

# Social Work in a Corporate Era

## Practices of Power and Resistance

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## Critical Reflection and Transformative Possibilities

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Introduction

Is it possible that new ways of knowing can enable emancipation, and can challenge structures and relations of domination?

In the face of current global economic trends, it is easy to feel that possibilities for challenge and change of dominant structures are less attainable. Earlier in this volume Peter Leonard argues that these trends have resulted in a decline in the belief in collective agency, and the vision of structural welfare, and that these beliefs are associated with a determinism which results in fatalism. Yet at the same time, the postmodern thinking which is often associated with globalization might potentially unsettle some of our assumed ways of thinking about ourselves in relation to the social structure. It is possible that this unseating of taken-for-granted ways of understanding ourselves in our social worlds might in fact provide a means and a site for challenging and resisting different forms of domination. In this chapter, I aim to explore this issue by examining an approach to unsettling these assumptions. This is the phenomenon of critical reflection. I argue that critical reflection, as a process which is partially based on, and integrates, elements of deconstructive thinking, can provide a means of reconstructing, and thus changing, the ways in which individuals perceive and relate to their social worlds. In this sense, critical reflection holds emancipatory possibilities.

I begin the chapter with a brief description of critical reflection, and then move to a section which develops the idea of critical reflection from a number of different theoretical traditions. After outlining a process for critical reflection which derives from this theoretical background, I then spend some time discussing the emancipatory elements of critical reflection, based on material from existing literature, as well as results of evaluations from my own critical reflection programs. Lastly, I pose some further possibilities for the use of critical reflection in contributing to a transformative social work practice.

### **What is Critical Reflection?**

Critical reflection is most simply understood as an approach to analyzing practice or experience, based on the identification of the assumptions embedded in that practice or experience. Having said that, it is acknowledged that there is wide divergence about what this actually means in practice (Ixer, 1999). Part of the difficulty in being able to pin down the idea of critical reflection with any certainty possibly arises because critical reflection itself seems to derive from a number of different intellectual traditions (which I will describe in more detail in the following section). For instance, it is often used interchangeably with the idea of 'reflective practice', a term which emerges principally from the work of Donald Schön (1983). However, many writers carefully distinguish between reflection, and critical reflection. The latter is also variously defined. Mezirow (1991), writing in the adult education field, distinguishes critical reflection as unearthing deeper assumptions: 'or presuppositions' (p.12). Brookfield (1995, p.8) suggests that what makes critical reflection critical is the focus on power. 'Critical' can also be extended from this to encompass an awareness of how assumptions about the connection between 'oneself' and social context/structure can function in powerful ways, so that awareness of these assumptions can provide a platform for transformative action (eg. Kondrat, 1999; Fook, 2002). These latter understandings of the term come from a clear critical theory tradition, and this is the perspective that I adopt in this chapter and in my own work more generally.

In order to understand the idea of critical reflection and the processes involved, it is helpful to explore the main traditions of thinking from which it arises. I have identified four main ones which are involved: reflective practice; reflexivity; postmodernism and deconstruction; and critical social theory. In the following section, I will detail each of these and their contribution to the idea of critical reflection

### **The Theoretical Background of Critical Reflection**

#### **Reflective Practice**

The idea of reflective practice is often credited to Argyris and Schon (1976) and later to Donald Schon (1983 and 1987). These works are often used as a basis for subsequent writings in the professional learning traditions, particularly nursing (eg. Taylor, 2000, Rolfe, 2001). However, in the adult education literature, the much earlier influence of Dewey is noted (Mezirow, 1991). For instance, Mezirow (1991, p.5) notes that for Dewey 'reflection referred to (Dewey, 1933, p.9) assessing the grounds (justification) of one's beliefs', the process of rationally examining the assumptions by which we have been justifying our convictions'.

For Schon (1983 and 1987) it was important to acknowledge that professional knowledge involves both technical rationality (rules) and professional artistry (reflection in action), and that very often the 'theory' or rules espoused by practitioners, is quite different from the 'theory' or assumptions embedded in the actual practices of professionals. Reflective practice therefore involves the ability to be aware of the 'theory' or assumptions involved in professional practice, in order to close the gap between what is espoused and what is enacted, in an effort to improve both:

From this has been developed a reflective approach (Fook, 1996), which encompasses the recognition of the intuitive, the artistic and the creative in professional practice. The role of the emotions is also often emphasized (Fook, 1999a).

