

Critical Theory: Pathway From Dichotomous to Integrated Social Work Practice

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ABSTRACT

Social work is rich in ideologies and traditions. One of our defining characteristics has been that we struggle with dichotomies. The focus of this article relates to our practice dichotomy: the struggle between service to the individual and change of the environment. This article uses critical theory as an ideological foundation to bridge the dichotomous approach between micro and macro social work practice. Applying critical theory to social work practice fits well with the professional values of enhancement of people's well-being, promotion of social justice, and empowerment of oppressed populations, while blending micro and macro practice. The article concludes with guidelines for critical social work practice.

Implications for Practice

- Practitioners can incorporate critical theory into everyday practice.
- Direct practice social workers can assist consumers to simultaneously address individual issues and prepare for engagement in social change.
- Practitioners and consumers can deal with the consequences of oppression by using critical theory as a foundation.

Social work is a relatively young profession. Medicine's formalization with Hippocrates dates back thousands of years, while social work was born in the late 1800s. In spite of its youth, social work is rich in ideologies and traditions. One of our defining characteristics has been that we struggle with dichotomies. The focus of this article relates to our practice dichotomy: the struggle between service to the individual and change of the environment. We often refer to this as the tension between micro and macro practice. We have made progress in bridging this practice dichotomy in recent years. However, more can be done. This article focuses on using critical theory as an ideological foundation to link the dichotomous approach between micro and macro social work practice. Critical theory is an ideological framework that can bring stronger cohesion to the profession. A discussion of critical theory and how it can be effectively applied to our profession is valuable as we progress into the second century of the social work profession.

The History of Dichotomous Practice in Social Work

There is rich discussion about the dichotomous foundations of social work (e.g., Abramovitz, 1998; Allan, Pease, & Briskman, 2003; Berlin, 1990; Ehrenreich, 1985; Gibelman, 1999; Haynes, 1998). Franklin (1986) summarizes the history of it well with her description of Mary Richmond and the Charity Organization Societies' (COS) perspective that emphasized individual responsibility and action, compared to Jane Addams and the settlement movement's perspective that problems are environmental and should involve social melioration. This split became codified further through Porter R. Lee's (1929) presentation to the National Conference of Social Work, where he defined the struggle between "cause and function" for social workers. He saw the challenge as finding a way to balance the cause of social work (mission, belief in social change) with the function (administration, delivery of services) of practice. This perspective was a variation on the settlement philosophy of changing the social structure and the COS focus on delivering services to the individual.

The struggle was renewed in the 1990s when Harry Specht and Mark Courtney (1994) published their book, *Unfaithful Angels: How Social Work Abandoned its Mission*. In their book, Specht and Courtney confronted the profession on what they viewed as a practice dichotomy. They worried that social workers were embracing psychotherapy and abandoning their mission as agents of social change. The larger argument was between commitment to an ideology for social change, and the administration and provision of direct services.

Are We a Dichotomous Profession?

We authors came to writing this piece because we have struggled with the above dichotomous dilemmas both in our practice and in teaching

social work practice. There likely would not have been so much heated debate over the last century if other social workers had not also faced this dichotomy. So, are we a dichotomous profession? Are we split within our practice arena between micro and macro work?

The *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (NASW) begins with the declaration that our mission is to “enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession’s focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society” (NASW, 2008). The *Code of Ethics* does not distinguish between micro and macro or cause and function. Our code of ethics regards us as one profession, united by our mission. There are no preferences or prescriptions given toward how to practice. However, the nature of our work does lead to dichotomies. For example, if we are working with a family evicted from their foreclosed home and in immediate need of housing for the night, do we focus on the function aspects and find them a place to sleep, or do we address the causes within our economic and social structure that may have contributed to their homelessness? When teaching about such “this or that” situations in social work, we typically suggest attending to the immediate need while maintaining efforts to change the larger system. Is that possible?

The dichotomous history of our profession is best described by the “Social Work Practice” entry in the 20th edition of the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*. In his summary of the section, McNutt (2008) writes, “It is undeniable that direct services/casework is the primary practice orientation in social work. The orientation of social work practice often conflicts with its concerns for social justice and systems change” (p. 141). Most schools of social work and textbooks delineate separate curricula for micro and macro practice, reinforcing this dichotomy for students learning to become social workers. Today, with our emphasis on environment, it is likely not an intentional preference or slight of either form of practice. Rather, it seems to be a reflection of the difficulty in teaching social work practice and its multifaceted approaches. Critical theory as a foundation for practice can provide that synthesis. We have excellent sources on the value of critical thinking for social work (e.g., Gambrill, 2005). *Critical thinking* is a tool of critical theory. *Critical theory* provides the ideological framework for a way to avoid dichotomous practice.

