenge to their power base. (37)
3. Similar dilemmas arise in relation to theory and practice. The separate worlds of theory and practice have been built in this way in line with the hierarchical split between professionals and service users and researchers and practitioners. (38)
4. The reflective approach recognizes that theory is often implicit in the way professionals act and may not be congruent with the theory they believe themselves to be acting upon. This type of theory, or perhaps ‘practice wisdom’. Is developed directly from practice experience – a ‘bottom-up’ type of process. (39)
5. Similarities between the reflective approach, feminism and postmodernism: (40)
  - ◆ An inductive approach to theory building
  - ◆ A recognition of the use and importance of intuition and artistry in professional practice,
  - ◆ The importance of context and interpretation,
  - ◆ The importance of a holistic perspectives,
  - ◆ Non-positivist and experiential approaches.
6. From a critical and postmodern perspective then, the reflective practitioner engages with knowledge that is obtained empirically and through reflection in a way that recognizes the process by which this knowledge (and thus power structures and relations) are maintained. Through deconstructing this knowledge, and unearthing multiple constructions, they are able further to develop (reconstruct) their own practice in inclusive, artistic and intuitive ways which are responsive to the changing (uncertain, unpredictable and fragmented) contexts in which they works; and in ways which can challenge existing power relations and structures. (41)
7. Processes of critical reflection: (43)
  - ◆ Description of your practice and the situation (or context). (in postmodern

terms, storying or telling the narrative)

- ◆ Reflective questioning, reflection-on-action (or deconstruction), focusing on issues of power and how notions of power are constructed;
  - ◆ Redeveloping practice and theory (reconstruction), particularly in relation to how power relations and structures can be changed to be more emancipatory.
  - ◆ The whole process is therefore an inductive process in which you are engaged in developing your own theory of practice from this particular piece of practice and situation.
8. Different between reflective practice and reflexivity: (43)
- ◆ From different discourses;
  - ◆ Reflectivity seems to have emerged from professional practitioner and educational discourse; refer more to a process of reflecting upon practice;
  - ◆ Reflexivity comes from social science researcher discourse; refers more to a stance of being able to locate oneself in the picture, to appreciate how one's own self influences the research act.
  - ◆ They are not mutually exclusive and it is possible that the methods of reflective practice, used similarly to deconstructive methods, might aid a person in becoming more reflexive.

## **Power**

1. Adams (1996:12-15) nicely summarizes some of the risks associated when the idea of empowerment is put into practice: (47)
  - ◆ The paradox of empowering without doing people's empowering for them;
  - ◆ One person's empowerment may be another's disempowerment;
  - ◆ Danger of dilution – from empowerment to enablement;
  - ◆ Dangers of addressing too many target groups and addressing none adequately;
  - ◆ Ambiguous relationship between self-help and empowerment. (47)
2. Problematics in the conceptions of power and empowerment
  - ◆ Power as commodity: modernists notions of power seem to conceptualize power as a 'commodity', that is, as a material entity which can be traded or given away, or transferred from one person or group to another. (48)
  - ◆ Binary oppositional relations: such notions of power therefore seem to split the world into two oppositional groups – the powerful and the powerless – with the accompanying assumption that they are two mutually exclusive groups. (49)
  - ◆ Allowance for difference: modernist notions of power assume that we are

striving for equality, that empowerment is about reducing inequality. However, what equality means is often unclear or oversimplified. Often it is assumed that equality = sameness. Therefore the process of empowerment necessarily means that all people and groups become the same. The problem is that it leaves little room for personal choice and social difference. (50)

- ◆ Accounting for contradictions: such conceptualizations of power are therefore inadequate in accounting for uncertainty, contradictions and difference. In particular they cannot account for the phenomenon of 'complicity with oppression', in that sometimes traditionally disadvantaged people and groups appear willingly to comply with beliefs which work systematically to disadvantage them. (50)
- ◆ The disempowering experience of empowerment: the experience of being given power may not be experienced as empowering, but in fact may have disempowering effects. (51)

