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Beginning at the Beginning: An Exploration of Critical Social Work

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Abstract

Recognizing the complexities of critical social work the authors use a metaphor of a traffic circle to survey the fundamental values, assumptions, theories, concepts, principles, and practices of critical social work. They then consider the relationship among 'mainstream', critical, and other marginalized social work perspectives. A subsequent exploration of the challenges and possibilities of critical practice is followed by a reflection on the processes of teaching and learning critical social work. The article does not presume a level of pre-existing social work knowledge or experience on the part of the reader and is therefore accessible and useful for scholars, teachers, students, and practitioners who are new to critical social work.

KEYWORDS: Critical social work; social work education; practice fundamentals

Critical Social Work: Beginning at the Beginning

Critical hope...refers to hopeful action that is based on the critical analysis of a situation and the recognition that wishing alone is not sufficient to make change. It involves an understanding of the forces that produce injustice and an imagining of what the world without these forces, and without the injustice, might look like (James, Este, Bernard, Benjamin, Lloyd, & Turner, 2010, p. 27)

We are practitioners and educators who remain critically hopeful that social workers, by understanding and adopting critical social work perspectives and practices, will contribute individually and collectively to the creation of a socially just world. We have embraced the task of teaching critical social work to beginning students and practitioners, but our enthusiasm and excitement is often in sharp contrast with the frustration and confusion expressed by learners as they attempt to navigate through the complexities of 'what is' and 'how to do' critical social work.

One source of confusion is the number and variation of critical social work perspectives (Hick & Pozzuto, 2005). The different theoretical influences and interpretations result in a

myriad of internal contradictions and debates that frustrate students seeking a clear and consistent definition.

A second source of confusion is that previously marginalized and distinct social work perspectives, including Afro-centric and Aboriginal Social Work, are often portrayed alongside critical social work and are mistakenly assumed to belong within the same container of thought and action. Sorting out the nuances of these distinctions and similarities is difficult.

A third, and perhaps most major source of confusion, is the result of a significant gap in the literature. While there are many excellent articles and texts that explore the origins, evolution, and uniqueness of critical social work (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2009; Allan, 2003; Allan, Pease, & Briskman, 2003; Baines, 2007; Campbell, 2003; Carniol, 2005; Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005; Hick & Pozzuto, 2005; Hick, Fook, & Pozzuto, 2005; Leonard, 2001; Mullaly, 2007) we have been unable to locate a concise introductory explanation that does not presume some level of pre-existing social work knowledge or experience.

Developed as a result of our experiences as social work educators and in response to common and reoccurring questions from learners, this paper offers a foundational article for beginning learners. In our attempt to simplify the complexity of critical social work we risk neglecting important distinctions, relying on over-generalizations, and appearing to reduce practice to a series of platitudes and lists. We explicitly accept these risks because our priority is to speak directly to those beginning students and practitioners who earnestly seek to understand critical social work.

We begin with some basic directions for reading this article and then introduce readers to the traffic circle metaphor that frames the paper. After an initial detour to consider the meaning of the words 'critical' and 'political', we direct you through a more detailed journey. This provides an orientation to the components of the critical social work perspective. We consider how critical social work relates to other practice perspectives and highlight some challenges of and possibilities for critical practice and, finally, we briefly comment on the processes involved in teaching and learning critical social work.

Some Basic Directions

- Always remember that critical social work is dynamic and robust: one introductory paper cannot cover everything but, by introducing some central components this paper will serve as a foundational framework for ongoing study.
- Do not assume that this paper represents the one and only 'truth' about critical social work: not all scholars will agree with everything we have written. You will soon learn that there are multiple interpretations, and therefore multiple representations, of critical social work.
- You may not have previously been exposed to the critically reflective thinking process that is central to critical social work. A critically reflective thinking process enables you

to question and unlearn old thinking habits and opens up alternative ways of interpreting and acting on social problems and structures.

