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THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

The term 'foundations' in the title of this chapter has been deliberately chosen for two reasons:

1. It reflects the need to have a firm footing on which to base our analysis, our plans and our actions. It is in this sense that theory *underpins* practice.
2. It emphasizes the fact that theories of inequality, discrimination and oppression are still at a relatively early stage in their development, particularly in terms of how they can be applied in practice. There is a great deal of theory building that remains to be done.

The discussion of theory is not an intellectual exercise for its own sake, but rather a means of clarifying theoretical issues with a view to guiding and informing practice. As Sayer (1992) acknowledges, theorists often work on the premise that: 'there's nothing so practical as a good theory' (p. 50).

This chapter begins to get to grips with the concept of equality by asking the thorny but none the less very important question of: What is equality? From this we move on to consider how discrimination and oppression are related to inequality. This discussion is developed further by exploring the application of 'PCS analysis', a concept I introduced in an earlier work (see Thompson, 2001a). This refers to the need to recognize that discrimination operates at three separate but interconnected levels – the personal, cultural and structural. The important themes of ideology and discourse are also considered as fundamental elements in a theory of promoting equality. Finally, the theoretical issues discussed are woven together under the heading of what I shall call 'emancipatory practice'.

The chapter covers a range of important issues and introduces a number of important theoretical concepts. It may therefore prove difficult to assimilate all the information on first reading, but many of the concepts and themes featured are revisited in subsequent chapters, giving readers the opportunity to develop their understanding of the ideas presented. Therefore if you struggle with this chapter (and perhaps to a lesser extent, Chapter 2), do not despair – they are both ‘heavy-going’ chapters in terms of the theoretical ground that they cover, but they serve the purpose of laying the foundations for the remaining chapters and so the discussions there should help to cast light on the ideas presented here. You may find it helpful to re-read this chapter after you have completed the other chapters.

What is equality?

Equality is a word that means different things to different people. This is due, in no small part, to the fact that it is a *political* term. Like ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’, equality is a term used by different political groups or affiliations to promote their own particular values or interests. In this sense, equality is an *ideological* concept. As we shall see below, ideology involves the power of ideas being used to reinforce and legitimize existing power relations. The task, then, is not to find the ‘true’ meaning of the word ‘equality’, but rather to clarify the way it is being used in the context of this book.

Equality, in the sense I am using it here, is not to be confused with uniformity. Being equal does not necessarily mean being the same. Indeed, I shall be arguing later that a better understanding of difference and diversity is an important part of promoting equality. As Lister (1997) argues:

Equality and difference are not incompatible; they only become so if equality is understood to mean sameness. In fact, the very notion of equality implies differences to be discounted or taken into account so that, despite them, people are treated as equals for specific purposes. Equality and difference are, therefore, better understood as simultaneously incommensurate and complementary rather than antagonistic. The opposite of equality is inequality. To posit it as difference disguises the relations of subordination, hierarchy and consequent disadvantage, which underlie the dichotomy, and serves to distort the political choices open to us.

(p. 96)

We shall examine in more detail below the relationship between

inequality and difference when we explore the important role of diversity.

Turner (1986) argues that: 'The modern notion of equality cannot be divorced from the evolution of citizenship' (p. 21). This is an important point, as it draws our attention to the links between equality and rights. Conversely, inequality can be seen to involve an undermining or denial of rights.

In a classic text of social policy, Marshall (1963) describes three sets of rights, as Mishra (1981) explains:

Marshall's analysis is chiefly concerned with the development of citizenship rights and its impact on social inequality. These rights, according to Marshall, consist of three different elements – civil, political and social. The first refers broadly to guarantees of individual liberty and equality before the law; the second to political enfranchisement – the right to vote and to seek political office; the third, a good deal less specific than the other two, comprises a 'modicum of economic welfare and security' and the 'right to share to the full in the social heritage and life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society'.

(p. 27)

This passage touches on a number of important issues:

- Social rights owe a great deal to the provision and effectiveness of a system of human services.
- The notion of sharing 'to the full in the social heritage' begins to account for the marginalization associated with inequality – that is, socially disadvantaged groups are pushed to the margins of mainstream society.
- 'Standards prevailing in the society' suggests that social rights are not absolute – they have to be understood in the context of the society concerned.

Taking this a step further, it can be argued that one important implication for working with people and their problems is the need to recognize:

- The significant role of health, welfare and related practices relating to 'people problems' in terms of rights, citizenship and equality;
- The process of marginalization as a key element in the development and maintenance of inequality;
- An understanding of the social context as a basic requirement for good practice.