### 3. Reformulating the concept of power:

- ◆ Power involves the potential to control and restrict, to form and transform. Not only are individuals regulated by state power, but state power gives a life and identity for the individual through providing appropriate categorization, a fabric through which to live their lives. (52)
- ◆ To analyze/reflect upon (deconstruct) situations, focusing on how existing power relations and structures are supported and created: (54)
  - What different assumptions about power support the existing state of affairs?
  - How are these expressed and articulated?
  - What types of climate and context are created by these ideas?
  - How does this climate maintain existing power relations?
  - How is this climate experienced by different people and does it function to empower or disempower them?
  - What are the different interest groups and individuals in the situation?
  - What types of power are used differently by these different people?
  - Whose ideas are dominant, and how are they expressed by, and how do they affect different players?
  - What are some of the contradictions about power which arise for people?
  - How might some players participate in their own disempowerment?
  - What power do I exercise in the situation?
  - How do I conceptualise it and the power within it and whose interests

does this serve?

- ◆ To redefine and reconceptualize the power relations and structures in non-oppositional terms, allowing for differences between the different players involved, including yourself. You may need to develop a process of dialogue and communication so that different parties can come to understand how each experiences empowerment or disempowerment.
- ◆ To negotiate a changed system of power relations and structures which is experienced as empowering for all parties, including yourself.
- ◆ To reconstruct and reconceptualize the situation in ways which are more empowering for all parties.
  - How can different players be included in the process of empowerment?
  - How can powerful experiences be identified and valued?
  - How can an empowering climate be created?

### **Empowerment**

1. In reformulating the concepts of power and empowerment we need to take into account: (103)
  - ◆ The contextual and changing nature of power;
  - ◆ How power operates at diff. Levels, often simultaneously and in contradictory ways;
  - ◆ How power is experienced by different people;
  - ◆ The creative, as well as controlling, possibilities power entails.
2. Empowering people therefore involves a complex (multilayered) understanding (which includes their own perspectives as well as those of other players) of how power is exercised and how it affects them, but also of how they exercise and create their own power. This includes an understanding of how they might participate in their own powerlessness as well as their own powerfulness. (103-4)
3. The four stages of the deconstructive/ reconstructive process in empowerment may be summarized as follows: (104)
  - ◆ Reconstruction (of the constructions and operations of power and power relations): in this stage, the focus is on identifying the major types and sources of power, and how they are understood and used by diff. Players in the situation;
  - ◆ Resistance (questioning of domination constructions of power and power relations): in this stage the main focus is on identifying the types of power and the ways it is exercised which may need to be changed or resisted in order to change the situation in more empowering ways.
  - ◆ Challenge (labeling of dominant and missing constructions of power and

power relations): in this stage, we seek to make specific changes to the way we conceptualise power, and thus the way in which we construct the situation and the power relations within it.

- ◆ Reconstruction (changing of existing constructions of power and power relations and creation of new ways of seeing power and related practices)
4. Overall the process involves an analysis and practice which focuses on the four main aspects of power as outlined above: (104)
- ◆ How is power constructed in this context and climate, and how might it change if some aspects of the context changed?
  - ◆ At what different levels does power operate and how might these support or contradict each other?
  - ◆ How is power exercised and experienced by different players in the situation?
  - ◆ What are both the controlling and the creative potentials of the power involved? (105)
5. Deconstructing power and power relations: (105)
- ◆ What main themes or patterns emerge from the description of the situation? What terms, phrases or patterns of communication reoccur frequently? What labels or categorizations occur? Is there evidence of binary opposites? Which of these themes, patterns or categories involves ideas or assumptions about power? If they are not ostensibly about power, how do they relate to issues of power?
  - ◆ Who are all the potential players (individuals, groups or organizations) involved in the situation or potentially affected by it? What are the relative positions of power of each of these players and what are the sources of their power?
  - ◆ Are the sources of power related to the context of this particular situation? Would this power change in a different context?
  - ◆ How does each player exercise power? How does each player experience the exercise of power?
  - ◆ Whose perspectives are represented and whose are missing? What other gaps or biases are present? What does this indicate about power relations?
  - ◆ What interpretations or explanations were made and whose were they? How were they represented and how did they influence the situation? What types of power did they imply?
  - ◆ How might the situation have been interpreted differently, and how might it have been interpreted by different players in the situation? Why do you think it was not interpreted by different players in the situation? Why do

you think it was not interpreted in these ways and what does this have to do with power relations?