The History of Critical Theory

The origins of the school of thought known as critical theory date back to the 1920s and 1930s with the social philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, key scholars linked to the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School was the term used to identify a group of German philosophers, sociologists, and economists who were associated with the Institute for Social Research set up in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1923 (Held, 1980). Critical theory evolved in part as a response to the reactionary and totalitarian thought that was gaining popularity in Western Europe. The general premise was that human knowledge—knowledge gained through natural science, social awareness, and evaluation of the social order—can liberate people and contribute to social change (Fay, 1987). Horkheimer promoted the idea that the difference between knowledge in natural science, the foundation of positivism, and knowledge in social science was reflexivity (Horkheimer, 1972). Practicing reflexivity meant questioning the existing social order and the way power was distributed to explain human conditions. During the Nazi rise to power, this perspective was contrary to the prevailing powers, and the Institute went into exile. Adherents

of critical theory moved to the United States and other European countries and their ideas spread.

Since the 1930s, the ideology of critical theory can be found in other theoretical perspectives such as feminist theory and emancipation theory. Other theorists commonly identified with critical theory include Jurgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. We include modern social theorists bell hooks and Paulo Freire. Although classism, social order, and the power of institutions dominated early critical theory, hooks’ and Freire’s works questioned the impact of sexism and race on power and the social order, thereby widening the application of critical theory.

The general tenets of critical theory are that by understanding social systems with a focus on power and domination, we can become more conscious of the need for change, and in turn work toward that change. By reflecting on our individual place within the social structure, we can be more conscious of how to make changes for self-empowerment. Critical theory can be a guide for social action. It calls for investigation of the social order and understanding of why collective needs go unmet but the existing power structure is maintained (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Critical theory asserts that through self-awareness people can transform society (Fay, 1987). And finally, once we gain an understanding of the social order, critical theory stresses that the knowledge we have gained will lead to social change and emancipation of those who are oppressed (Hoy & McCarthy, 1994).

This assumption of the power of critical understanding to lead to individual empowerment and social change can seem grandiose and idealistic, but practical application has given evidence that it can work. Paulo Freire’s efforts to educate workers and raise consciousness in Brazil and Chile through popular education; the consciousness-raising groups held by feminists and African Americans during the 1960s and 1970s; and the welfare rights movement are all examples of applied critical theory. Freire stressed class differences, feminists examined sexism, African American activists confronted the power of racism, and welfare rights organizers argued against the power of classism, sexism, and racism. The outcome of all these movements was social change with individual empowerment. They all shared the goals of examining power in the social order, analyzing historical context, and raising awareness through self-reflection. These are the key components of critical theory.

The whole point of critical theory is to redress a situation in which a group is experiencing deep but remedial suffering as a result of the way their lives are arranged. Its aim is to overturn these arrangements and to put into place another set in which people can relate and act in fuller, more satisfying ways. (Fay, 1987, p. 29)

Critical theory adds a key component of self-reflection to the analysis of power and society. What this means for social work is that critical theory provides a framework for understanding how the social order runs, what place and role each of us has within it, the effect the system has on us, and what we can do to change it. It is a combination of the macro analysis of human behavior in the social environment, blended with the micro analysis of transference and countertransference, distilled together to determine what course of action we need to take to change injustices of the current system.

The Key Components of Critical Theory

Based on a wide range of disciplines and literature, the following criteria provide a guide for practice based in critical theory:

1. Examine historical and cultural context. What factors over time contributed to the issue?
2. Consider power distribution. Who is in power, who is not? How do classism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression impact this issue?
3. Engage in self-reflection. What are your own values, beliefs, and experiences in regard to the issue? How are you impacted by power and oppression?
4. Practice nonjudgmental inquiry. How do we maintain the perspective that there is no right or wrong view?
5. Acknowledge values. What are the values of others, particularly clients and client systems? How do they differ from your own?
6. Realize that from greater awareness comes action. How can we effect social change to improve the well-being of others?

The application of critical theory to social work practice is an excellent fit with the professional values of enhancement of people's well-being, promotion of social justice, and empowerment of oppressed populations. Combining these concepts bridges the dichotomy between micro and macro practice.

Relationship Between Critical Theory and Critical Thinking

There is a difference between critical thinking and critical theory in how each concept defines the term critical. The word *critical* in critical thinking does not mean judgmental, but rather crucial or essential. Critical thinking is considered a version of informal logic that must involve emotions and personal values in assessing or arriving at conclusions in any analytical discourse. It regards specific belief claims not primarily as propositions to be assessed for their truth content, but as parts of systems of belief and action that have aggregate effects within the power structures of society (Marshall, 2001).

