11 Working within (and against) the System: Radical Humanism

They sentenced me to twenty years of boredom, for trying to change the system from within.

— From "First We Take Manhattan," by Leonard Cohen (1988)

Introduction

The ultimate goal of structural social work is to contribute to the transformation of society. To accomplish this goal, social work must operationalize an ideology within a society where another ideology dominates. To carry out this task, the social worker should possess the following attributes:

- an awareness of the limitations of our present society as a satisfactory social system;
- a vision of society in which the satisfaction of human need is the central value;
- an awareness that social work is a political activity that either reinforces or opposes the status quo;
- an awareness that social problems are not amenable to individual, family, or subcultural solutions;
- an awareness that critical social analysis is itself an important social work skill;
- an awareness that structural social work is much more than an approach to practice—it is a way of life.

The guiding principle for structural social work practice is that everything we do in some way contributes to the goal of social transformation. This does not mean that the legitimate, here-and-now needs of people are ignored. Rather, structural social work practice comprises a simultaneous two-pronged approach: (1) to provide practical, humanitarian care to the victims and casualties of our inherently oppressive liberal-capitalist society; and (2) to restructure society along socialist lines. This two-pronged approach to practice is consistent with the concept of dialectic discussed in Chapter 8.

The purpose of this chapter is to present certain practice elements that characterize structural social work practice and that therefore distinguish it from mainstream, conventional social work practice. Although these practice elements are presented and analyzed separately here, in reality they cannot be separated so easily, for they are all interrelated, functionally intertwined,

and mutually reinforcing. These elements of practice operationalize structural social work theory. Through the practice of this structural social work theory, social workers will contribute to the long-term transformation of our present society by tending to the short-term needs of people within the social welfare institution—the very system that oppresses both those who depend on it and those who work within it.

The theory of structural social work does not consider any level of social work practice as inherently conservative or oppressive. Nor does it consider that one level of practice is inherently more progressive and liberating than another. For example, Galper (1975) has shown how community organization, as it has traditionally been practised, is just as conservative as traditional casework. A substantial literature (see Agel, 1971; Allan, Pease, & Briskman, 2003; Caspary, 1980; Fook, 1993; Forbes, 1986; Longres & McLeod, 1980; Lundy, 2004; Vazala-Martinez, 1985) shows how casework or clinical work can be emancipatory as opposed to oppressive for the service user. The major distinction between liberal mainstream social work practice and structural social work practice is that the former reflects and perpetuates the present social order whereas the latter attempts to transform it.

The approach to structural practice within the social welfare system emanates from the radical humanist school of thought. As presented in Chapter 8, this approach is based on the belief that changing people by personal consciousness-raising on a massive scale is a prerequisite for changing society. This consciousness-raising, which is carried out by structural social workers with service users and with co-workers, focuses on raising people's awareness of how a society characterized by dominant–subordinate relations shapes, limits, and dominates the experiences of members of subordinate groups, thus alienating them from social structures, from each other, and from their true selves. Only by becoming aware of how others define us to suit their own interests and by understanding how ideological hegemony makes our subjugation appear acceptable can we become free to begin to regain control over our lives and our destiny (Carniol, 1984; Howe, 1987; Mullaly & Keating, 1991). In sum, radical humanism is predicated on the belief that before social transformation can occur, personal transformation must take place. This assumption is rejected by structural social workers, who believe that it is not a case of personal change coming first or of social change coming first (the latter comes from the radical structural school of social change—discussed in Chapter 8 and further discussed in the next chapter). Rather, both approaches carried out simultaneously (in a dialectic) are necessary. The women's movement is one of the clearest examples in which both approaches were carried out simultaneously. In combatting sexism and patriarchy, much use was made of women's consciousness-raising groups that helped large numbers of women become aware of the pervasiveness, oppressive effects, and dynamics of gender discrimination in society. With this awareness, women put pressure on the system to change its gender biases. At the same time, leaders in the women's movement put pressure on the political structures to enact legislation and policies that addressed gender inequality. Many people (mainly men) then adjusted to the new social reality (i.e., legislation and policies promoting gender equality) before they had a real understanding or awareness of gender oppression in society.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into two major sections. The first section discusses certain elements of structural social work practice that help to operationalize radical humanist

Box 11.1 *Common Myths Held about Structural Social Work*

- It is a militant, unreasonable, and irresponsible approach to practice—a relic of the 1960s and 1970s.
- One must work at the macro level and carry out large-scale social changes; otherwise, one is not working structurally.
- There is nothing that an individual social worker can do to change the system.
- It denies all conventional social work practice such as counselling, micro skills, direct practice, and family therapy.
- Social work should be about people and not about politics.
- Structural social work is strong on critique but short on practice.
- By focusing on social structures and forces, structural social work absolves people of all personal responsibility for their actions.
- You will lose your job if you practice structural social work in an agency.
- Structural social work is just too hard for the average person. It alienates one from other workers and leads to burnout and self-destruction.

thought when working with users of various social agencies, services, and programs. The second section focuses on ways that help social workers not only to survive working in mainstream social work bureaucracies but to change them from within as well. The material in this chapter also addresses a number of myths (see Box 11.1) often associated with progressive social work approaches in general but structural social work in particular.

Working with Service Users

As noted in Box 11.1, one of the myths held by many about structural social work is that such work ignores all conventional social work activities such as working with people who are in crisis or who are hurting in the "here and now." Nothing could be further from the truth! Structural social workers are keenly aware that: (1) over time, oppression results in damaging psychological effects in a person's intrapsychic and interpersonal areas; and (2) before one can take action against social structures that are negatively affecting their social position and functioning, work has to be carried out with individuals that encompasses intrapsychic and interpersonal processes. As well, crisis situations, including a lack of material necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing, and safety issues must be alleviated before political action can be contemplated.

Intrapsychic Work

Geraldine Moane (2011), a critical psychologist, reviewed a series of studies and summarized the effects of oppression on psychological functioning: a sense of inferiority or low self-esteem, loss of personal identity, fear, powerlessness, suppression of anger, alienation and isolation, and guilt or ambivalence (see Mullaly, 2010, for a discussion of these factors). The main aim of structural social work in the intrapsychic area is to: (1) counteract these damaging effects of oppression; and (2) build strengths in the individual for developing a community of solidarity with others and for taking individual and/or collective action against oppression. Individual work, group work, or community work may be used separately or in some combination to pursue these goals.

Box 11.2 *A Psychology of Liberation*

Psychological approaches to social problems have been criticized as, at best, unrealistic and, at worst, as contributing to the maintenance of social problems. Earlier versions of progressive social work have accused clinical or counselling social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other helping professionals of supporting the status quo by: controlling or managing the dangerous (i.e., oppressed) classes; cajoling or coercing victims of social problems to accept and adjust to the very systems that victimized them in the first place; diverting attention away from the real source of social problems—an oppressive society; attempting to humanize an inhumane society; and promoting personal development through 12-step and other programs. Too often, critics have charged, people experiencing social problems have entered therapy or counselling because of problems associated with their oppression only to focus on their childhood, family, and endless analysis of their feelings. Psychotherapy and personal development become substitutes for political action.

The above "anti-psychological" position overlooks not only the obvious psychological consequences of oppression but also the psychology of both dominant group and subordinate group members. As well, it homogenizes all perspectives in psychology and overlooks the critical and liberation schools of psychological thought that also criticize mainstream psychology for its inattention to social variables. The critical and liberation schools of psychology start with the premise that psychological patterns can only be understood by analyzing the social context in which individuals live their lives. Members of this school, such as Moane (1999; 2011) and Fox and Prilleltensky (1997), seek "to develop a political explanation of psychological phenomena, and to harness psychological insights for the purposes of political activism" (Moane, 1999, p. 182). "Internalized oppression" is a focus of liberation psychologists in that they analyze psychological patterns associated

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with internalized oppression and develop psychological processes for breaking out of internalized oppression and bringing about social change. Moane calls this a *psychology of liberation*.

In sum, structural social work is not anti-psychological. It is "anti-mainstream psychological" and "pro-liberation psychology." The latter recognizes that breaking out of the oppression associated with social problems, whether at the psychological or at the political level, requires changes in both psychological and social patterns. Not attending to the need for social change means that social conditions will continue to affect individuals and shape psychological functioning in oppressive ways, and not attending to psychological change means that any desired social change will be undermined by negative psychological patterns. Both are necessary.

Often, an individual requires counselling to deal with the psychological effects of oppression and to become emotionally ready to participate in a group. This can take the form of introspective counselling or behavioural therapy or any other type of individual work that helps to stabilize a victim of oppression, relieve some hurt, change some symptoms and behaviours, and build some strengths. The important point for structural social work is that, regardless of the individual approach used, it must not de-contextualize human activity or treat it in a de-socialized or ahistorical way (Bulhan, 1985). Otherwise, personal changes may become concessions to the current social order whereby the person has been helped to adjust to it rather than to change it. "As well, individual work is not an end in itself, but the means to connecting or reconnecting with other persons similarly oppressed so that they might together reflect on their situation and engage in collective actions to change it" (Mullaly, 2010, p. 224).