- ◆ How do different players participate in creating or supporting the situation? How do different players participate in ways which empower or disempower them?
  - ◆ What knowledges and assumptions are implied and used in the account? How do they relate to (for example): practice theory; value and belief systems; paradigms; human behavior; moral and ethical codes; social and political systems and change; gender and cultural considerations? Are they relevant and appropriate to the situation at hand? What types of power relations does such knowledge or theory preserve?
  - ◆ What are the sources of these assumptions? What roles or positions do these assumptions support? Which players stand to gain or lose from holding them, and what social and power functions does holding these assumptions perform?
  - ◆ What practices, cultures, systems or structures are upheld by these assumptions? What power relations are preserved or created by them?
  - ◆ What are the 'theories of power' which arise from the analysis? Which ones are dominant? Are my own ideas about power similar or different to these dominant constructions?
  - ◆ What power do I exercise in the situation? How do I conceptualise it, and the power within it, and whose interests does this serve?
6. Resistance: (106)
- ◆ Which constructions of power should be questioned and further scrutinized and why?
  - ◆ Which constructions of power work in disempowering ways and for whom? In what ways do these support or contradict each other?
  - ◆ In what ways can we resist, or not participate in, practices, cultures or climates which are disempowering, for ourselves or others?
  - ◆ What aspects of the situation or context, if changed, might bring about changes in power relations?
  - ◆ What types of power, and the way it is exercised, hold controlling and/or creative potential for which players?
  - ◆ Can different players all benefit from a changed situation or must some stand to gain or lose relative to others? Is it possible to change the situation so that all players become relatively empowered?
7. Challenge: (107)
- ◆ How can we label or relabel these constructions of power in ways which are

more empowering, and for whom?

- ◆ What new types of thinking can we support or create, which will be experienced as empowering? And for whom?
- ◆ How can we support the creative, as opposed to the controlling, aspects of power?
- ◆ How can we change different aspects of the situation of context which might bring about changes in power?
- ◆ What new type of climate, culture, system, structure or situation might be experienced as more empowering, and by which players?

8. Reconstruction: (107)

- ◆ What changes need to be negotiated in order to bring about changed power relations in the situation? What different players are involved in these negotiations and how will their positions and ways of seeing power need to change?
- ◆ What different strategies can be used to make these changes? How do these strategies fit with the changed theories of power we have developed?
- ◆ How can different players be included in the process of empowerment? How can powerful experiences be identified and valued? How can an empowering climate be created?
- ◆ How does what is happening in this change process compare to the changed theories or conceptualizations of power? What are different players' actual experiences of empowerment?
- ◆ What further questions arise out of this changed situation? How do these relate to my changed conceptualizations of power? What are different players' actual experiences of empowerment?
- ◆ What further questions arise out of this changed situation? How do these relate to my changed conceptualizations of power?
- ◆ How would I label or categorize (or relabel or recategorize) my own theory of power as a result of this comparison? What is my version of, or my terminology for, the theory upon which I practice?
- ◆ What is the reformulated theory of (or assumptions about) power which results from my ongoing analysis?
- ◆ How can I frame my own practice theory of power, so that what I have learnt from this situation is useable in other contexts?