- Educational processes (pedagogy) that are congruent with critical social work may be unfamiliar and initially uncomfortable as they require active engagement from learners: mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. You cannot be passive consumers of knowledge within a critical social work classroom.
- Most beginning learners seek certainty and consistency: you want to learn the ‘right’ way to be a ‘good’ social worker. However, critical social work, like life in general, is often contradictory, complex, disconcerting, and therefore requires emotional labour. Your journey will be enriched through finding ‘comfort with discomfort’ and then calmness in the midst of inconsistency and uncertainty.
- Learning should not be an isolating experience: seek out and engage with others as you explore the intricacies and complexities of this intriguing social work perspective. We remain grateful to the many practice mentors and theorists who have invested in our journey.
- Recognize that each of us forges our own unique path. For instance, we (the authors) came to critical social work from very different paths – Carolyn as a feminist activist in south-eastern Canada and Gail as an Aboriginal social worker from northern Canada. Regardless, our vision of a better world is shared and we join many others on this journey of critically engaged hope.
- You do not have to understand everything in this paper. There will be twists and turns: just when you think you understand a given idea, concept or theory, some new information will call that understanding into question. You are encouraged to approach your studies in a spirit of exploration and remember that:

It is not the goal of critical social work to discover or establish the finite answers for ‘correct’ social work theory or practice. Rather, the goal of critical social work is to identify the multiple possibilities of the present in order to contribute to the creation of a more just and satisfying social world (Hick & Pozzuto, 2005, p. xi).

The Journey Called Critical Social Work

Our Departure Point: Understanding ‘Perspective’

A perspective can be simply understood as an outlook (Schein, 2003) or narrative map (Clark, 1995) from which one views, interprets, and understands the various phenomena of everyday life. Clark (1995) describes this narrative map as “the consciousness platform on which we act, through which we ‘know who we are’ . It is shared in a greater or lesser degree with those around us, but is seldom discussed outright” (p. 65). Building upon Clark’s analogy we use the metaphor of a traffic circle to illustrate the components of any perspective. Our traffic circle has six components, or entry routes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

A Short Detour

Before beginning our journey around the traffic circle let us take a short detour to consider the words ‘critical’ and ‘political’. Dictionary definitions of the word critical include (1) not pleased; saying that someone or something is bad or wrong (2) giving opinions or judgments on books, plays etc. (3) important and (4) serious (Cambridge, 2009). None of these definitions are particularly relevant to critical social work and it is important to let go of these commonly understood meanings of the word ‘critical’.

So what does critical mean when used in the context of critical social work? Critical social work theorists originally adopted the term from *critical theory*, a sociological and philosophical theory that evolved from the so-called ‘Frankfurt School’ of German social thinkers. We will draw on this body of thought but know that critical social work perspectives are “no longer strictly aligned with critical theory” (Hick & Pozzuto 2005, p. xi).

Two themes within critical theory are particularly relevant to understanding the word critical when used as an adjective to describe social work. First, critical theorists assert that the role of theory is to help us move beyond understanding and explaining society to critiquing and changing society. **Critical social workers are therefore committed to understanding, critiquing and transforming the profession of social work and the unjust nature of society.**

Second, critical theorists assert that all social relationships, whether at micro, meso or macro levels, are political. The common understanding of the word political, that evokes images of political parties, elections, and governments, is not very useful on our journey. In the context of critical theory, to politicize something or someone “...is to introduce the idea that everything has political elements: that is, nothing is neutral, everything involves struggle over power, resources and affirming identities” (Baines, 2007, p.51). **Critical social workers therefore**

include an analysis of power and understand social relationships as both personal and political: you will become familiar with the phrase “the personal is political”.

As you begin the journey through the traffic circle, we ask that you put aside the popular meanings of the words ‘critical’ and ‘political’ and take on very different meanings: meanings that incorporate ideas of social identity, oppression, domination, privilege, power, justice, creativity, and change. We also ask you to keep in mind that our ‘journey’ is predominately situated within the meta–perspective that is often termed a ‘Euro-western worldview’. Other societies and cultures have quite different meta-perspectives that give rise to different ways of thinking about and knowing the world. Let us now move to a more detailed consideration of each of the entry routes and the specific components of a critical social work perspective.

Navigating the Traffic Circle

Entry Route 1: Assumptions. Assumptions are foundational ideas or beliefs about how the world works. Jackson (2008) distinguishes between primary assumptions and secondary assumptions. He explains that primary assumptions are typically unquestioned taken-for-granted ‘truths’ that we are not even aware of until they are specifically surfaced and considered. Some of these primary assumptions deal with significant philosophical ideas. Secondary assumptions are additional layers of beliefs that are rooted in, and thereby consistent with, the underlying set of primary assumptions. Secondary assumptions are then legitimated by society’s broad-based acceptance of the primary assumptions. Even though we are frequently unaware of our assumptions they are fundamental to our understanding of the world.