Put in these terms, critical reflection would involve a focus on assumptions about power, and the corresponding assumptions about links between the individual person and their surrounding social structure. Often a focus on the intuitive and artistic also unearths the role of emotions in supporting particular assumptions. What is difficult, however, in using a simple reflective practice approach, is that often a detailed framework for analyzing the links between the personal and social is not well developed, so it is all too easy to limit focus to personal issues without making a broader connection.

#### *Reflexivity*

The idea of reflexivity is perhaps more associated with social science research traditions (Marcus, 1994), and was widely written about in anthropology (for example, Rosaldo, 1993). Lately it has been more developed for use directly in the health and human service professions (e.g. Taylor and White, 2000). Reflexivity, or a 'turning back on itself' (Steier, 1991), again has been variously defined. For example, White (2002, p.102) notes how understandings of reflexivity can range from simple ideas of 'being reflective' through to more complex social science research ideas based on notions of deconstruction. White's own version of reflexivity, of being able to look both inwards and outwards to recognize the connections with social and cultural understandings, is similar to my own, which is also based on an understanding of reflexivity in research practice. In this sense, reflexivity involves the ability to recognize that all aspects of ourselves and our contexts influence the way we research (or create knowledge) (Fook, 1999b). I am using the idea of research in an inclusive sense here, to refer to all the different ways in which we create knowledge - some occur on a more formal and systematic basis, yet others are used daily, and often in unarticulated ways to make sense of immediate surroundings.

If we take this as our base, then it is easy to detail some ways in which we (as researchers and creators of knowledge) might generate knowledge, and this might have some part in influencing the type of knowledge which is produced. For example, knowledge is embodied and social in nature - it is mediated by physical and social lenses: In the same way, knowledge is also mediated by our own subjectivity - our particular being, experience, and social position will influence what and how we interpret. Thirdly, there is a reactivity element - the knowledge we obtain is at least partly determined by the kinds of tools and process we use to create it. And lastly, knowledge is also interactional - it is shaped by historical and structural contexts.

From the reflexivity tradition, critical reflection might be seen as a way of researching personal practice or experience in order to develop our understandings of ourselves as knowers - this helps us make the connections between ourselves as individuals and our broader social, cultural and structural environment.

#### *Postmodernism and Deconstructionism*

I have identified these traditions separately from those of reflexivity, although it is clear that they overlap. However, I think it is important to note how the influence of postmodern thinking brings with it particular ways of thinking which to some degree transcend, yet complement, those associated with reflexivity. In this section I also include poststructural thinking as well, and will focus on what I believe to be the common threads which are useful to our understanding of critical reflection. I have developed these ideas in more detail elsewhere (Fook, 1999a). By postmodernism, I am referring simply to the questioning of 'modernist' (or linear and unified) thinking. This postmodern thinking alerts us to the role of dominant discourses in creating what is perceived as legitimate knowledge (and therefore power). Poststructuralists also alert us to the role of language in forming our knowledge, particularly to the role of the construction of binary opposites, and how we make difference, by often attributing inferiority to the second part of a binary category. However, language (and dominant discourse) also has a role in silencing multiple and marginal perspectives, since it is often only the major (unified) voice which is recognized.

Overall then, postmodern and poststructural thinking allows a recognition that knowledge can be socially constructed, often in linear and unified ways, to support a dominant power base, and that we often unwittingly participate in preserving these power relations through the very language which we use to speak about our world. Postmodern thinking opens up the possibilities for contradiction, change and conflict in thinking, thus recognizing that many different experiences can be legitimate.

From this point of view, critical reflection can be aided by deconstructing our thinking in order to expose how we participate in constructing power, and by allowing us to explore conflicts and contradictions which previously we may have silenced. It is particularly useful, I think, in helping to explore difficulties in practice which are brought about because of perceived (binary) dilemmas or tensions. What is still deficient, I believe, about this position, is that details of how to reconstruct power, and how to determine which forms of power actually preserve or challenge domination, are still not clear. A better understanding of how different forms of power can be used and function, and the contradictions involved in this, is needed.