One of the criticisms made of any kind of social work (including structural social work) is that it is potentially oppressive, especially at the one-to-one intrapsychic level. This type of criticism was articulated best by Bulhan (1985, p. 271), who, with respect to any kind of therapeutic intervention or helper–helpee relationship, asked, "[F]or how can an intervention liberate the patient from the social oppression when the 'therapist–patient' relationship itself is suffused with the inequities, nonreciprocity, elitism, and sado-masochism of the oppressive social order?" Bulhan is referring to inequities such as the power of the professional (therapist, social worker) and the powerlessness of the service user, the comfort of the professional's office (often alien to the service user), the professional's values (often foreign to the service user), and the professional's discourse that differentiates expert from layperson or professional from client. Given this power imbalance, Bulhan asks, "Is it therefore surprising that the oppressed have not come in droves to seek help from mental health professionals, and, if a few of them turn to 'therapy' as a last resort, that they soon drop out and return to their own travails?"

To avoid reproducing oppressive patterns and relationships while working with oppressed persons, two essential themes of structural social work must be kept in mind at all times. First, people experiencing social problems or oppression must be the agents of their own change,

whether it is personal, cultural, or social. Of this Moane (1999, p. 183) says, "Change is a process which individuals undergo in their social context and through their own processes. It is fundamental that this process of change is experienced by individuals as one in which they are in control, rather than as a re-enactment of patterns of domination." The second theme to help avoid the reproduction of oppression is to ensure that one's structural social work practice is *critically reflective*. This takes the form of the social worker engaging in a reflective conversation with the situation, which, as Thompson (1998, p. 204) argues, "can be used to promote an ethos in which equality issues [including the relationship between the social worker and the service user] are openly and explicitly on the agenda." He further argues that the reflection must be critical with respect to not taking any existing social arrangement or structure for granted. Otherwise, the reflection becomes another routine, uncritical form of practice that legitimates existing relations of social inequality. Critical reflection is discussed more in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Interpersonal Work

There is widespread agreement in the literature that to become part of a group process with other persons who are experiencing similar problems or are in similar situations is the most effective way for them to: (1) develop political awareness; (2) self-define a more genuine identity than the one imposed on them by the dominant group (e.g., "welfare bum," "lazy Aboriginal," "inferior black culture"); (3) develop the confidence to assert their more authentic identity (e.g., Indigenous persons as a resilient group of people who have survived hundreds of years of colonization and policies of assimilation); and (4) establish solidarity with similar others to take action against their oppressors (Bishop, 2002; Freire, 1994; hooks, 1993; Leonard, 1997; Mullaly & West, 2018; Pharr, 1988). Consciousness-raising is a critical element in the process of liberation, and the most effective way for engaging in consciousness-raising is in groups. These two elements of structural

Box 11.3 *Where Do I Start as a Structural Social Worker?*

As an exercise for a class of students in Australia, I (Bob) asked them where they would begin with service users—given a structural explanation for social problems. One student wrote the following passage that I think helps to answer this question that so many students new to structural social work have.

> Because the explanation for social problems goes far beyond the individual, structural social work becomes much more than just dealing with the problems of individuals. It is about challenging the dominant order, and doing what we can on the personal, cultural, and structural levels to work towards a society that is free

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of oppression. So then, given our understanding that oppression (domination, subordination, and privilege) is the root cause of social problems, what will our practice look like?

Whichever way we look at society, it is made up of individuals. Much of social work practice involves dealing with individual people, and taking a wider view of society does not exclude working with people on the personal level. I believe one of the most important things we can do for people at the personal level is simply to listen to them. Everyone has their story, and everyone's story deserves to be heard. Everyone's story will be different, as we all experience our lives in our own unique way.

We need to explore the oppression in people's lives and allow them to verbalize how they are feeling. We mustn't assume that we understand what someone has experienced because we have heard similar stories before, or have had similar experiences ourselves. Nor should we assume that because we can identify one form of oppression in someone's life, that it is the main reason for concern. We need to respect the people we are dealing with, and their views of what is happening in their lives.

The act of listening in itself can be part of the healing process. It indicates that you consider the person worth listening to, and that she or he has value. By listening carefully to the service user, a dialogue can develop, where ideas and knowledge can be shared and assumptions challenged. Listening to someone's story also gives the opportunity of naming the oppression or oppressions, and placing them in a political framework. Making these connections and normalizing the experiences can all be part of a powerful process. It may not solve someone's structural problems, but it can give a greater understanding of what is happening to her/him, and why.

The fact that persons have survived the various forms of oppression in their lives indicates that they have strengths, and that they have used these strengths to develop strategies. By identifying what strategies have worked for them in the past, an indication may be given as to what direction they may move to in the future. If strategies haven't been successful, it may be possible to relate this to structural objects, and a political dialogue can follow.

An important aspect of structural social work is to respond to the psychological damage that oppression causes. This will involve building up self-esteem and confidence. The act of listening and of identifying strengths that people possess is the beginning of this. People also need to express their feelings of shame, guilt, and repressed anger. It may be possible to redirect this anger and for it to be used in a constructive way, just as our own anger can be used constructively.

— Reproduced with thanks to Liz Deutscher

social work (i.e., consciousness-raising and collectivization) are discussed in this chapter along with a number of factors that assist in the process of consciousness-raising. Taken together, they provide the framework and guidelines of a structural approach to interpersonal work.

The Personal Is Political

One of the myths held about structural social work is that such work is carried out only at the macro level. Most progressive social work writers today (e.g., Baines, 2011; Gil, 1998; Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015; Mullaly & West, 2018; Thompson, 2016) agree that social work interventions are limited if they focus on only the individual level or the structural level. Bulhan (1985) points out that the former, which focuses only on the here and now and individual problems of people, tends to lose sight of people's shared victimization and the need for social transformation and often results in a minimalist view of change or a conservative outlook that blames the victim. The latter, which works toward social transformation, tends to become a paternalistic imposition of change from the top and disengages the person on whose behalf the changes are sought. Both approaches fail to adopt a dialectical perspective whereby interventions at both the individual/personal level and the societal/political level are carried out simultaneously, with each informing and influencing the other.

Although social work has always espoused an awareness of the connection between the personal and the political,[1] the emphasis for the most part has been on personal change, adjustment, and/or coping. This emphasis, of course, is consistent with the order view of society discussed earlier. In fact, a dichotomy emerged in social work practice in that most social workers chose and worked within the areas of casework, group work, and family therapy (i.e., intervention on a personal level), leaving the larger socio-political issues to a minority of community organization and social policy social workers. Social workers who subscribe to a change or conflict analysis of society view this split as a false dichotomy (Mullaly & Keating, 1991) and would point to what C. Wright Mills (1959, p. 3) said about the relationship between the individual and society: "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both."

The traditional split between micro and macro social work practice has served to weaken the link between the personal and the political, which is at the heart of social work. This split is often reinforced by the ways the curriculum is organized in schools of social work and by the structures within which social workers are employed. Curriculum tends to be divided along micro–macro lines; most social agencies are mandated to provide personal services without engaging in political or macro-level practice; and agencies that focus on social policy, social action, or larger social change tend not to see the provision of personal services as part of their mandate. The artificiality of such organizational constraints needs to be challenged. Although they may reflect the current political reality of separating the personal from the political, they do not reflect the social reality of people's lives or the reality of good social work practice. How can a direct practitioner be effective if they omit the cultural or community or societal context of the people with whom they work? Similarly, how can a social policy or community practitioner be effective if they lack interpersonal, listening, and communication skills? In terms of skills, the differences between micro and macro social workers are much less than might appear on the surface (Ife, 1997).

"The personal is political" stands for a method of analysis developed and refined by feminists for "gleaning political insights from an analysis of personal experience—in particular, female experience" (Collins, 1986, p. 215). Most writers today use this statement when analyzing or discussing how the socio-economic–political context of a society is critical in shaping who we are in terms of our personality formation and what we are in terms of our personal situation (Mullaly & Keating, 1991). Social work deals with many personal issues, troubles, and situations. If the personal is political, then social work is also political.

Major Implications for Structural Social Work

The premise that the personal is political has two major implications for social work practice. First, it signals that a social worker's individual practice has certain political ends. This applies to all social workers. Personal practices inevitably contain political ends. For conventional social work, the political end is to maintain the status quo. This is done by personalizing social problems. For structural social work, the political end is to change the status quo and leave oppression behind. This does not preclude intervention at the individual or family level, but instead of dealing with each of these levels by itself, the connection between private troubles and the structural source of these troubles is made in every case. Each structural social worker must see their individual work as an integral element of the larger movement of social transformation.