Primary assumptions:

- Axiology explores questions about values: what is good/right/wrong/moral/immoral?
- Epistemology explores questions of knowledge: how do we ‘know’ what we know? What is true; what is false?
- Ontology explores questions about reality: what is real; how does reality change?
- Cosmology explores questions about the nature of the universe and the place of all life within the universe?
- Praxeology explores questions about action: how should and how do we behave?
- Spiritual: explores questions about the nature of spirit and faith and how we make meaning in our lives (Vidal, 2007).

Secondary assumptions:

- Human Nature: Do humans have a fundamental nature? Is it good, bad, a mixture? What is the role of nature/nurture?
- Social Relationships: Are we collective or individualistic beings? Do we act from self-interest or from considerations of the common good? What does it mean to ‘help’ another?
- Nature: Are we meant to subjugate and control nature, to live in harmony with nature, to accept the power of nature?

- Political: What are the nature of societies, economies, systems and institutions? What is the relationship and interconnection between individuals and societies, economies, systems and institutions? Whose needs are served by these systems and institutions?
- Change: How does change happen? What is the role and possibility of individual and/or collective action in promoting change?
- Temporal: What is the nature of time? Should we focus on the past, the present, the future (Ibrahim & Owen, 1994)?

Assumptions of critical social work. The foundational assumptions of critical social work incorporate a mix of modernist (including anti-colonial), post structuralist, post-colonial, and postmodernist thought. While articulating the distinctions among these various bodies of thought is beyond the introductory scope of this paper, it is important to know that critical social work is in a transitional phase whereby fundamental assumptions are being challenged and re-conceptualized by diverse schools of thought (Kincheloe & MacLaren, 2000). However there are some generalizations or commonalities that would be accepted by most critical social workers.

Epistemologically, knowledge is not understood to be ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered. Knowledge is “not simply a reflection of an inert world” (Agger, 1998, p. 4) but is actively and socially constructed and interpreted. Therefore objectivity is a myth and ‘truth’ is determined by those who have the power to define a particular interpretation of knowledge as the ‘correct’ interpretation.

Not surprisingly then, critical social workers do not ascribe to the belief that there is one reality that is the same for everyone. Rather our individual experiences and how we understand these experiences depend on where and how we are situated socially, culturally and politically.

Critical social work grew from a modernist, materialist perspective which means that it initially focused in the concrete realities of life and frequently neglected spiritual concerns. However, this is changing as more and more critical social workers are exploring spiritual questions (Damaianakis, 2006; Graham, Coholic, & Coates, 2006). Consistent with the above ontological and epistemological assumptions, most critical social workers recognize and embrace diverse and multiple ways of ‘meaning making’. Similarly, critical social workers embrace cosmological assumptions that challenge the alleged superiority of humans and suggest that social work has a role to play in helping human beings learn to live in harmony with nature (Mary, 2008; Zapf, 2009).

Critical social workers understand human nature to be fluid and malleable and therefore susceptible to multiple influences. Accordingly, social relationships are understood as being crucial in the development of both individual and collective identities: by this we mean that our individual identities (how we see ourselves) are significantly influenced by our social positioning and identities (how others see us). The assignment of social identities (the most commonly discussed are those rooted in race, culture, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and class) has a tangible reality in a person’s day to day life and leads to differential and intersecting experiences of oppression, domination and privilege. However critical social

workers do not accept that these experiences pre-determine who a person is: on the contrary, humans are understood to be active participants in shaping their lives and societies.

Critical social workers hold a number of political assumptions, many related to the existence and transformation of injustice. Critical social workers believe that injustice exists, has current and historical manifestations, impacts individuals, families, communities, and societies, influences interpersonal relationships, can be resisted and transformed, and has been both re-enforced and transformed by social work and social care practices.

Finally, critical social workers assume “that a better social world is possible and that the achievement of a better social world requires a qualitative change in current social relations” (Hick & Pozzuto, 2005, p. xi). They assume that social workers have a responsibility to engage in the difficult and creative work of imagining and building a better social world.

Entry Route 2: Values. Values are what a person, group, or culture considers important. Values are frequently intangible but give a sense of what is esteemed, cherished and considered to be worth preserving and acting upon. The study of values is referred to as axiology, which comes from two Greek words: ‘axios’ meaning ‘worthy’ and ‘logos’ meaning ‘science’. Values are intimately linked to collective assumptions and challenging a person’s values often evokes intense emotional responses and resistance.