In developing the idea of what is 'critical', the common themes of critical social theory are useful. I have paraphrased and summarized these (Fook, 2002) from Agger (1998), as follows. Critical social theory involves a recognition that domination is both personally experienced and structurally created. In this sense, individuals can participate in their own domination, through holding self-defeating beliefs about their own power and possibilities for change. Social change, in this sense, must therefore be both personally and collectively achieved. This involves a recognition that knowledge often has an empirical reality, but the way that knowledge is used and interpreted may be constructed (socially and personally). Therefore, in bringing about social and personal change, communication and dialogue is important so that shared understandings can be created.

What is important about the contribution of critical social theory for the idea of critical reflection is that it provides a broader framework for understanding what critical reflection can and should help achieve. By helping make connections between the personal and structural, and emphasizing the importance of communication, critical social theory points to how a critical reflection process might help us forge bridges between our own experience and that of others to bring about desired social changes.

In the adult education literature, these aims of critical reflection often translate into specific changes in perspectives. For example, Mezirow (1991, p.14) points out that more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative perspectives are the superior perspectives that adults choose to better understand the meaning of their experience. For him, 'precipitating and fostering critically self-reflective learning means a deliberate effort to foster resistance to ...technicist assumptions, to thoughtlessness, to conformity, to impermeable meaning perspectives, to fear of change, to ethnocentric and class bias, and to egocentric values' (1991, p.360).

### *The Critical Reflection Process*

In some ways, what I have outlined above are also different discourses, or ways of talking about, critical reflection. For instance, if we are coming from a reflective practice tradition, we might speak about 'reflecting on' our practice. Alternatively, speaking from the other traditions respectively, we might talk about, 'researching' our practice reflexively, 'deconstructing' our practice, or, from a critical standpoint, 'challenging and changing' our practice. It is helpful to be aware that there may be different ways of talking about a similar process, in which each tradition is integrated with the other in providing different ways to understand and unearth the assumptions involved in practical experience.

Let me illustrate with the following examples of questions, derived from each of the different traditions, which might assist in critically reflecting on our practice. For example, in the reflective practice tradition, critical reflection questions might include: what do my thinking/actions imply about my ideals/the basic social structures I believe in/my beliefs about power?

Using a stance of reflexivity, one might ask, how did I influence the situation through: my actions/my preconceptions/my presence/other people's perceptions of me? How have I constructed myself and the situation in relation to me? How have I constructed myself in relation to power? What have I unearthed about my social beliefs?

From a postmodern/deconstructive perspective, critical reflection might be aided by asking: what language have I used? Are there any binary opposites evident? What perspectives are missing? What are my constructions of power? How do my constructions relate to the dominant discourses? How have I constructed myself in relation to other people, or power?

Taking a critical stance would place the emphasis on how the critical reflection process can bring about change. Questions might take the form of how might my practice, and my theory of my practice, change as a result of my reflections? How can I change or use my power differently? What different outcomes might I seek, and different processes might I use to challenge different forms of power?

The above list illustrates that although each perspective might provide different ways of asking critical reflective questions, each overlaps in some way. I have found that the above kinds of questions can be used successfully in an integrated way through a process of critical reflection. There is no prescribed way to undertake critical reflection, and, indeed the field is characterized by myriad different process, techniques and exercises which can be used to further critical reflection. This has invited criticism from some quarters (LYer, 1999) but I believe that this is, in fact, one of the strengths of critical reflection, as it is highly adaptable to situation, place, learner and educator.

However, I do believe that if the critical reflection process is to be used to bring about some kind of change, then it is important to structure the process to bring this about. In my own work, I tend to prescribe two stages to the critical reflection process. The first focuses on exposing and examining the hidden assumptions, and the second on turning these reflections into new ways of understanding practice, our power, and how we might challenge and change our environment in some way. In some ways, the process might be likened to a process of conscientization or consciousness-raising (Hart, 1991) but an included emphasis on how some political options (Heaney and Horton, 1991) arises out of the, process. Elsewhere I have likened the process to a first stage of deconstruction and a second stage of reconstruction (Fook, 2002). Other writers also refer to the staging of the critical reflection process (Brookfield, 1991) suggesting that it is a process which is about ongoing development. As mentioned earlier, there are clear commonalities with the conscientization process (Alfrero, 1972) in which there is a shift from first a more fatalistic stage of consciousness in which the person feels dominated by 'facts', through a second stage of awareness of more freedom in understanding the 'facts' from outside, to a final stage of understanding the causal links between 'facts' and social circumstances. With critical reflection there is a fourth stage which links this new critical awareness with possibilities for action.