The second major implication that "the personal is political" has for social work practice is that it forces the worker beyond carrying out mere psychosocial manipulations, which in effect pathologize the people who are forced to use social work services. Understanding that private troubles are often linked to political (structural) forces enables the worker to begin a discussion of the relationship between the personal and the political (i.e., consciousness-raising) with the persons experiencing difficulties and to explore the personal situation of the person within its larger social context to see if there are connections between the two (i.e., normalization). This activity often has the effect of reducing some of the internalized guilt and blame (i.e., internal oppression) that many people experience as part of their troubled situations. This has to be carried out with a high degree of both personal and social empathy on the part of the structural social worker. These processes, along with some of the techniques that facilitate them, are considered below.

As discussed in Chapter 7, structural social work owes a great deal to feminist analysis. It has shown us the nature and extent of patriarchy in our society, and it has given us ways of dealing with women's oppression that do not further contribute to it. Too much of conventional social work practice locates the source of many problems women face within the person herself. This psychologizing of what are essentially problems of the larger society contributes to women's oppression by failing to see a woman in the context of a patriarchal society and by placing the blame for all her troubles squarely on the shoulders of the woman experiencing them. Because of the many social workers who have been actively involved in and/or influenced by the feminist movement, there is now a major social work perspective and practice based on feminist theory and analysis.[2] In addition, feminist social work writers have shown us that sexism exists within the welfare state and within our own profession (Walker, 1977; Weeks, 1992; Williams, 1989). And, of course, becoming aware of, identifying, and analyzing sexism in social work are prerequisites to purging us of it.

A "personal is political" (i.e., structural) analysis holds the potential to be a powerful force for change. If people are helped to relate their disempowerment and experiences of oppression at a personal level to a broader political understanding, there is a basis for moving beyond "coping and adjustment social work practice" to a practice that attacks the alienating and oppressive institutional and thought structures of our current society.

The Personal Is Political as a Method of Analysis and a Force for Change

"The personal is political" as a method of analysis has relevance and utility for dealing with all sources of oppression in our society. It can be used to better understand the nature and extent of racism in our society and how it contributes to the oppression of racialized groups. It can be used to better understand the nature of colonialism and how it contributes to the oppression of Indigenous persons in our society and to the oppression of developing countries by the industrial and post-industrial societies. It can be used, as well, to better understand oppression based on classism, ageism, physical disability, mental disability, heterosexism, and so on. However, the concern expressed in Chapters 7 (see Box 7.2) and 9 about the difficulty in translating "the personal is political" analysis into social work practice should be kept in mind. The practice problem is that it seems to be a giant leap between the personal and the political, so much so that many practitioners retreat to working at the personal level only (and some at the political level only) so that the dialectic between personal problems and their structural causes is lost. However, we believe that if the "personal is political" analysis is made personal to a service user, it will reduce the perceived distance between the two levels of practice and help to make the connections between personal problems and their political or structural causes. A set of "personal is political" questions can be asked of any group that is afflicted by any particular social problem, which will help them to make this connection. For example, if we are working with an unemployed person or group of people, we can ask: "Why do you think there are so many unemployed people in today's society?" This can be followed by a discussion about the problem being a lack of jobs rather than that so many people lack the work ethic. Follow-up questions could be: "What has been your experience in looking for a job?" "How are you treated (by society) as an unemployed person?" "What judgments are made of you?" (which gets at issues of self-blame and stereotypes). This type of dialogue is a form of "critical questioning," which is discussed more fully in the section on consciousness-raising in this chapter.

This connecting the personal with the political kind of social work is not to suggest that the structural social worker excuses irresponsible behaviour or bad choices by adopting a simplistic "it's all society's fault" approach when dealing with the situations of service users. However, a distinction must be made between "excusing" and "explaining" irresponsible behaviour. Personal responsibility is discussed in more detail in a subsequent section of this chapter. The PCS model of oppression presented in Chapter 9 helps us out of this dilemma because it separates culture from social structure and reminds us that oppression also occurs at the cultural level situated between the personal and structural levels. "The personal is political" is still a powerful analytical tool, but an awareness that a dominant culture helps to legitimize and institutionalize oppression provides the structural social worker with specific

targets to change—oppressive stereotypes, dominant discourses, norms, values, and shared patterns of thinking (see Mullaly & West, 2018, for an overview of anti-oppressive social work at the cultural level).

Empowerment

Power, Powerlessness, and Empowerment

From the discussion in Chapter 9, it is obvious that oppression leads to the alienation and powerlessness of the subordinate classes. Most definitions of power or powerlessness refer to the control or lack of control persons have over their environment and their destiny. Oppressed people, as individuals, have limited choices over most aspects of their lives and are often ruled by forces of which they are not even aware. A tenet of mental health is that "Throughout life, the feeling of controlling one's destiny to some reasonable extent is the essential psychological component of all aspects of life" (Basch, 1975, cited in Pinderhughes, 1983).

One of the insights of postmodernism is that everyone has some measure of power and that it was a limitation of earlier modernist forms of progressive social work to assume that members of subordinate groups had no power. Yet although no one is without power, it is equally wrong to assume that power differentials do not exist—including the power difference between social workers and their service users. At a societal level, dominant groups not only have more power than subordinate groups, they also frequently use it to maintain this power differential and the privileges that come with it. Gil (1976) argues that the lack of control that oppressed people experience over their life situation and their destiny robs them of their essential human dignity, for without any real control, life becomes meaningless. We drift through it, controlled by others, used by others, and devalued by others for the interests of others. Oppression, then, violates or contradicts such important social work values and beliefs as self-determination, personal growth and development, the inherent dignity and worth of persons, social equality, and democracy.

A key concept of structural social work is "empowerment." However, empowerment is a contested concept and one that has been appropriated by neo-conservatives. With respect to its contested nature, Allan (2003) points out that earlier forms of mainstream social work and some progressive perspectives regarded it as a process whereby social workers would give power to the people with whom they worked. And, with respect to its appropriation, empowerment takes on another meaning for neo-conservatives. For example, many neo-conservative politicians have promised to empower oppressed persons to look after themselves by reducing the scope of and/or taking away the benefits of the welfare state. These two meanings of empowerment are quite different from that of structural social workers, who view it as a process through which members of subordinate groups reduce their alienation and sense of powerlessness and gain greater control over all aspects of their lives and their social environments. The definition and concept of empowerment that are most consistent with structural social work were developed by Gilles Rondeau (2000, p. 218):

> I define empowerment as a process that enables the transition from a state of passivity to one of activity and control over one's life. . . . [I]t essentially means a process of change where people stop being passive and become active, that is, they take charge and become active players in their own lives. By becoming active, they attempt to take, or take back, control of themselves and their environments.

Empowerment as a Goal and a Process

Empowerment, as a goal and a process, has been a recurrent theme in social work (Freedberg, 1989). However, since the 1980s it has been receiving increasing attention in social work theory and practice (Simon, 1990). Some writers view empowerment as the major goal of social work intervention (e.g., Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998; Pinderhughes, 1983; Rondeau, 2000), while another "calls for a revision of social work practice theory in a way that defines the major function of social work as empowering people to be able to make choices and gain control over their environment" (Hasenfeld, 1987, p. 487). Empowerment is typically understood as a process through which people reduce their powerlessness and alienation and gain greater control over all aspects of their lives and their social environment. Simon (1990) points out that (1) empowerment has its basis in the self-help or mutual aid traditions and in the civil and human rights activities of the 1960s; and (2) because of the many groups, organizations, and professions involved with empowerment in all its dimensions, it should be considered social movement. "Empowerment, in short, is a series of attacks on subordination of every description—psychic, physical, cultural, sexual, legal, political, economic, and technological" (Simon, 1990, p. 28).

As a dialectical process, empowerment occurs in two ways. Consistent with radical structuralism, empowerment for some disciplines and groups is essentially a political and economic process whereby these structurally oriented groups will actively attempt to gain more power and influence over those organizations and institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and the workplace, that have an impact on their lives. This area of empowerment will be examined in more detail in the next chapter. Consistent with radical humanism, the empowerment process involves the psychological, educational, cultural, and spiritual dimensions involved when individuals are helped to understand their oppression and to take steps to overcome it.

Simon (1990) points out that empowerment is a compelling topic for social work for three major reasons. First, the people that social workers work with tend to be in marginal and disadvantaged positions and are among the most oppressed, alienated, and powerless. Second, social work is a profession disproportionately staffed by women, who themselves comprise a group that historically has been oppressed and powerless, even within the profession of social work (Cummings, 1980). And third, "Social workers of both genders are no strangers to the experiences of being discounted, scapegoated, dislodged, underpaid, and overlooked by legislatures, public administrators, executive directors of agencies, colleagues in other professions, academics, clients, and the public" (Simon, 1990, p. 34). We know first-hand the meaning of occupational subordination.