Values of critical social work. Social work is a ‘normative’ profession: this means that values, as well as knowledge, influence our analysis and decision-making. Critical social work is grounded in values of equity and equality, community, inclusiveness, democracy, celebration of diversity and difference, human rights, social justice, sustainability, harmony, cooperation, interdependence, and personal and social transformation. Since these values are also espoused by many ‘non critical’ members of society we ask you to remember that it is situating these values in the context of the previous assumptions that make them ‘critical’.

Entry Route 3: Theories. Theories are ‘speculative’ (Jackson, 2008) ways of describing, explaining, and making meaning of the events in our lives. For example, the theory of evolution is a way of explaining the origins of, and changes in, populations of biological organisms. Like any theory, this explanation is not universally accepted; there are other theories or ways of explaining the origins of life. Theories are not developed or supported in isolation from fundamental assumptions and values. It is unlikely that one whose cosmological assumption is that God created human beings in seven days would accept the theory of evolution as a legitimate way of explaining the origins of life.

Theories of critical social work. Social work is primarily concerned with theories that seek to explain and influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of human beings and the relationships of humans to each other and to societal institutions. An exploration of social work theory reveals the influence of multiple theoretical traditions including biomedical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, political, and educational. While you will explore many of these traditions as a part of your social work education, the theoretical foundations of critical social work primarily rest on the last four of these traditions: sociological, anthropological, political, and educational. These theoretical traditions are more consistent with

critical social work's desire to both critique and transform society as opposed to just describing and explaining life events. In addition, these traditions move beyond considerations of individual behaviour to explore the complex relationship between the structures of society and individual consciousness, a focus that is not as prevalent in biomedical and psychological theoretical traditions.

Entry Route 4: Concepts. Concepts are the building blocks of theory. To understand any given theory we need to understand the concepts that are central to that theory. Using the above example, to understand the theory of evolution we would need to understand concepts like natural selection, genetics, mutations, and adaptation.

Concepts of critical social work. The many, many conceptual building blocks of sociological, anthropological, political, and educational theories are significant to critical social work. For the purposes of this paper we just list some of these concepts, but rest assured that you will learn more about them throughout the course of your studies. These concepts include: oppression, domination, privilege, individual and social identity, individualization, justice and injustice, human rights, social location or social positioning, power, language, discourse, dialogue and dialogical relationships, history, difference and diversity, inclusion and exclusion, marginalization, complexity, contradiction, critically reflective analysis, helping, consciousness raising, community, deconstruction and reconstruction, context, meaning, and possibility.

Entry Route 5: Principles. Principles are brief, clear statements that provide people general guidance and direction.

Principles of critical social work. Practitioners who embrace a critical social work perspective strive to:

- Achieve congruency among their assumptions, values, theories, concepts, principles, and practices.
- Politicize their work by linking personal/private issues to public/political conditions. In so doing, they reframe accepted and dominant definitions of social problems.
- Not dismiss standardized knowledge and practices but understand the contextual nature of practice and vary their actions, including the use of power, in relation to context. This frequently means shifting one's practice focus from the 'client' to the problematic 'context'.
- Work at multiple levels: social work includes direct working with individuals, families and communities but it also includes working at policy, research, and advocacy levels.
- Center the voices and experiences of those who are traditionally marginalized.
- Work co-operatively and collectively in ways that value the knowledge and experience of service users and communities.
- Attend to all components of life: material, affective, cognitive, and spiritual.
- Establish and maintain ethical relationships that respect the uniqueness of individuals, groups, and communities.
- Work comfortably and competently in the midst of contradiction and uncertainty.

- Embrace and practice critical reflexivity.

Entry Route 6: Practices. Practices are the actual actions people engage in during their day to day lives.

Practices of critical social work. It is impossible in one paper to describe the many, many practices and related skills of critical social work and to distinguish them from other practice perspectives. Many critical practitioners use skills that are also used by workers who adopt other perspectives. We believe that such generalist skills, if grounded in critical social work assumptions and values, can be useful in supporting and advancing the goals of critical social work. At the same time some generalist skills may be inappropriate within a critical social work perspective.