The process essentially involves a small group of participants who assist each other to critically reflect on their practice in a confidential setting facilitated by someone versed in the approach. A group climate and culture of trust, openness, and non judgementalism (neither positive nor negative) is essential to the effectiveness of the approach. I ask people to present a concrete 'critical incident' from their own practice as the raw material for critical reflection. The critical incident technique is widely used, and in varying ways (Brookfield, 1995; Davies and Kinloch, 2000). In the critical reflection

process that I use, I ask that it be kept deliberately concrete, as someone's 'story' or 'narrative' about an event in which they were involved, and which was significant to them in some way. I find that this focus is helpful on at least four counts: 1/ it allows us to focus on concrete actions as further possibilities; 2/ it allows us to bypass (to some extent) getting caught up in the accepted language or abstracted ways of theorizing practice; 3/ it emphasizes that this is their own construction; and lastly, it has more immediacy for them.

Participants present their critical incidents in two stages according to the process outlined above. The first stage focuses on deconstructing the story of the incident. The whole group asks critical reflective questions based on the four theoretical traditions outlined above. Each participant then reflects further on the thinking which has been unearthed in this first stage, and presents their revised 'theory of practice' again (after a period of time, normally at least a week), with a view to devising specific practice strategies from it. The group assists this process by asking a series of reconstructive questions.

### **How Can Critical Reflection be Transformative?**

In order to be transformative, the process of critical reflection needs to be able to counteract feelings of fatalism. What exactly is fatalism and how can it be counteracted through critical reflection? Heaney and Horton (1991, p.86), in speaking of the fatalism often felt by welfare dependants, refer to it as 'an adjustment of the mind to the inevitability of poverty and disenfranchisement'. Fatalism might refer more broadly to feelings of disempowerment, of lack of agency or ability to act upon and effect change. In some senses, this might be associated with an inability to see any connection between an individual person's actions and any broader social concerns, to the point where they do not see any possibilities for action and therefore do not even want to try to think of them. Alternatively, there might be a pervading sense of pessimism, so that there is a belief that even if one could think of changes and could take action to bring them about, it is assumed they would not be successful, or that they will inevitably lead to a negative outcome.

In some of my work with critical reflection, I encounter many constructions which might be associated with feelings of fatalism. For instance, sometimes, along with assumptions that any attempt at changes will not be successful, there might be accompanying beliefs about the 'powerful' people at whom change is targeted, e.g. that they will not listen, that they will find some other way to win, or that they will sabotage the action. Often incidents are constructed in terms which emphasize the powerlessness of the individual person telling the story, and exaggerate the powerfulness of the other person targeted for change. In some cases a form of fatalism is that thinking which consistently constructs actions as not powerful or not powerful enough. For example, I see people who have taken some quite powerful action, but labeled it as unsuccessful because it did not bring about enough 'structural' change, as they saw it. Elsewhere (Fook, 2002, p.110-111), I document this tendency in social workers - change is not seen as good enough unless it is 'structural' and 'total'.

How can such thinking be counteracted by critical reflection? Is it possible that critical reflection can assist people to see how they might become empowered, more effective, or even realize the possibility of their own agency? Whilst there are no definitive answers to these questions, there are several reasons for which I think it is possible that critical reflection can assist in changing personal beliefs about power and their engagement with it, so that new possibilities are opened up for action.