This trinity of interests in empowerment should serve as a catalyst for social work to continue to devise theory and strategies for working with oppressed and disempowered groups, including the profession itself. Hasenfeld (1987) contends that empowerment must occur on at least three levels in social work: (1) at the worker/service user level, where activities are carried out to increase the service user's power resources; (2) at the agency level, where organizational policies should be aimed at increasing people's power resources rather than conformity to prescribed behaviours; and (3) at the social policy level, where the formulation and enactment of policy decisions are influenced by those directly affected by them. Consistent with the PCS model of anti-oppressive social work, Mullaly and West (2018) and Thompson (2001) contend that empowerment as a practice must occur at three levels—the personal, cultural, and structural levels. At the personal level, which is the major focus in this chapter, the emphasis is on helping individuals to gain greater control over their own lives through intrapsychic and interpersonal work by, for example, alleviating the psychological damages caused by oppression and enhancing confidence. At the cultural level, assumptions, stereotypes, and discourses of the dominant groups that perpetuate dominant–subordinate relations are deconstructed and challenged. And at the structural level, power relations rooted in the institutions of society are resisted and challenged. Empowerment at the cultural and structural levels is discussed in the next chapter.

Three Considerations for Carrying out Empowerment-Based Structural Social Work

Should empowerment take place at the personal level before structural empowerment can occur? Dalrymple and Burke (1995) believe that this should be the case. However, as suggested earlier, crisis situations might have to be resolved or some intrapsychic damage might need to be repaired before proceeding to structural analyses or social action. We concur with June Allan (2003) when she argues that in order to avoid the traps of creating dualisms, structural social workers need to work with persons at all levels of empowerment and that this may be done simultaneously (but not always). Many inherent difficulties are involved in empowerment work, but if three considerations are kept in mind at all times, the process of empowerment will be greatly facilitated. First, social workers cannot empower others but can only aid and abet in the empowerment process. Service users "who are empowered by their social workers have, de facto, lost ground . . . in their battle for autonomy and control over their own environment and existence." The role of social work is to provide "a climate, a relationship, resources and procedural means through which people can enhance their own lives" (Simon, 1990, p. 37). The relationship between social worker and user is one of collaboration, with the latter retaining control of the purpose, pace, and direction of the collaborative effort.

A second important aspect of the empowerment process is that instead of being an expert problem-solver, the social worker becomes engaged in a mutual learning situation with the service user (Moreau & Leonard, 1989). The worker should not assume that a compatibility of interests exists between service user and worker (Hasenfeld, 1987). What could be more presumptuous and more disrespectful on the part of a social worker than to think that they know exactly what the problem is and what the solutions are? To avoid this elitist, expert, disempowering practice,

social workers should: (1) continually update their knowledge of the history of race, gender, class, and other relations of subordinate groups (i.e., know as much as possible about the groups one is working with) (Simon, 1990); and (2) help the service user to define and contextualize their situation and problems while always encouraging service users to question and to express disagreement or reservations about particular interventions that the social worker might suggest (Moreau & Leonard, 1989).

A third aspect of empowerment for social workers is to avoid exploiting the helping encounter for our own benefit (Pinderhughes, 1983). It was mentioned that social work experiences subordination as an occupation. Also, we are often stigmatized because of our association with marginalized groups. Thus, we may be vulnerable in terms of compensating for the powerlessness we experience at work and may use our professional role to gain a sense of power. Rather than empowering the people with whom we work, we may actually reinforce their victim status by playing the role of benefactor and exploiting the power differential between ourselves and service users.

Consistent with the principle of linking the personal with the political, empowerment-based social work transcends the micro and macro levels of practice and today includes work at the cultural level as well. At the micro level, the social worker helps the individual not only to take more control of their life, to set goals, to access resources, and to articulate needs and ambitions but also to create or join associations or organizations of members of similar social groupings. These organizations (e.g., anti-poverty groups, women's organizations, Indigenous groups) constitute the focus of macro social work discussed in Chapter 9 and further discussed in the next chapter. The fact that there were (and still are in many workers' minds) two major levels of social work practice has historically created tension between micro and macro practitioners (Ife, 1997). Social workers at the micro level have often believed that the larger aims of social change pursued by macro workers are unattainable and thereby have devalued the importance of social change. Conversely, social workers at the macro level have often believed that individual approaches to helping are simply affirmations of the status quo, thus devaluing the skilled work of many social workers.

The "old" structural social work model incorporated both approaches to empowerment within the day-to-day work of each social worker and within the social work profession as a collective (Ife, 1997). Individual empowerment is not possible unless the individual understands the connection between individual powerlessness and its structural/political sources through a reflection on their own experiences not only as an individual but as a member of one or more oppressed groups. Similarly, at the macro level empowerment work must incorporate the lived experiences, the personal stories, and the impact of oppression on the individual lives of the people who constitute the membership of the various groups or organizations of oppressed persons. The link between the personal and the political is made not just at the analytical or theoretical levels but at the practice level of empowerment-based structural social work. And, of course, empowerment work today must include an awareness of how the dominant culture both oppresses subordinate groups and supports and reinforces social institutions that serve the dominant group through dominant discourses, stereotypes, and popular or mass culture (see Mullaly & West, 2018). The medium in which these links are made is through a consciousness-raising dialogical relationship.

Ife (1997) makes an important point about empowerment when he calls on social workers not to speak on behalf of oppressed groups but to facilitate the voices of marginalized persons themselves to be heard. In the current socio-economic–political climate, marginalized persons do not have a legitimate voice, and what voice they do have tends to be devalued by politicians, who are themselves also overwhelmed by the corporate sector. Well-intentioned advocacy by social workers who speak on behalf of marginalized groups is actually disempowering. It only reinforces marginalization in that oppressed people still do not speak for themselves and, thus, are further excluded from political discourse. As well, the perception may be that social workers are using marginalized people to represent their own views and interests rather than those they claim to represent.

Structural social workers must work alongside oppressed groups to help them find their own voices and make them heard. This involves helping them to define their own needs, to develop the skills and vocabulary required to articulate these needs, to gain access to public forums to address the structures of power and domination, and to help legitimize these authentic voices by supporting them in every way possible. The role of the social worker in empowerment-based social work is one of facilitator and supporter, not leader. The ideal of empowerment connects the personal with the political. It requires both good interpersonal skills and political and organizational awareness and understanding.

Empowerment is not a technique but a goal and a process. As a goal, it will not be reached overnight, just as the oppressive conditions within our current social order will not suddenly disappear. As a process, it is ongoing. Components of empowerment work are feelings and beliefs about self-efficacy, ideas and knowledge and skills for critical thinking and action, knowledge and skills (including the process of reflection, learning, and relearning) to influence invisible and external structures (Dalrymple & Burke, 1995; Gutierrez et al., 1998, cited in Allan, 2003). This process of empowerment is not linear, and no one area is considered more important than another (Gutierrez et al., 1998). It applies just as much to community development projects, policy formulation and implementation, and social action campaigns as it does to work with individuals and groups. "Hence there is a broad range of strategies that could be drawn on to facilitate empowerment" (Allan, 2003). Some of the elements of empowerment work are presented below.

Consciousness-Raising

Although the idea of revolutionary praxis involving both subjective and objective elements was formulated by Marx, the more recent versions have come from Paulo Freire, the contemporary women's movement, and a host of recent writers concerned with social justice and anti-oppression (Baines, 2011; Gil, 1998; Dominelli, 2002; Freire, 1994; Leonard, 1997; Moane, 2011, Mullaly & West, 2018; Thompson, 1998; 2001; Young, 1990). Consistent with the precept that the personal is political, consciousness-raising is legitimized on the basis of the relationship between the social order and human misery. "Thus, consciousness-raising involves the politicization of people" (Longres & McLeod, 1980, p. 268). As awareness of social injustice and oppression grows, oppressed people are more able to identify the causes of their oppression and are less likely to blame themselves (Longres, 1986; Midgely, 1982). Freire developed a total pedagogy based on

the "conscientization" of the peasant population living in Latin America. With a similar set of ideas and purposes, the women's movement has used consciousness-raising as a powerful tool for combatting gender oppression and empowering women.

There are two elements to consciousness-raising:

> First, consciousness-raising is reflection in search of understanding dehumanizing social structures. Second, consciousness-raising is action aimed at altering societal conditions. The two must go hand in hand; action without reflection is as unjustifiable as reflection without action (Longres & McLeod, 1980, p. 268).

The techniques used in consciousness-raising are similar to those used in conventional social work, with one significant difference. Conventional social work is introspective, often motivating people to change their behaviour and adjust to their circumstances. Consciousness-raising, on the other hand, encourages people to gain insights into their circumstances with a view to changing them (Midgely, 1982).