Although they use the word ‘processes’ instead of practices Finn and Jacobson (2008) provide a useful categorization that can serve as a beginning introduction to critical practice. The four core inter- connected processes (practice clusters) as presented by Finn and Jacobson are

1. Engagement: interpersonal communication, anticipatory empathy, observation, noticing and bearing witness, body consciousness, listening, dialogue, understanding and respecting resistance, group work, popular education, honouring difference.
2. Teaching and Learning: co-learning, systematic inquiry, “diagnosis” and analysis, mutual aid, open space technology, collecting and assessing generative themes, community mapping, organizational knowledge, identifying resources and supports, setting a teaching and learning climate, development of critical awareness, assessment.
3. Action and Accompaniment: challenging oppression and creating contexts of support, planning, supporting, decision making, mobilizing resources, motivating participants, challenging barriers, following through in creating change, addressing anger and transforming conflict, critical education, building coalitions, policy analysis, advocacy.
4. Evaluation, Critical Reflection, and Celebration: participatory evaluation, designing evaluation tools and processes, initiating, sustaining, and enriching critical reflection, recognizing success, appreciating contributions, and relishing learning, honouring ritual and play, finding joy and beauty in the work.

By now we have made our way completely around the traffic circle. While we started our journey at ‘Assumptions’, as you learn about critical social work you will enter from different locations, depending upon the material you are studying. For example, the School where we teach has one course that focuses primarily on assumptions and values; another one focuses primarily on theories and concepts; and a third on principles and practices.

How Does Critical Social Work Relate To Other Practice Perspectives?

As you learn about the historical evolution of critical social work (and its predecessors like radical, feminist, anti- racist, structural, anti-oppressive perspectives) it will become clear

that it has been, and continues to be, somewhat on the margins of more dominant, Euro-American perspectives. Baines (2007) uses the term 'mainstream social work' to describe these perspectives and says:

Although often claiming the opposite, mainstream social work tends to view social problems in a depoliticized way that emphasizes individual shortcomings, pathology and inadequacy. Interventions are aimed largely at the individual with little or no analysis of or intent to challenge power, structures, social relations, culture or economic forces (p. 4).

Baines goes on to say that mainstream social work takes

... politics and political awareness out of issues in order to control the issues and those seeking to make social change. ... In social work, issues are often depoliticized by defining them as individual shortcomings, medical or psychiatric diagnoses, criminal activities or other forms of deviance, and/or by using existing bureaucratic understandings of social problems and their solutions (2007, p. 5).

The most significant thing to remember at this point in your studies is that critical social work and mainstream social work are informed by some fundamentally different assumptions, especially ontological, epistemological, and political assumptions.

Some other social work perspectives, such as Afri-centric, Aboriginal, and Queer, are also marginalized in relation to mainstream social work. Critical social work has been enriched by the insights of these perspectives, particularly by an analysis of the complex processes of colonialism, de-colonization, and de-colonialism (Lang, 2005). In turn, the emergence and growth of critical social work has, to some degree, facilitated the 'space' for other perspectives to claim their place as distinct cultural models of social work. While all of these perspectives share a commitment to co-creating a just society, it would be a mistake to assume they are the same. Again, some are informed by fundamentally different assumptions than critical social work.

As a beginning student or practitioner you may find it difficult to identify the differences between various marginalized approaches and mainstream social work. An in-depth analysis of these differences is not possible within this introductory paper but please accept that there are many valid reasons for your struggle.

First, without knowledge of, or experience in, mainstream social work practice you may find it difficult to comprehend the real uniqueness of the various marginalized perspectives, including critical social work. Second, mainstream social work has a stated commitment to social justice and equity that, on the surface, appears to be consistent with the aims of the marginalized perspectives. For example, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2008) states that "the global vision of social work is a world consistently working toward social justice and well-being for all citizens" (p. 2). It is only through a more detailed study of all components of each perspective that you will be able to distinguish sometimes subtle qualitative differences.

Third, the use of shared words and images is not always indicative of shared perspectives. For example, while the following quote from the vision statement of the Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers (n.d.) uses similar language, it is our informed analysis that the work of this Association is not congruent with a critical social work perspective as we have outlined it here.

...following from this are a focus on empowerment and a critical perspective on social, health and economic policy that makes clear our humanitarian mandate. Active support of an anti-oppressive framework for social work practice reinforces our commitment to diversity (home page).