Critical thinking encourages analysis and assessment of issues and arguments in a way so as to identify biases, distortions, and unreliable claims with a view to improving them. According to Paul and Elder (2006), critical thinking is “self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self-corrective thinking” (p. 2). Critical thinking is primarily aimed at the individual, and while it may encourage and involve an understanding of social and human conditions and issues of power, privilege, and oppression in social contexts, it does not demand social action. Critical theory, on the other hand, is focused on uncovering entire phenomena of consciousness that underscore social injustice and on influencing social action to alter social injustice.

Despite the difference, there is a definite link between critical theory and critical thinking. One way of conceptualizing the relationship is that critical theory provides a framework, whereas critical thinking is the tool of reflexive activity within the critical structure. In many ways, critical thinking is the culmination of applied critical theory. Such mode of thinking is about a complete outlook toward living, extending beyond mere thinking skills to considerations of fair-mindedness, intellectual leadership, humility, perseverance, and integrity (Thayer-Bacon, 2000).

Critical theory provides a framework for thinking critically, enabling an enquirer to reflect systematically and contextually, and to be comfortable with internal and ideological contradictions. Historically, the focus of critical theory has been on social injustice and how to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Critical thinking, through its

emphasis on an attitude of suspended judgment, problem solving, and evaluative decision making, could thus play an important part in the individual consciousness-raising that ultimately culminates in social change. Critical theory is concerned with examining institutional and social practices with a view to resisting the imposition of oppressive and dominant norms and structures. These norms require critical thinking—asking vital questions, gathering and assessing relevant information, and recognizing underlying assumptions, implications, and consequences of such thought processes.

Strengthening Social Work's Theoretical Foundation

Many are calling for a reformulation of social work theory to prepare social workers more effectively to engage in social justice work as part of their practice (Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Mullaly, 2007). Dominant theories in social work over the last 30 years include systems theory or ecological perspectives. Both theories contribute greatly to social work by providing a framework that allows social workers to focus on the whole and on interactions. In systems theory this framework entails attending to interactions between subsystems and supra systems. The ecological perspective centers on interactions with the environment and other organisms. While both theories provide a model for understanding context, they have been criticized for providing little guidance for practice. Furthermore, neither theory attends to power relations and the role of history in creating oppressive social structures. Instead, the dominant order is accepted and the objective is to maintain the current system precluding radical changes (Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Payne, 2005).

The empowerment perspective is also prevalent within social work. Unlike systems theory and ecological perspectives, its focus is on the analysis of power. Empowerment practice has centered on connecting the personal with the political, consciousness-raising, and on collective efforts to alter oppressive conditions. While empowerment theory demonstrates tremendous potential to transform both individuals and society, critics point out that all too often the focus has been on personal and interpersonal empowerment with little attention to political empowerment (Breton, 2004; Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1999). Others note that empowerment has become a buzz word that is so broadly used that it has become meaningless. For example, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program has been described as empowering mothers to obtain employment. Some mothers were empowered. They received education and/or were connected with resources. Numerous mothers, however, were not able to meet the requirements of the program and they continued to be marginalized. Political empowerment did not occur. Poverty was conceived of as an individual problem and the structural factors that create or perpetuate poverty were ignored (Breton, 2004; Finn & Jacobson, 2003).

The strengths perspective is another prominent theory in social work. It is solution focused and attempts to use consumers' values, goals, and talents. Rather than looking at what is wrong, the strengths perspective attempts to incorporate resources from the environment. It is inclusive and engages consumers in working toward improved outcomes. Advocates of the strengths perspective note that it can be used in conjunction with the ecological perspective. Detractors observe that it does not give enough attention to structural constraints that impact oppressed populations, nor does it take a historical view of the present social order (Finn & Jacobson, 2003).

Although systems theory, the ecological perspective, and empowerment and strengths perspectives have made significant contributions to social work theory, they do not fully attend to structural issues and

the impact of power imbalances on particular social groups. Adding critical theory to the repertoire of social work theories would provide social workers with the necessary lens for understanding oppression and its consequences.