Consciousness-raising is obviously an important part of intrapsychic and interpersonal work in that with increased awareness of injustice and oppression, oppressed people are better able to identify the structural causes of their negative emotions and interpersonal difficulties. Part of the intrapsychic and interpersonal work may involve personal development through individual counselling or by taking a course such as assertiveness training or leadership development, which have been found to increase self-confidence and assertiveness (Mulvey, 1994, cited in Moane, 2011), two characteristics needed for social change activities. However, without a social analysis, such courses may reinforce and perpetuate a "blaming the victim" ideology by overemphasizing human agency and cultivating the belief that problems in living can only be solved through personal change (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993; Mulvey, 1994). Thus, although personal development may be a first step for many in an ongoing process of empowerment and change, it should be framed within a structural analysis of oppression and social injustice.

Obviously, consciousness-raising is part of the radical humanist school, since it is predicated on the belief that reflection must precede action. Although it sees practical action as an outcome, consciousness-raising places its initial emphasis on the understanding of oneself in the context of the social order. As Leonard (1984, pp. 210–211) points out, "The hegemony of the ruling class involves the domination of its world view, a view which drenches individual consciousness and which must therefore be actively struggled against at the level of consciousness." Thus, changes of consciousness regarding social relations are a precondition of the transformation of those relations.

Although a certain amount of consciousness-raising may occur in individual counselling sessions (e.g., providing statistics to the oppressed individual with whom one is working, providing some factual information about some aspect of their oppression, asking questions that connect the personal and the political, exploring some of the functions that a particular form of oppression carries out for the dominant group), most effective consciousness-raising occurs in groups of persons who share the same form of oppression (Longres & McLeod,

1980; Young, 1990). Elsewhere (Mullaly, 2010), I (Bob) pointed out that there is widespread agreement among many anti-oppressive writers and progressive social work writers that to become a member of a group process with other persons who are similarly oppressed is the most effective way for oppressed persons to develop political awareness of their situation. In such a group context, the members can self-define a more authentic identity than the one imposed on them by the dominant group, develop the self-confidence to "come out" and assert their more authentic identity, and establish solidarity in order to take action against their oppression (Adam, 1978; Bishop, 2002; Dominelli, 1997; Freire, 1994; Herman, 1992; hooks, 1993; Ife, 2001; Leonard, 1984; Pharr, 1988; Withorn, 1984).

Consciousness-Raising as Political Education

Much of consciousness-raising occurs in the form of political education whereby structural social workers, in the course of their daily service efforts, explore with service users their experiences with oppression and how to challenge and resist it. Consciousness-raising can occur by linking people's personal problematic situations with their political causes so that oppressed people "become more aware of the structures and the discourses that define and perpetuate their situations of oppression" (Ife, 2001, p. 151).This type of education is not a process of depositing knowledge (i.e., the banking concept of education) into the head of a service user (Bock, 1980), nor is it a process of haranguing people about social injustice (Longres, 1986). Allan (2003, p. 65) cautions us that although consciousness-raising may open up possibilities for action, it can also be "oppressive and patronizing if it is based on the assumption that the practitioner's consciousness is superior and is to be imposed on the people with whom they are working." First and foremost, consciousness-raising must involve reflection based on the service user's experience and individual consciousness, not solely the worker's. This does not mean that the structural social worker will not introduce new ideas or challenge beliefs held by the service user, however. Rather, the political education process takes the form of a dialogue in which both the social worker and the service user assume roles of mutual sharing and learning.

The service user will present their world view and where they see themselves fitting into this view. The social worker, in turn, will ask questions that might expose any of the service user's stereotypical or socially conditioned assumptions. This type of questioning is called "*critical questioning*," which is different from "normal questioning" (Fook, 1993) because it focuses on any socially conditioned answer. An example is a response a social worker might give to a woman who says, "If I just tried harder to be a good wife and mother, I might still have my family." The worker could say, "And why do you think that?" Such a response, however, might imply that there is one correct answer, and the woman could respond, "Because it is the woman's job to look after her family." Alternatively, a structural social worker would respond by asking a critical question such as "Is that what you think or what you think is expected of you?" This use of critical questioning has the potential for persons to explore their expectations and how they feel they have to act. It may also provide the opportunity for the woman to understand the extent to which her life may represent her own personal choices on the one hand or social conditioning on the other (Fook, 1993).

To facilitate this process of dialogue, mutual learning, and critical questioning, the social worker must express empathy to signal to the service user that their world view and explanation for any difficulty is understood by the social worker. Empathy "is a large part of the substance of critical consciousness for a social worker" (Keefe, 1980, p. 389). In her classic book *Radical Casework*, my friend and former colleague Jan Fook (1993) extends the concept of empathy beyond "personal empathy" to include "social empathy." The former refers to a social worker's ability to understand by experiencing or merging with the experience of another with respect to their perceptions, feelings, and ideas of their own personal world. Social empathy refers to the worker's ability to empathize with the service user's perceptions, feelings, and ideas about the social world. This is a valuable tool to link the personal and the political in the service user's situation. What Fook has called "social empathy," Jessup and Rogerson (1999) call "structural empathy." Examples of translating these concepts into practice are contained in Box 11.4.

A major topic of dialogue between social worker and service user is how our present society works, including the social functions carried out by poverty, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and so on. If members of various subordinate groups realize that their personal difficulties are related to their membership within a particular oppressed group and that their oppression is socially useful

Box 11.4 *Social or Structural Empathy*

Social Empathy

"Take the following exclamation by a bored and frustrated housewife: 'Men always get what they want!' This can be empathically reflected [back to the woman] in at least two ways. The first picks up the personal experience: 'You feel you never get what you want?' The second highlights her perceptions of the social condition: 'You think men get a better deal than women?' A socially empathic response would ideally combine the two and draw attention to the links about them: 'You don't think you ever get what you want because men always get a better deal than women?'" (Fook, 1993, p. 112)

Structural Empathy

Working with a woman who has abused drugs and alcohol and is now separated from her children and her partner, who was physically abusive, a social worker might ask, "Can you tell me what rights you believe you have as a mother, wife, and individual?" and "What resources do you need to get your children back?" (Jessup & Rogerson, 1999, p. 173, cited in Allan, 2003, p. 66). Other structural empathic questions in this situation are: "Tell me, what do you think the role of mother and partner should be?" "Where do these expectations come from?" "How do you differ from these?" (Jessup & Rogerson, 1999, p. 174, cited in Allan, 2003, p. 66).

to the dominant groups, this awareness should alleviate much of the internalized guilt and blame that exist. In turn, awareness of their oppression, coupled with the energy unleashed from not feeling guilty or responsible for their subordinate status any more, should lead to some kind of social action against that oppression. For this consciousness-raising to be successful, however, it must be based on people's experiences and not on some foreign, academic critical analysis imposed on people in sophisticated quasi-Marxist jargon. "Consciousness-raising methods require the same sensitivities to self-determination and relationship-building that traditional . . . [social work] requires" (Longres, 1986, p. 31).

Often, service users demonstrate what Marxists call "false consciousness" or what anti-oppressive writers call "internalized oppression" (Ruth, 1988) in that they understand their troubles and behave in ways that promote the interests of the dominant groups in society (Longres, 1986). At the same time, a part of all of us tells us that society is not working in a way that supports a satisfying and enriching life for large numbers of people. From a structural social work perspective, we should look for and reinforce that part of the service user's perspective that is aware of social oppression (Galper, 1980; Gil, 1998). In this way we are not imposing a brand of politics unrelated to the normal events of service users. Instead, we are focusing on their experiences in an empathic, respectful, and relevant manner.

Some examples may help to clarify the discussion so far. People who are forced to apply for welfare benefits often express humiliation, guilt, and shame because they have been socialized into believing that everyone in society should be able to make it on their own. One of the ideological myths of capitalism is that equal opportunity exists and that only the lazy, the inferior, and the weak do not take advantage of opportunities available to everyone. To be on social welfare is a sign of weakness, inferiority, and laziness. When people seek social welfare benefits or any other kind of social service, we must help them to deal with their pressing, immediate problems. Most people cannot develop a larger critical perspective of their distress until they experience some symptomatic relief.

However, we have an obligation as structural social workers to move beyond symptomatic relief, since we know the symptoms will likely reappear (Galper, 1980). We must participate in the consciousness-raising experience of the welfare recipient by discussing why poverty exists in a capitalist society (i.e., the social functions it carries out), why the receipt of social welfare is seen as a failure in our society, the social control functions of social welfare, and how it operates in the best interests of capitalism and the dominant groups in society. In other words, a structural analysis of the welfare recipient's situation and experiences is discussed in an empathic manner at a level and in a language that the recipient understands. As mentioned previously, although most people are victims of false consciousness or internalized oppression, everyone knows to some extent that society is not working in the interests of large numbers of people. Similarly, many social welfare recipients have some awareness that their situation is not necessarily or completely of their own doing. It is these thoughts that the structural social worker uses to begin the consciousness-raising process.