Firstly, the critical reflection process values and validates the personal, and by starting with that, helps to validate the person and their own sense of themselves. Whilst this is not an expressly critical component in an established structural sense, there is growing recognition of the importance of the personal in what is termed 'life politics' (Ferguson, 2001). Thus, critical reflection can be experienced as very liberating, especially by people who assume that their point of view is not important or somehow less valuable. I see this often in the case of human service workers, who are often used to subordinating their own practice wisdom in favor of academic research or theorizing. The novelty of presenting, sharing, and learning from their own practice experience is seen as very validating, and they report increased confidence in their own judgment and creative abilities. Whilst this is a well-known phenomenon in therapeutic circles, it is perhaps less well recognized in more structural forms of social work which are easily interpreted as focusing only on the social structure, to the point where the personal may be devalued or denied (Fook, 2002).

In addition, people often experience critical reflection as a process which assists them to reaffirm their positive sense of themselves in the face of negative social experiences or social environment. In a

recent group I ran with school teachers, participants spoke of being enabled to identify how their social environment (other teachers, school principals, parents of students or the school culture) often negatively affected the value they placed on themselves and their work. They felt they could now distance themselves from needing affirmation from those quarters, and felt empowered by being able to revalue the self-worth or identity which came from their own experience or values.

Secondly, the 'personal' often incorporates an emotional element. Indeed, people often present critical incidents which were significant simply because they were traumatic, emotionally and professionally. Additionally, there are strong emotions often attached to long-held and little-questioned assumptions. Critical reflection can perform a therapeutic function by debriefing, providing support, and clearing emotional blocks. Of course, as therapists, we know that the handling of emotions can be very powerful in inducing change. Whilst this is not a specific goal of critical reflection, and of course needs to be handled sensitively, there is a role for critical reflection in providing collegiate support for the emotional aspects of our work, and in helping colleagues to harness emotional energies for better future practice (Mezirow, 1991, p.17; Askeland, unpub.). I believe one of the strengths of critical reflection is the recognition of the whole person, the physical, social, emotional and cultural being, and how all these aspects are reflected in daily practice. Recognizing these elements, and focusing on how they come together in concrete practice, not only helps remove some blocks which before might have been denied, but also assists people to use all aspects of themselves more productively. There is a better sense of personal integration and integrity. Participants in critical reflection groups often speak about feeling better able to be themselves, and of becoming aware of different strategies they might use at the same time.

Thirdly, by starting with the concrete personal experience, critical reflection is able to make real the connections between the personal and the social. When people are able to get a very specific idea of how a piece of their thinking or action might have influenced a specific thought or action of another person, they are given a clear site to act, and a process for acting. This model can then be applied to many different situations. For example, if a person is reflecting on how they cannot change the organization, it is useful to ask a reflective question about what they are assuming when they talk about 'organization'? What aspects are they talking about? How do they encounter these? Whose attitudes and behavior are they talking about? Which specific behaviors would they like to see changed? What do they mean by change? What would indicate enough change? These questions effectively place the person at the center of their thinking about the organization, and help them to understand how their experience of the organization is mediated by their own thinking about it.

The critical reflection process can be likened to a process of 'laying all the cards on the table'. In this sense, it is about creating a positive climate for change, by emphasizing the potential that change might create, and by framing change in positive terms. What is also important about this is that the person feels free to lay all the 'cards' and to look at them from different perspectives. If such a climate is created, a person can learn to make their own judgments of their own 'cards', simply by seeing them juxtaposed afresh. In this sense, they learn to self evaluate, which is an important process in the achieving of change, and may be more successful in bringing about change than imposing external judgments. It also acts as a form of empowerment, as the responsibility for evaluation is placed squarely back in the hands of the individual.

In a related sense, the critical reflection process also legitimates the person as a creator of their own practice knowledge, and of themselves as social beings. Developing the person as a creator of knowledge has empowering benefits in that it is an aspect of reconstructing the identity of that person as having a role and

recognition in contributing to the pool of useful theory. In helping to develop the identity of the person as a social being, the value of that person's contribution is acknowledged as coming from, and influencing, a wider sphere than one's individual experience. It involves the recognition that simply because I am a person in a social context, who cannot be separated from that context (and) who is partially constructed and defined by it, I have wider influence.

This realization extends nicely to the reflexive aspect of critical reflection. This can function to reconstruct the person into many different situations as a responsible actor - one who is able to have influence (indeed who is not able to not have influence because they are inextricably part of their embodied and social context). One of the positive aspects of this is that the influence is of many different kinds - formal, informal, structural, personal, embodied, communicative, positional, subtle, direct, discursive, and so on. This potentially posits many different ways in which influence can be used, and is therefore a potentially more inclusive way of seeing the possibilities of change.