A Critical Mode of Practice

Current practice knowledge suggests personal and social changes are enhanced when micro and macro practice occur simultaneously. Rather than being dichotomous, they are interconnected and must be unified. Meaningful, effective social work practice entails assisting individuals in getting their needs met and in altering conditions that create oppression (Mullaly, 2007; Pearlmutter, 2002; Pease & Fook, 1999; Vodde & Gallant, 2002). The goal of critical practice is to assist individuals in seeing their oppression so they might engage in collective action that transforms society. Working with individuals and families entails providing resources, skill building, and/or therapy for consumers to deal with the consequences of oppression. It also requires facilitating a connection between private issues and structures of domination (Baines, 2006; Mullaly, 2007; Pease & Fook, 1999). Vodde & Gallant (2002) note, "Unless we are able to adequately connect the problems of clients in oppressed groups to the roots of their oppression and the clients to each other, fundamental change will not occur" (p. 440). Once consumers can identify how they have been impacted by the structures of society, in solidarity with others, they can begin to work toward transforming these oppressive structures.

Likewise, practitioners dedicated to macro level practice must engage in providing resources to individuals and/or assist them in dealing with the consequences of their oppression. In this way, the dichotomy between micro and macro practice is reconciled. A growing number of critical social workers believe that the profession is most effective when macro and micro practice occur simultaneously and that only in this way can fundamental change occur (Allan, Pease, & Briskman, 2003; Baines, 2006; Mullaly, 2002; Vodde & Gallant, 2002; Wood & Tully, 2006). Below are two practice examples that demonstrate how critical theory can be used in direct practice with individuals to bridge the dichotomy between micro and macro practice.

A 14-year-old African American male is referred to the school social worker for talking back to the teacher. This student has been sent to the principal's office on more than one occasion for fighting with White peers. Additionally, the teacher is requesting that the student be suspended from school for refusing to comply with expected classroom behavior. The school social worker, who is White, listens initially to the students' explanation of what has occurred. The student becomes angry during the session, stating that the teacher is racist and so is everyone at this school. The social worker states that she is not racist and that the student should calm down so she can help him sort this out. The social worker attempts to assist the student in considering what he could have done differently to avoid getting in trouble. The social worker suggests that perhaps the student is overreacting because the teacher is a good person and probably did not intend to offend him. As the session proceeds, the student refuses to continue speaking with the social worker. Ultimately, the social worker recommends that in lieu of suspension the student participate in an anger management group to learn to deal with his anger more effectively.

In this example, the problem is largely treated as an individual problem and the student is held solely accountable rather than viewing the issue contextually. The social worker, likely unintentionally, minimizes the students' beliefs by suggesting that perhaps the student is being too sensitive. This example highlights how social workers cannot engage in critical practice if they have not engaged in their own reflexive process of questioning existing social arrangements and have worked through feelings of denial, guilt, or defensiveness that frequently emerge when issues of oppression surface (Allan, Pease, & Briskman, 2003; Mullaly, 2002).

A critical practitioner who has a thorough understanding of the dynamics and consequences of systemic oppression does not underestimate the possibility that racism is a factor in social problems given the dominant cultural ideology that labels African American youth as violent and deviant. This is not to say that every claim of discrimination is true; however, a critical social worker is willing to investigate the situation fully rather than dismiss it (Kivel, 2002). In the previous scenario, the student would have been better served by the social worker listening intently to the student's story, questioning him about other incidents, asking whether this has happened with other students, and inquiring about the student's interactions with his White peers. This approach involves gathering historical and contextual information. Recognizing that being discriminated against is a painful attack, and that the student has a right to be angry, the social worker could have empathized with the student over this injustice.

Critical practitioners must be careful not to replicate power imbalances in the helping relationship. Thus, after the student has been affirmed, the social worker and student can explore together how to deal with the situation. It may be that the social worker utilizes her status to advocate for the student, or the student and social worker may agree that the student can indeed benefit from anger management classes, to learn how to deal with future injustices in a manner that does not get him suspended. Another possibility is connecting the student with other African American peers or mentors to discuss how they deal with and resist their oppression. The social worker may start a small group for students of color where they have a safe place to dialogue about their experience and make connections between their experiences and the racist culture in which we live. This group could lead to students engaging in efforts to change some of the oppressive conditions in their school and could entail assisting youth in recovering a bit of their history that has been distorted or lost in the dominant narrative.

Although oppression is quite visible in this example, social workers frequently encounter problem situations where injustice is less apparent. Consumers may not be cognizant of how they suffer because of the current social arrangement of society. All too often they have internalized the dominant ideology and blame themselves for their situation. Critical social workers, however, understand that an oppressive social order plays a role in most social problems. The following scenario demonstrates blending macro and micro perspectives on practice:

A social worker employed at a women's correctional facility is tasked with "rehabilitating" the women so that when they are released they can function in society. The social worker has brought numerous services to the prison including GED classes, life skills classes, substance abuse services, parenting classes, and individual therapy. Additionally, the social worker facilitates small groups where the women share their stories regarding what led to their incarceration. Although the group

is primarily participant-led, the social worker frequently asks problem-posing questions that engage participants in considering the impact their gender, race, and class have played in their lawbreaking. The social worker probes them to consider what commonalities they see in all of their experiences. She often brings guest speakers to the group from various advocacy groups to describe the work they are doing to assist women in obtaining equal pay for their work, and advocating for living wage laws, affordable child care, and propositions that would ensure that convicted criminals retain their voting rights.