Consciousness-raising should always be based on the service user's situation and experiences. Oppression is group-based, so consciousness-raising should focus on a structural analysis of the position the service user's group occupies in society. If we are working with senior citizens, then the structural social worker must know all about ageism. If this analysis

is discussed in a meaningful way with senior citizens, part of that discussion will include how many of the problems experienced by senior citizens—limited housing options, inadequate or non-existent home care, the high cost of drugs, meagre pensions, transportation difficulties—are not caused by senior citizens but stem from a society that treats people as commodities whereby, if you are a non-producer and have no market value as a worker, you have no social value.

Longres and McLeod (1980) make two additional points about consciousness-raising as social work practice. First, because consciousness-raising focuses on the negative features of society and politicizes people around these features, structural social workers who engage in this practice will not be favoured by politicians, by administrators, and by many conventional social workers. Consciousness-raising will not make life easier for the social worker. Second, although consciousness-raising should be a cornerstone of social work practice, it does not represent the totality of practice; giving support, dealing with crises, providing hard services, advocacy, making referrals, and helping to make people's immediate lives more bearable are also important activities. It should also be noted here that consciousness-raising is greatly enhanced when it occurs on a group basis. More will be said about this later. Four activities that are part of the consciousness-raising process—normalization, collectivization, reframing or redefining situations, and dialogical relationships—are presented below.

Normalization

Normalization assists in the consciousness-raising process. Its purpose is to dispel any notion that any particular difficulty experienced by an oppressed individual is unique and idiosyncratic only to that individual when in fact the difficulty is a logical outcome of oppression and is experienced by many members of a particular subordinate group. It is a way of learning that many others of the same social grouping, whatever it might be, also experience the same problems and that in their situation it is not unusual to have such problems. Many oppressed persons will internalize feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame about their oppressive living conditions because they have been socialized into accepting the dominant culture's message that they are the architects of their own misfortune. In other words, they believe that they are responsible for causing the social problems they are experiencing. Normalization breaks with that part of conventional social work that does not look at an individual as part of a social group subject to all the vagaries involved in a dominant–subordinate relationship. Normalization is an activity consistent with Piven and Cloward's (1993, pp. xiii–xiv) contention that:

> we have to break with the professional doctrine that ascribes virtually all of the problems that clients experience to defects in personality development and family relationships. It must be understood that this doctrine is as much a political ideology as an explanation of human behaviour. It is an ideology that directs clients to blame themselves for their travails rather than the economic and social institutions that produce many of them. . . . This psychological reductionism—this pathologizing of poverty and inequality—is, in other words, an ideology of oppression.

Structural social work understands that the political, cultural, and economic context of our present society, which is characterized by dominant–subordinate relationships, favours the dominant group at the expense of the subordinate groups. Unlike conventional social workers, structural social workers never overlook class, gender, race, and the like as possible sources of personal problems.

One of the first normalization activities is to deal with the service user's notion that the problem or situation being experienced is something unique to that service user. This may be done in two ways: individually and collectively. First, giving some factual information to the service user may help them to see that other people are in the same situation. For example, people are socialized into believing that those who are not working in the labour market are in some way defective and, therefore, are responsible for their unemployed status. However, if the unemployment rate for a community is 10 per cent, there obviously are more workers than there are jobs, so some people, through no fault of their own, will not be able to find work. And if there are 1 million unemployed people within a labour force of 11–12 million (as there were in Canada during the recession of the early 1980s), this does not mean that there are 1 million unique problematic situations caused by 1 million individual workers. Rather, there is one social problem affecting 1 million workers and their families, and a problem of this magnitude is well beyond the control of any individual negatively affected by it. If persons experiencing unemployment are able to place their situation in the wider political and economic context and understand that there are many other people like them, much of the guilt and blame that have been internalized should be alleviated. Unemployment is a structural problem that negatively affects lower socio-economic groups but is encouraged by the dominant group so that the latter will benefit by having an available workforce to compete among themselves for carrying out dangerous and menial jobs at subsistence wages, which of course contributes to larger profits for the dominant group.

Feminist social workers are able to provide female service users with all kinds of information on how our patriarchal society oppresses women, how it causes problems for them, and how it then convinces them that they, themselves, are responsible for the emotional, financial, marital, and family problems they might encounter. Normalizing information helps them to combat internalized oppression and to reject blaming-the-victim explanations. An example is that of an abused woman who believes that she is one of a very tiny minority of women and that because this happens to so few, there must be something she is doing to cause her partner to abuse her. Providing some basic statistical information, such as abuse rates of women, should help to normalize this woman's situation and dampen her internalized belief that, somehow, she has brought this abuse on herself. Once the internalized guilt, shame, and blame are eliminated or alleviated, a certain amount of energy is freed up that can be used to take a deeper and broader look at the situation and deal with it in a more fundamental way (Galper, 1980).

A second and more effective normalization activity is to link the service user with others experiencing similar situations and problems. One of the difficulties of trying to normalize a service user's situation on an individual basis is that "the weight is too strongly distributed in favor of individual uniqueness and private troubles" (Longres & McLeod, 1980, p. 273). The collective

sharing and consciousness-raising that occur within these types of self-help groups show people that their situations and problems are not idiosyncratic but are part of a larger social dynamic.

In sum, normalization puts situations and problems in their proper political, economic, cultural, and social context. The emphasis is not on the uniqueness or individuality of a service user's situation but on the sameness and common ground of the service users. It is a way of reducing guilt and raising self-esteem and opens the possibility of analyzing the structural causes, dynamics, and consequences of social problems and oppression. A precondition for carrying out normalization activities is that the social worker is able to move beyond the traditional diagnostic mindset that ascribes all social problems to personality defects and family dysfunction. If this diagnostic mentality remains in place, chances are greatly reduced that the service user will be able to move beyond the traditional "personal inadequacy" perception of social problems.

Collectivism

Collectivism is a primary social value of both of the socialist paradigms. Collectivism recognizes that people are social beings who depend on one another for the satisfaction of most of their primary and social needs. It is the antithesis of individualism and, therefore, should be reflected in structural social work practice. As far back as 1975, Galper (1975) pointed out that because we live and experience problems within a social context, the analysis of the causes of problems, the development of awareness of the extent to which problems are widely shared, and the mobilizing of activity toward the solutions of these problems must take place in conjunction with others. Thompson (1998, p. 147) supports Galper's position when he says, "because inequality is a political issue, responses to it are often of a collective nature. That is, people band together to tackle the problem by challenging the ideologies and social practices that sustain it."

Longres and McLeod (1980, p. 273) conclude that "The first step to consciousness-raising is forming groups based on common social statuses" and that "consciousness-raising in a holistic way is only possible within groups" because such a medium is free of what Corrigan and Leonard (1978) call the "cult of individualism." This does not deny the necessity for individual work with service users, for it is recognized that many people feel overwhelmed in a group or that a group focus overshadows their immediate personal needs. Some individualizing is necessary to show care, respect, support, and encouragement to participate in a group process. As mentioned above, initially the situation may call for the relief of any pressing and immediate stress as well as a demonstration of personal and social empathy for the service user. Once the initial crisis is dealt with and a trusting relationship is established, the service user will be in a better position to look at their situation in a broader but more fundamental way with others.

Groups of service users may serve a number of different purposes: therapy, consciousness-raising, political action, or a combination of these. If such groups already exist, the structural social worker should refer all service users they come into contact with to these groups. For example, a structural social worker should refer anyone in receipt of, or applying for, social welfare to any welfare rights or anti-poverty organizations that might exist in the community. As well, structural social workers should support such groups however they can, including alerting such groups to policy developments that have the probability of negatively

affecting them (Galper, 1980). Although structural social workers should support mutual aid groups of service users, they should not violate the social work value of self-determination by attempting to lead them. Withorn (1984, p. 110) underscores this point when she discusses the functions of mutual aid groups:

> Political practice means establishing groups of clients, not staff-led therapy groups, but "mutual aid" groups, in the best sense. Such groups can discuss common concerns and organize joint demands on workers. They can also provide support and assistance to each other. We do not live in a socialist society: we cannot organize real "mass organizations." Any efforts will be compromised and feel contrived. But the presence of such groups could help articulate client demands: They may be a safe place for sharing "bootleg" information about the agency, and they may give clients a place to do their own "power analysis."