9. Common constructions of power in social work practice

- ◆ Social workers constructions of themselves: they see themselves as powerless and they did not possess enough power to bring about any change;
- (109)

- ◆ Constructing the enemy: we may conversely construct other people and groups as powerful; (110)
- ◆ Must power be structural?
- ◆ The only change is total change; (111)
- ◆ Participating in our own disempowerment; (112)
- ◆ Change and responsibility: workers construct for themselves, a type of 'no-win' situation. This 'responsible' yet 'powerless' identity potentially casts us in the worst possible position, accepting total blame but feeling unable to do anything about it; (112)
- ◆ Reconstructing ourselves and service users: (113)
  - What kinds of power do we and our service users possess, how do we exercise this and how does it change between situations? Are we able to transfer some types of power from one context to another?
  - What kinds of new identities and labels can we create for ourselves so that we define ourselves, and the people we work with, in non-oppositional terms (e.g. perhaps 'responsible in certain situations'; 'powerful in the interpersonal arena') or our service users (e.g. 'knowledgeable in using services');
  - What kinds of changes are we able to bring about and how can we label and value these?
  - What are the different levels of responsibilities of particular players in the situation, and which aspects can we be responsible for?

### **Critical Deconstruction and Reconstruction**

1. Discourse analysis and possibilities for critical resistance, challenge and change.
  - ◆ Analysis of discourses should also take into account how they operate, in order to uncover which interests are being served at a particular point in time, and in which particular situations. (90)
  - ◆ When analyzing discourses, it is therefore crucial to understand how they operate, for whom, and in which particular times and situations.
2. Deconstructive methods in practice: (91)
  - ◆ Discourse analysis is based upon an understanding of how discourses shape meaning. Their analysis therefore involves the uncovering of the ways we talk about and choose to label experience, and also how these shape this experience. In a practical sense this might involve analysis of the semiotics. Semiotic analysis refers not simply to the uncovering of rules, relations and mentality behind written texts but also to social life and its symbols in general (Kellehear, 1993). An analysis of discourse in this way also involves

a deconstruction of thinking and examination of how our talk and behavior contributes to constructing social relations and structures.

3. The critical reconstructive process: (91)
  - ◆ Critical deconstruction (analysis and identification of constructions of power);
  - ◆ Resistance (questioning of dominant constructions),
  - ◆ Challenge (labeling of domination and missing constructions),
  - ◆ Reconstruction (changing of existing constructions and creation of new ways of seeing, and related practices).
4. Deconstruction: involving searching for contradictions, different perspectives and interpretations. It is helpful to become aware of how different discourses operate (for whom and in what contexts) and to locate the specific sites of operation (through language, beliefs, practices, structures, power relations and different subject positions). Locating our own perspective or subject position in the discourse is also crucial (a stance of reflexivity). Analyzing how particular aspects of particular discourses preserve power relations and structures in particular situations is also another aspect of deconstruction. (92)
5. Resistance: this stage of resistance involves refusing to accept or participate in aspects of domination discourses which work to disempower, or perhaps render a situation unworkable because of this. (95)
6. Challenge: once prevailing discourses have been questioned and exposed, challenge involves the identification or labeling of both the existence and operation of discourses and that which is hidden, glossed over or assumed. (95)
  - ◆ Coining new terms, speaking publicly about viewpoints which have not been heard, or are considered unfashionable might also be helpful. Drawing attention to the fact that what you are about to say is unpopular, labeling a perspective for what you think it is etc., (95-6)
7. Reconstruction: formulating new discourses and structures. Naming existing and hidden discourses allows us to create new ones on this basis such as: (96)
  - ◆ Inventing new terms, language or phrases,
  - ◆ Inventing new conversational devices,
  - ◆ Creating new categories,
  - ◆ Modeling new practices,
  - ◆ Creating structures or processes, cultures or climates which allow new discourses to develop and become accepted.

### **Narrative Strategies**

Narratives are usually understood as stories that have a basic structure involving a

succession of events, organized in a culturally coherent way, which lead to a finale (Sands, 1996). The 3 elements are as follows: (132)

- ◆ They aim to establish credibility or acceptance within a particular social or cultural context;
- ◆ There is usually a linear, logical or causal link between different incidents in the narrative which leads to a conclusion or end;
- ◆ The incidents are organized to create a coherent sequence and view (identity) of the narrator.