This example demonstrates how a social worker can simultaneously help consumers deal with the damaging psychological effects of their experiences, strengthen their emotions, and increase their consciousness about the role of systems of domination in their lives. Through group work, the social worker assists the women in reframing their situation. Instead of taking their behavior out of context and labeling incarcerated woman as poor decisionmakers with inadequate coping skills who suffer from low self esteem, the social worker can guide them in considering the social context of lawbreaking (Pollack, 2003). Additionally, through consciousness-raising, the women are empowered to engage in the struggle to alter oppressive conditions. Central to critical social work practice is the need to bring similarly oppressed people together so that they can critically reflect on their experiences and collectively engage in efforts to change things.

The Key Components of Critical Social Work Practice

Based on the key components of critical theory outlined previously, we offer accompanying guidelines to implementing critical theory concepts in social work practice. First and foremost, social work practice grounded in critical theory begins with a commitment to recognize how the personal and political are connected, and consequently integrate social care with the elimination of oppression. To engage in critical practice, social workers must consider the following factors. These factors are interrelated, while at the same time they represent distinct dimensions. We refer to *client* as any person, group, organization, or community with whom social work professionals intervene.

1. Historical and cultural context: What events preceded the issue of concern? Include assessment of events affecting the individual, events within the relevant settings, and societal events that are related to the client's race, ethnicity, national origin, skin color, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political beliefs, religion, and mental or physical disability.
2. Power distribution: What is the power position of the client? Which social groups have more power than the client? How does your power compare to your client's power? What effect might such a power difference have on your relationship with your client? What kind of privileges does the client have or not have? In what ways do these privileges translate into power or lack of power? How do a client's socio-economic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation, sexual identity, religion, age, and abilities influence the client's situation?
3. Self-reflection: What are your own values, beliefs, and experiences related to the issue the client is experiencing? How does your race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political

beliefs, religion, and mental or physical ability contribute to your values and beliefs? How might your identity affect your interactions with your client?

4. Nonjudgmental inquiry: In what ways are you being judgmental? What ideas do you have regarding what is appropriate or what is right or wrong for your client? Do you consider all viewpoints (particularly your client's) in good faith? How do you ensure that you are truly interested in your client's well-being and interest and not in other vested interests? How do you ensure that you have the intellectual humility to accept errors in your inquiry?
5. Values: How do you acknowledge others' values? Can you differentiate what is important to your client and what is important to you, and be clear about the difference between yours and your client's values? How do you negotiate differences between yours and your client's values?
6. Action: What steps can be taken to improve your client's well-being and address social change? How can you engage the client in developing a plan for action that addresses both the personal and political situation? How do you ensure that a respectful partnership exists between your client and you? How do you ensure that this action leads to changes in the client's context? How can you enhance your client's awareness of how the current social order perpetuates the situation?

Conclusion

Through practice based on critical theory, social workers can begin to embrace the dual mission of enhancing the well-being of all individuals and creating environments conducive to social justice. Contrary to the historical struggle within social work, these two objectives are not mutually exclusive. Social work is most effective when the false dichotomy between working with individuals and working toward social change is reconciled and when social justice is addressed at all levels of practice.

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Manuscript received: September 28, 2008

Revised: March 26, 2009

Accepted: March 31, 2009

A solution to the divide that sometimes exists between child care and clinical staff in group homes and residential facilities is being championed by Children's Aid and Family Services.

The agency, a leader in adoption and specialty therapeutic services for children who have been severely traumatized and abused, developed The Healing Nature of Relationships[®], a comprehensive, self-directed clinical and educational training model for child welfare agencies and organizations.

Suggested program participants are a cross-mix of child care workers, clinicians, supervisors, and management, thus creating a cross-team approach to address the therapeutic needs of the youngsters in care. This approach also provides a mutual understanding of the different yet interdependent roles played by the clinical and child care staff. The curriculum can be taught by in-house staff, further reinforcing this team dynamic and its commitment to relationship building. The context of the learning is as important in this model as the content of the learning.

Children's Aid and Family Services (Paramus, NJ) believes that the goal for today's children must be to first provide clinical stabilization so that permanency can ultimately be achieved. For more information, **contact Scott Cohen at 201 261-2800 or scohen@cafnsj.org**

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