Many of these above changes involve a process of reconstructing the identities of participants as powerful, and, in line with a reflexive awareness, of reconstructing power in inclusive ways. Critical

reflection involves an exploration of all assumptions regarding power, and a reconstruction of those ideas which have limited the person to seeing themselves as powerless, or as powerless in relation to other people or structures. This may also involve a deconstruction and reconstruction of beliefs about other types of power inherent in other people or social structures, and about a reconstruction of their own power in relation to this. Because power may be seen to be expressed in many different ways, rather than being the exclusive domain of structurally powerful people, the choices of ways in which to be powerful are increased. This appears to be particularly enabling for people who have not formerly seen themselves as having structural power, for they are able to revalue other aspects of their power. This type of thinking can be loosely equated with a Foucauldian view of power as expressed or enacted, rather than belonging inherently to a person or position (Healy, 2000, p.43).

The reconstruction of powerful identities is based in part on exposing the oppositional thinking involved in assuming that power is structural, and that, by and large, there are two dichotomous groups, the powerful and the powerless. Critical reflection is useful however in deconstructing many binary opposites and in helping to reconstruct binary dilemmas as more complex. Often people freeze into inaction because they have constructed their situation as involving unresolvable tensions. A common one is the conflict between social work values and bureaucratic/management/economic imperatives. Critical reflection exposes these binary constructions, and asks if there are many more varied and more complex ways of seeing situations. What usually happens is that participants recognize that there are many more 'gray' ways of seeing what might have formerly been a 'black and white' situation. This opens up more room for debate, for new strategies. Taylor calls this 'framing the debate in non-dichotomous terms' (1996). In some of the groups I have run, this has involved participants moving on from blaming their supervisors and managers for much of what is wrong with their jobs, to being able to see more and different ways of working with them.

Developing the skill of divergence and a stance of collegiality is related to the above. Mezirow (1991, p.369), sees the skill of divergence as related to 'opening ourselves up to the ideas of others, especially when these provide a new angle of vision'. I have found that learning this skill involves an ability to accept the existence and legitimacy of different points of view (especially those of other people regarded as protagonists in the person's critical incident), even if these might be vastly different, even contradictory, from our own. Often people's abilities to be open to contradictory or divergent viewpoints is enhanced if it is accepted that this does not necessarily mean they have to relinquish their own, but that they can accept that contradictory perspectives can sit side by side, and that all can be 'true' from their respective positions.

The willingness to be more collegiate with fellow workers, regardless of position, is developed in a similar way. Participants in critical reflection workshops often note how the process has made them more aware of their colleagues' situations, has made them more understanding, and able to see more and different options for working with them. They seem to be able to develop more of a shared sense of ideals within an organization, and hence more of an ability to tackle, at least some projects, in a shared way. This contributes to their feelings of empowerment within the organization, and sometimes within their particular job roles. Critical reflection workshops often end spontaneously with plans for shared action, for instance, changing supervision arrangements. Lastly, an important way in which critical reflection can be transformative is in the ability to develop skills in practicing in uncertainty. Elsewhere I and my colleagues (Fook, Ryan and Hawkins, 2000), have outlined how professional expertise in the current climate involves skills in working with uncertainty, in being able to practice flexibly and with openness, and to be able to modify and create relevant practice theory in an ongoing way. With its inbuilt legitimation of personal experience and practice theory development, critical reflection provides an ideal framework for developing these skills.

In the foregoing section, I discussed primarily the transformative effects I have observed and experienced in critical reflection programs I have conducted. In this section, I wish to discuss some broader possibilities for the uses of critical reflection which might be posited from my experience.

Firstly, the possibilities for more inclusive approaches have been mooted. Post modern thinking, which allows for more and different ways of knowing, and which underpins critical reflection, also provides a basis for transforming social relations along more inclusive lines. For example, we can use a postmodern analysis to understand the ways in which the fixed identity categories and notions of difference of modernist ways of thinking can work both for or against the political interests of groups defined as different.