### **Contextual Practice: Strategies for working in and with contexts**

1. This idea of contextual practice – practice both with and within context, places an emphasis on several new ways of seeing our practice:
  - ◆ The need to understand the nature of contexts in developing relevant practice strategies;
  - ◆ The idea of positionality – being able to assume a reflexive stance, simultaneously outside and within contexts;
  - ◆ The need to develop an ability to work with whole contexts, rather than simply a number of disparate players within a context;
  - ◆ The need to develop practice and practice theory/knowledge which is transferable across different contexts;
  - ◆ The need to reframe our skills in contextual terms.
2. Positionality: this recognition allows us to see from different positions at the same time, and therefore to position ourselves in a number of different ways at the same time. These multiple positions allow us to take multiple perspectives, to recognize our relative positions both within and outside our everyday working and living contexts. (144)
3. Working with whole contexts: allows the ability to work with whole contexts, while at the same time working within them. This involves an ability to recognize the different players in a situation, that their interests and identities may be complex and primarily influenced by a particular context. Therefore, it is important to recognize that service users might not always necessarily be ‘disadvantaged’, ‘victims’ or ‘disempowered’. (144)
4. Transferability: this occurs in an inductive process, whereby theory is created from an amalgam of preconceived thinking and changing experience, to be more easily transferred across contexts. This skill of transferability – the ability to modify, change and develop theory and knowledge in ways that make it readily relevant in different contexts – involves the practitioner being open to changes in contexts, rather than assuming and imposing preconceived orientations. (145)

5. Reframing skills in contextual terms – contextual or cultural competence: the ability to ‘read’ the cultural climate of contexts and to practise effectively with and within this climate. (146)
6. Advocacy:
  - ◆ We need to recognize that there are both outcome and process aspects of advocacy. While the ultimate outcome of advocacy may be to ensure the rights or entitlements of the person or group for whom we are acting, the process itself should be experienced as an empowering one by the people we are working for. (150)
  - ◆ It is important to identify multiple points of contradiction, alliance, complexity and resistance. (150)

### **Ongoing Learning**

- ◆ Critical reflection: linking reflection, evaluation and research; (157)
- ◆ A ground and transcendent vision: rather than devaluing small levels of change as inadequate because they are small, it is better to recognize that even small levels of change may contribute, in the longer term, or even in unpredictable immediate ways, to larger scale levels of change; also it may be possible to have seemingly contradictory aspects of one identity at the same time; (159)
- ◆ Relativism? Postmodernism is probably most criticized for its dangerously relativist stance as the denial of claims to universal truths runs directly contrary to the ideas of critical social work (Ife, 1999); also there seems to be little guidance for concrete action when knowledge and practice must be contextually relevant. We can see postmodernism as primarily an epistemology and critical theory as primarily a structural theory (a theory of underlying explanations implying a moral element), then it is possible to combine the two approaches. Thus critical perspectives provide the moral and directional element to postmodern thinking and postmodern thinking adds complexity to our understanding of how domination is created and maintained, at different sites and in different contexts. (160-1)
- ◆ Reframing our practice as contextual: we have reframed our idea of context and our idea of practice within it. In fact, if practice is contextual then this dilemma (of opposition between practice and environment) is no longer a dilemma. Our practice is simply defined as working with the context. (161)
- ◆ Identifying contradictions, complexities and points of alliance: (163)
  - What do we mean by social justice?
  - What is social justice in this situation?
  - Which aspects of this situation which people in this situation might support

these ideas?

- What are the different ways I can work with these people or these aspects?
- ◆ We are all part of the same social fabric. We also choose to continue our participation in the ways assumed within this social fabric. Also if we understand that each specific context in which we work, and even specific act within it has the potential to function in a number of ways simultaneously, we need to engage with people or situations in ways which minimize the harmful functions and maximize the empowering ones.