To these functions of the collective process Leonard (1984, pp. 210–211) would add two psychological benefits: (1) positive changes in the conception of the self occur; and (2) people are able "to move away from the cult of individualism which dominates people's lives within capitalist societies." These groups can also be consciousness-raising groups in which members are involved in social analysis of their oppressive conditions and dynamics. They can also be social or political action groups in which members strategize, plan, and carry out campaigns to challenge and change oppressive social conditions, policies, and practices. Groups are usually dynamic, change over time, and may shift from one focus or purpose to another, as illustrated in Box 11.5.

In working with groups organized on the basis of a common status, the social worker ideally is assigned to groups that share their gender, race, class of origin, and so on. Maurice Moreau (n.d.) cites research showing that if the social worker is of the same social group as that with whom they are working, (1) the worker is better able to empathize with the group members, and (2) the group members tend to explore themselves much more than when the social worker has a different background. The caution for the worker, however, is not to project their own life experience onto the service users.

Eight practices that Moreau and Leonard (1989, p. 124) use for the operational definition of collectivization are useful here:

1. Drawing a service user's attention to the links between their personal difficulties and the similar problem situations of other service users.
2. Putting service users of the same agency who are living in similar problem situations in touch with each other.
3. Grouping service users for the purpose of mutual aid.
4. Grouping service users for the purpose of creating necessary resources the agency itself should provide.
5. Grouping service users for the purpose of creating necessary resources other agencies should provide.
6. Grouping service users for the purpose of changing problematical aspects of the agency.

7. Grouping service users for the purpose of changing aspects of other agencies and organizations that are problematic to service users.
8. Referring service users to larger social movements directly related to their situations.

Adam (1978) makes an important point with respect to the collective process by showing that it is not always (if ever) a linear process. He acknowledges that when individuals who are similarly oppressed come together, a dialectical movement toward integration of the group occurs whereby group members discover each other and, in the process, discover themselves. However, for this discovery to occur, a certain withdrawal from the inhospitable environment controlled by the dominant group may be necessary. Thompson (1998) argues that greater progress can often be made by the subordinate group if members of the dominant group (including the social worker) are not present at or involved with the meetings, planning, etc. of the subordinate group. He gives the examples of some women's groups and some groups of black people who deliberately exclude men and white persons, respectively, from meetings. Leonard (1997) also notes that some degree of segregation is a necessary element for emancipation and symbolic community identity. He points out that some groups have developed their own social services, which are more relevant to their needs than are many mainstream agencies, but they still participate in the larger social services network. Adam (1978) issues a caution with respect to segregation. He points out that it could lead to a ghetto-type situation, which, although it may offer some degree of comfort and safety from the dominant group, could also be stifling and confining to oppressed individuals.

Box 11.5 *The Brisbane Women's Reading Group*

Several years ago, I (Bob) was invited to speak to a class of social work students at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. The students in this class were taking a specialization in radical/structural social work coordinated and taught by Dr Bill DeMaria. On this day, a few graduates of the program were also in attendance to speak to the students about some of their experiences as structural social workers. One of the graduates related a work experience that I think illustrates several essentials of collectivist structural social work.

She had recently graduated and obtained a job with the Commonwealth (i.e., federal government, which is responsible for social security in Australia) in the Department of Income Assistance (Centrecare). She was given the task of working with a group of single-parent mothers who were regarded by the department as potential "child protection" cases (simply because they were lone parents and in receipt of welfare). The young structural social worker managed to obtain some funds from the department for child care and transportation so that the women could attend a weekly group meeting. The social worker

Continued

set the meeting up as a reading club in which the women would read a book selected from a number of books suggested and then purchased by the worker. The group would then discuss the book at their weekly meeting. This program was sold to Centrecare as a way for the women to get out of the house once a week for a needed break.

Initially, the books were of general interest, but over time, as the group bonds became established and the worker gained the trust of the women, feminist books were introduced. The women would read these books, some of which critically analyzed the place of women in a patriarchal society such as Australia and others that looked critically at such topics as discriminatory (to women) spousal and child support legislation, gender-discriminatory welfare legislation and policies, and so on. The women were encouraged by the worker to talk about their own lived experiences with respect to the texts that they read.

The worker described the process of consciousness-raising and normalization that occurred with the women in the group. Initially, the group operated along the lines of a therapy group, but over a short period of time anger set in, which was directed toward adding a political dimension to the group's activities. The group developed and carried out strategies to change some of the moralistic and punitive legislation and regulations that negatively affected them as a group of oppressed persons (i.e., as women with children who were dependent on welfare).

The segregation process does not mean that the social worker has no involvement with the group. Mullaly (2010, p. 232) makes two points in this regard:

> First, social workers who have had some prior involvement with some group members should not feel rejected if they are not invited to or are excluded from such groups. Letting group members know that you are available to them on an individual or group basis may be all that you can do at this time. Second, knowing the importance of the liberating functions carried out by segregated groups, the anti-oppressive social worker should encourage the formation of such groups and support them in every way possible. There will still be plenty of opportunities to work with oppressed persons on a group basis.

Redefining

Redefining is a consciousness-raising activity in which personal troubles are redefined in political terms, exposing the relationship between objective material conditions and subjective personal experiences. Society, as discussed earlier, is characterized either by order or by change, and each view defines social problems differently. According to the order view, social problems emanate from individual defects, family dysfunction, or subcultures outside the mainstream. The social change view ascribes most social problems to the present set of

social relations whereby the dominant group controls the subordinate groups. Because social agencies are established within the present liberal-patriarchal-capitalist system, they tend to embody the ideology and thought structure of the larger system—that is, an order perspective. This includes the problem definition that underlies all services and social work–service user interactions. Rose and Black (1985) argue that the thought structure of operating assumptions that typically characterizes social agencies validates the North American political economy and invalidates users of social services. Contributing to an entrenchment of a personalist definition of social problems within social agencies is the fact that this thought structure produces several effects on service users (Rose & Black, 1985). (1) It invalidates the service user by validating the larger system. (2) It decontextualizes the service user because it severs their subjectivity from the objective and materialist context that frames and shapes all social life. (3) It shapes people's behaviour to correspond to the given social reality, and the more one deviates from this "proper and appropriate" behaviour, the more severe is society's treatment. (4) It saturates service users with pejorative vocabulary, a language of pathology and deviance that contains such concepts as diagnosis, treatment, symptoms, acting-out behaviour, resistance, and so on. (5) It forces service users to accept the problem definition imposed on them—in other words, to accept a false reality. If one were seeking an operational definition of oppression, these five effects of the prevailing definition of problems on service users would be a good starting point.

Redefining represents an alternative social reality, an alternative definition of problems. Validation is derived from reconnecting people to their objective social and historical context. The task, rather than working on personal change and accommodation to society, is to engage people as producers and participants in comprehending and acting on their contextual environment. Redefining involves the social worker and service user in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. In every instance, explanations of problems that are self-blaming are challenged, deconstructed, and examined in terms of the service user's specific situation and reconstructed or redefined in terms of their connection with the larger socio-economic-political system. As with consciousness-raising and normalization, priority is given to group rather than individual work because the former is consistent with collectivization and mutual sharing among persons with similar social statuses, which produces more meaningful consciousness-raising.

Moreau (n.d.) outlines a number of redefining or "reframing" techniques. These techniques include: critical questioning (discussed above); dialectical humour (Frayne, 1987, cited in Moreau, n.d.); metaphors and storytelling (Gordon, 1978); cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957); the checking of inferences (Middleman & Goldberg, 1974); mental imagery (Rosen, 1982); persuasion (Simons, 1982); and the use of silence (Bourgon, 1988). Such techniques help to contextualize not only the service user's problem situation but often the service user's behaviour. Behaviour that may be labelled as inappropriate and self-destructive according to the personalist problem definition may be relabelled as perfectly appropriate and normal with an alternative problem definition. Lundy (2004, p. 139) offers the following simple ways of operationalizing the concept of "redefining" or "reframing." She says that service users are often hard on themselves and may accept responsibility for a situation that is structurally caused.

The structural social worker will, in such instances, engage the service user in a process of reflection and, in a tentative fashion, offer another way of looking at the situation by saying something like "Do you think another explanation might be . . .," or "Another way of looking at it could be . . .," or "I see it another way." Narrative therapists use a number of techniques to help people see situations in ways that are not self-blaming. Externalizing the problem in conversation helps to remove the problem from the identity of the service user and to see it differently (Lundy, 2004).

An example may help to make this discussion more concrete. Many graduates from the social work program at St Thomas University (a structural program) in New Brunswick, where I (Bob) had been a faculty member and where Marilyn is currently the director, are employed in departments of social services in which one of the services is "child protection." They report that the problem definition of child abuse and neglect is that these occur because of inappropriate behaviours and attitudes on the part of parents. Case recordings of non-structural social workers highlight personal inadequacies, emotional immaturity, poor coping skills, and family dysfunction as the areas to focus on in working with child abuse and/or neglect situations. Large amounts of money are spent each year on providing family therapy training to the social workers so that they might work more effectively with child protection families. If there is any mention that maybe the service users' problems are largely material and structural or institutional, it is dismissed either as incorrect or by stating that "There is nothing we can do about that. Our job is to work with these families."