For example, an essentialist view of Australian Aboriginal culture has been criticized as one largely constructed by anthropologists and as being too allpervasive, not recognizing the efforts of many Aborigines to either accommodate or contravene harsh state policies (Finlayson and Anderson, 1996). Noting that Aborigines are increasingly taking responsibility for defining Aboriginality, Lewin (1991) also makes the point that to not recognize that Aboriginality is not homogenous has political consequences, in that an essentialist and structuralist view helps to legitimate government control, and to perpetuate a victim-blaming stance.

Critical reflection therefore possibly has a role in identity politics, that is, the possibility of resisting domination through the recognition of difference, and the creation of new identity categories as a result (Best and Kellner, 1991, p.205). Identity construction plays an important role in the empowerment of previously marginal or disadvantaged groups.

Young notes the politicizing effects of a process of control in the construction of identity: Assumptions of the universality of the perspective and experience of the privileged are dislodged when the oppressed themselves expose those assumptions by expressing positive images of their experience. By creating their own cultural images they shake up received stereotypes about them (1990, p.155).

I would argue that the methods of critical reflection, used as a tool to research and identify (reconstruct) identities, could function as one of these major empowering methods. The major principle it involves is the idea that critical reflection is a type of narrativity or story telling, in which people can tell (and then possibly deconstruct and reconstruct) specific instances in their own lives or experience. This process of recognition and reflection not only validates experience but opens it up for change by the narrator for her or himself. This latter point is crucial in the politics of critical reflection as an inclusive research method. Many traditional approaches to research and professional practice have placed the power for knowledge making and change within the hands of researchers who have not normally been the people who are the targets of research or change (Smith, 1999). Critical reflection, perhaps unlike many traditional research methods, can only succeed with the full participation and use of participants, and does not necessarily need the participation of an 'outsider' to organize the research process.

There are therefore uses for critical reflection in many different ways and on many different levels. For instance, the process might be used therapeutically to assist in reconstructing damaged personal identities (Sands, 1996, pp.180-183). Alternatively the process might be used with many different types of groups, both service users and workers, to examine marginalized aspects of their identities.

For example, in my own teaching and research experience, I am aware of the use of critical reflection methods being used by indigenous groups in both New Zealand and New Guinea as a way of researching their own experience. In New Zealand, for instance, I am aware that some Maori social work educators are finding that reflective methods can be used to articulate, develop and write about the Maori approach to social work. In my own teaching, I have found the use of critical reflective methods the best one in working with Aboriginal students to incorporate their own experience into their models of social work practice. For me, this has been the only approach that is effective, since Aboriginal students tend to find what we teach about social work and people to arise from a fundamentally opposed way of seeing the world. In order for any learning to be meaningful, we must engage in a process of developing their own version of social work from their own sets of experiences, taking from bits and pieces of my own perspective along the way. In a way, we engage in a process of reconstructing their 'identities as Aboriginal social workers, developing a picture of Aboriginal Social Work along the way. Of course, I always participate in the same way all class members do, so I find myself happily involved in reconstructing myself and my own version of social work too. In this sense, I find the whole experience to be as participatory as possible - I learn in the same way all members of the group learn.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that a process of critical reflection, using an amalgam of ideas including reflective practice, reflexivity, postmodernism, deconstruction and critical theory, can have transformative effects. I have illustrated aspects of this argument both from my own experience of conducting critical reflection programs, but also through reference to broader literature. The critical reflection process, as I have outlined it, appears to function similarly to a consciousness raising process, with an added imperative to develop concrete strategies for action. By engaging with the whole person, and enabling them to make connections with their social and structural environment through the prism of their own concrete experience, the critical reflection process enables individuals to take action in relation to their own social environments. In this way, it is able to counteract aspects of fatalistic



thinking, and to open up transformative possibilities. By linking these functions with possibilities for identity reconstruction, the inclusive potential of critical reflection is also realized.

In closing, I do not wish to suggest that critical reflection is the only, or the best method, for enabling transformative practice. In addition, there needs to be continued development of the approach and process for successful use in different contexts and with different groups. However, I believe it is this very flexibility which may mean that it can be effective in different settings and in different ways to enable vastly divergent people, amongst service user and worker groups, to become empowered to take social action within their own environments.

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