Fourth, the actual work done by critical social workers can, on the surface, resemble the work done by mainstream social workers. But the practice is **not** the same: a more nuanced examination shows that there are subtle, but fundamental, differences that arise primarily from differences in fundamental assumptions.

Challenges and Possibilities

We earlier suggested that the ideal situation is when all components of a perspective are congruent. However, human beings, and the structures, institutions, and cultures we create, are rarely ideal or congruent. Social work theory and practice is no exception: it is fraught with contradiction, inconsistencies, and incongruence. It is important that we all become skilled at recognizing and working within these contradictions in the best interests of our service users.

The privileging of mainstream perspectives over those of critical social work and other marginalized perspectives gives rise to a common question from beginning practitioners: “How can I possibly practice critical social work in an environment that either overtly or covertly practices on the basis of very different perspectives?” Given the changing relationship between social work and the state, processes of globalization, economic conditions, and the growth in managerial approaches to practice, this is a valid and pressing question.

Healy (2005) and Fook (2002) both advocate the idea of ‘contextual practice’ as one means of addressing this dilemma. Healy asserts that an essential element of critical social work is analyzing and understanding institutional context.

The deeply contextual nature of social work differentiates it from other professions. Our professional practice foundations – our knowledge, purpose and skill bases – are substantially constructed in, and through, the environments in which we work. For this reason, enhancing our capacity to understand, analyze and respond to our institutional contexts must be an integral part of our frameworks for professional practice. Through understanding our context, we can both recognize how our practice is shaped by context and how we might act as agents of change both within, and in relation to, our context (2005, p. 4).

Similarly, when asking if it is possible to bring “about social justice in an unjust environment” (Fook, 2002, p. 161). Fook (2002) claims that such a question implies that our social work practice is determined by the organizational context in which we work. She rejects

this implication, asserting that if practice is truly contextual, there is no longer an opposition between practice and environment. She suggests that, if we experience our environment as hostile, then part of our work is changing that environment.

Another common question is “but why do I have to use one perspective all the time?” Why can I not apply a mainstream perspective in one case situation and apply a critical perspective in a different situation?” We hope by now you can identify the misunderstanding embedded in these questions. To re-iterate, critical social work is not a set of theories that one ‘applies’. A critical social work perspective is better understood as a way of being, or as a world view, that is “a mental model of reality — a framework of ideas & attitudes about the world, ourselves, and life, a comprehensive system of beliefs” (Rusbult, n.d., home page). A world view is not something that you can ‘apply’ in one situation and not in another. Rather it frames how you explain, understand, and make meaning of any situation.

Teaching and Learning Critical Social Work

Many critical social work educators are informed by pedagogical assumptions that give rise to teaching principles and practices that may differ from your previous university experiences and may not conform to your ideas of university education and professional training. Critical education, sometimes called transformative education, is more than a cognitive process; it is also an emotional and spiritual process that calls for active dialogical engagement among students and teachers (Campbell, 2002, 2003). Many critical educators strive to facilitate learning environments that privilege: the active creation of collective knowledge over the passive giving and receiving of pre-determined knowledge; contradiction over certainty; surfacing assumptions over learning ‘the facts’; searching for understanding over finding the truth; exploring questions over finding answers; staying with discomfort over seeking comfort; dialoguing over debating; working collaboratively over working competitively (Campbell & Baikie, 2010). Such education can be both exhilarating and destabilizing so creating mutually supportive relationships with your instructors and fellow students is very important.

Conclusion

As you work with the complexities of critical social work practice remember that it is not an ‘either/ or’ situation: a practitioner is not a ‘mainstream social worker’ **or** ‘a critical social worker’. We can work in ‘mainstream’ contexts with a critical social work perspective. There are multiple possibilities for promoting social justice, exploiting critical possibilities, and politicizing practice in every work context.

As you study critical social work you may find that your own perspective on life and practice differs from the critical perspective we have explored here. If this is the case, remember that engaging in processes of deconstructing and reconstructing one’s own perspective, whatever that may be, is part of being an effective social work practitioner. This educational process of learning and unlearning takes time, demands cognitive and emotional investment, entails risk, is often circular and contradictory, but it is also rewarding, exciting and energizing. Critical social work provides us with the hope for, and progress towards, a changed social world for the wellbeing of all. May you enjoy and celebrate your journey as much as we do ours.

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