The problem definition of the social agency is that child abuse and neglect are problems of personal inadequacy when, in fact, child abuse and neglect are in large part a class problem. Contrary to the myth of classlessness, which is part of the current system's thought structure, both evidence and reason lead to the unmistakable conclusion that the incidence and severity of child abuse and neglect is often a function of poverty (Swift, 1995). This is not to say that child abuse and neglect do not occur among other socio-economic classes; the evidence does indicate, however, that the great preponderance of abuse and neglect and the greatest severity of abuse and neglect occur among those who have the fewest resources to work with, who are struggling the most to secure the basic necessities of life, and who have the greatest number and most sustained pressures on them—that is, people living in poverty—especially women living in poverty (Swift, 1995). This is not an excuse for child abuse or neglect, but it is an explanation. The job of the structural social worker, then, is to redefine the problem from one of personal pathology to one of class. This should be done not only with the service user but should be stated at case conferences, and the case recordings should be redressed to reflect the service users' problems as largely material and institutional.

This is not to imply that child abuse and neglect are only matters of class. Physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse each have their own distinct set of dynamics. The argument here is that class has an impact on these dynamics and that adequate material conditions are often a more realistic solution than sending people to parenting courses when they may not know where their next meal will come from, or if they will have a roof over their heads, or even if they will still have children to parent.

One of the myths about structural social work (see Box 11.1) is that it does not allow for personal responsibility. That is, in linking all personal situations to larger social or political

structures and forces, it removes all blame from the person for any seemingly irresponsible or bad behaviour. The criticism of structural social work is that when people make bad choices, it adopts a "society made me do it" response, which is similar to the "it's all a capitalist plot" critique of critical social theory explanations for social problems. Structural social work does not overlook or accept irresponsible or bad behaviours on the part of individuals. However, it does not blame or pathologize people for such social phenomena as poverty, racism, sexism, and so on.

Unlike mainstream "blame the victim" explanations for social problems, structural social work recognizes that the reasons for people's behaviours are much more complex than a simple dichotomy of the person being good or evil. When people suffer from all the injustices and indignities of oppression over a long period of time and must struggle to obtain the basic necessities of life, they will often develop coping behaviours that help them to survive day to day that, on the surface, might seem morally wrong or self-destructive. As well, when individuals lack the resources or opportunities to live their lives in productive and socially acceptable ways, they often use ways and means to get by that are not socially acceptable. And as in the case of child abuse or neglect, these are not excuses for seemingly bad or irresponsible behaviours; they are explanations. Thus, structural social workers would not accept or overlook personal irresponsibility, but they would not condemn the person as bad or evil because of it. They would work with the individual to extinguish or neutralize such behaviour, but in their work they would recognize that such behaviour is linked to larger oppressive forces in society and, therefore, would take a broader approach than simply "fixing up" the person.

Dialogical Relationships

Normalization, collectivization, and redefinition are the means of carrying out consciousness-raising. The medium within which these activities are carried out is dialogue, between the social worker and the service user and among service users. Dialogue is the vehicle for uncovering people's subjective reality and opening it to critical reflection.

> Dialogue cannot be professional interviewing, application of therapeutic technology, instructions for improved functioning, or casual conversation. It is purposive in both process and focus. It directs itself to validation of the oppressed as persons, attempting to demonstrate their capacity to inform you, and it struggles to direct the content towards depiction and analysis of the objective situation (Rose & Black, 1985, p. 45).

To be able to engage in meaningful dialogue, the structural social worker must develop a dialogical relationship with service users—a relationship based on horizontal exchange rather than vertical imposition (Freire, 1970). A dialogical relationship is one wherein *all participants in the dialogue are equals*, wherein each learns from the other and teaches the other. Power is shared as much as possible between worker and service user, and each is considered to have different but equivalent wisdom and experience so that they mutually engage in theory-building and action (Allan, 2003). Professional knowledge is not privileged over knowledge gained from lived experiences (Ife, 2001). Of course, the social worker will have some skills and insights that the service

user does not have, but the service user has experiences and insights that the worker lacks. The structural social worker must make conscious efforts to dispel any myths of expert technical solutions to fundamental political problems. Wisdom, experience, and expertise are accepted and validated "from below" as well as "from above" (Ife, 1997). The worker may pose problems but not solve problems, since this latter activity must be shared between worker and service user(s). Both work together so that they can ask the questions as well as think about the answers. As a result, both will come to a better understanding of the issue, both will learn, and both will act (Ife, 1997). Criticism of conventional social work practice has often centred on its elitist, impersonal, and overly technical approach. "In essence, a dialogical relationship is exchanging, comparing and communicating, rather than indoctrinating, proselytizing and generally issuing a 'communiqué'" (Moreau, 1979, p. 89).

As structural social workers, we do not want to reproduce with service users the kinds of social relations that have oppressed them in the first place. One of the contradictions of social work practice is that it attempts to provide practical humanitarian care for people in distress, yet it often provides this care in a superordinate (helper–helpee), authoritarian (worker has the answers), and mystical (helping process is not explained) way. A dialogical relationship minimizes these aspects. Burghardt (1982, p. 215) points out that "one of our pivotal, potentially 'insurrectionary' roles can be to produce relationships between client and worker that run counter to the dominant social relationships produced elsewhere." Such relationships not only are conducive to structural social work practice, but they challenge the ideological hegemony of the larger society.

To demystify social work activities, techniques, and practices, social workers must not be possessive of them but must make them broadly available to people at large as part of their job. For instance, the use of any technique, skill, or process is an opportunity to demystify it by discussing its origins and purpose, as well as other situations in which it might prove useful, and by encouraging the service user to ask questions. The content of service users' files should be made available to them, and they should have the right to be present at all conferences that affect them. Hidden strategies and manipulative approaches are not used, and the rationale behind all questions asked by the worker is explained (Moreau, n.d.).

In discussing empowerment, Moreau and Leonard (1989, pp. 82–87) present the following dialogical practices:

- sharing with the service user the content of case recordings;
- directly involving service users in the decisions that affect them;
- directly involving the service user in providing feedback on the kinds and quality of services provided;
- reducing the social distance between worker and service user by use of self-disclosure, casual dress, giving the rationale for techniques and questions, personal empathy, home visits, first names, direct clear speech, and use of body language;
- sharing with the service user one's personal biases and limits as part of the "helping" contract;
- providing information on the role of the agency and the rights of the service user and letting them know the worker is there to serve them.

Box 11.6 *Interviewing Skills for Structural Social Workers*

1. Capacity to *engage* clients at the beginning.
2. Demonstration of *warmth, empathy, sensitivity,* and *respect* to all clients in the group.
3. Management of *shared* air time.
4. Ability to facilitate a broad *definition* of the problem.*
5. Attention to the *different perspectives* held by various members in the client group.*
6. Appropriateness of probes and questions to facilitate a consideration/reflection that the impact of *class/gender/race/sexuality/ability/age* might have on the problem.*
7. Interviewer's use of non-judgmental and *non-pathologizing* language.*
8. Overall ability to elicit discussion that explores problems from a *critical perspective.**
9. Ability to demonstrate confident handling of proceedings without becoming *dogmatic* or *authoritarian.**

In conclusion, consciousness-raising is the approach used for working with service users, just as empowerment is the goal and process of structural social work for challenging oppression, and "the personal is political" provides the critical analysis at this level. Normalization, collectivization, and redefining are the techniques used in consciousness-raising. All structural social work at the personal level is carried out through the medium of dialogical communication and relationships. Two Australian structural social work educators (Fraser & Strong, 2000) developed a set of interviewing skills that provided the focus of a course they taught on structural social work skills. These skills, which capture much of the discussion above, are presented in Box 11.6. The skills that the authors identified as traditional are listed from 1 to 3, and the remaining six skills (with an asterisk) are broadly identified as structural interviewing skills. All students were assessed on how well they were able to demonstrate competence on these skills in role-playing situations.

In the Belly of the Beast: Surviving and Changing the Workplace

Most social workers work in agencies, whether they are public or private. The question most often asked of me (Bob) by social work students and practitioners is *"How can I practice structural social work and not get in trouble with my agency or even lose my job?"* Although the short and glib answer is "by being smart (i.e., strategic) about what you do," there is, of course, much more to it than that. There are a number of ways a structural social worker can survive within and challenge or change social agencies that hold the same oppressive thought and ideological structures as the larger society. Although social work by itself cannot eliminate oppression and injustice, it can help to erode oppressive structures and practices starting within its own arena for struggle—the workplace.

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