Turner (1986) speaks of equality as both a value and a principle:

Basically, I conceive equality as a value and as a principle, as essentially modern and progressive. Of course, the debate about equality has gone on for centuries but the special feature of modern societies is that we no longer take inequality for granted or as a natural circumstance of human beings. Under conditions of modern social citizenship, it is inequality not equality which requires moral justification.

(p. 18)

The reference to 'modern and progressive' is one that brings Turner's views into conflict with the postmodernist conceptions of society to be discussed in Chapter 2. However, his basic point is that contemporary societies place a certain amount of value on equality (even though this may not be manifested as fully as it could be). An important implication of Turner's comments is that equality is something that societies can and do strive for – inequality is not accepted as natural or inevitable. It is something that can be removed or at least decreased if appropriate steps are taken. It is a goal for us to aim for.

One well-known approach to promoting equality is that of equal opportunities (EO). The equality of opportunity approach is based on the desire to achieve a fair starting point for people – a level playing field – so that some people are not disadvantaged in terms of employment, access to services, housing and so on. While this has a lot of merit as a strategy, it has also been criticized for its narrow focus on individual issues without addressing broader structures of power and inequality. It is a philosophy of equality that emphasizes opportunities rather than outcomes – which may be anything but equal as a result of the broader issues of culture and structure. It is therefore very consistent with individualistic and conservative approaches to equality but is limited in its scope for addressing the more complex issues of institutionalized discrimination and inequality (Cashmore, 1996; Marlow and Loveday, 2000). As Humphries (1996) comments:

EO policies were based on the liberal assumption that inequality equals discrimination. In other words, the society was at root sound, with discrimination against some groups a superficial blemish which could be manipulated away – a wart on the face of the good community.

(p. 3)

A new approach that is gradually challenging the EO approach for dominance is what has come to be known as the managing diversity approach (or, simply, the diversity approach). This differs from tradi-

tional EO approaches in two main ways. First, by concentrating on diversity (that is, social variety across and within groups of people) as a positive aspect of society – an asset to be affirmed and valued rather than a problem to be solved – it seeks to counteract the negative, defensive elements of EO that have unfortunately tended to develop. Second, it is broader than the traditional EO approach which tends to have a narrow, legalistic focus – that is, EO approaches tend to concern themselves primarily if not exclusively with those aspects of discrimination that are illegal in terms of the framework of anti-discrimination legislation. The development of the diversity approach, its strengths and weaknesses, will feature in the discussions below in later chapters.

Contrary to what some people seem to believe, diversity is not an issue that has replaced equality as a focus of concern and interest – rather it has added another dimension to attempts to promote equality. Equality is a complex and intricate matter that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. It is not my intention to enter into an in-depth exposition of its subtleties. Rather, I shall simply emphasize that equality, as the concept is used in this book, can be seen as primarily a question of equality of human rights – particularly social rights as they relate to social justice. In this context, working in occupations that help people deal with their problems can be seen to be, in part at least, a process of addressing inequalities and promoting social justice.

What are discrimination and oppression?

At its most basic level, discrimination is simply a matter of identifying differences, and can be positive or negative. For example, in driving a car, being able to discriminate between lanes of traffic is a very important and positive attribute. However, negative discrimination involves not only identifying differences but also making a negative attribution – attaching a negative or detrimental label or connotation to the person, group or entity concerned. That is, it is a question of certain individuals or groups being discriminated *against*. As we shall see in Chapter 3, such discrimination does not occur at random – it follows clear social patterns in terms of class, race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation and other such social divisions.

When such negative discrimination occurs, the resulting experience is generally one of *oppression*, which can be defined as:

Inhuman or degrading treatment of individuals or groups; hardship and injustice brought about by the dominance of one group over another; the

negative and demeaning exercise of power. Oppression often involves disregarding the rights of an individual or group and is thus a denial of citizenship.

(Thompson, 2001a, p. 34)

Discrimination and oppression are therefore closely related concepts. Their interrelationship is a complex matter and it is not my intention to explore it in any detail here, but see Chapter 3 for a fuller analysis. However, it is worth noting that discrimination is a major contributory factor in relation to oppression. That is, a fundamental source of oppression is the set of processes by which certain social groups are discriminated against and thereby disadvantaged. The discussion below of PCS analysis attempts an explanation of how and why discrimination occurs and thereby leads to oppression.

Discrimination and oppression can be seen to be linked to inequality in a number of different ways:

- *Economic* The differential distribution of financial resources and rewards is a key factor underpinning poverty and social deprivation (Chapter 3 – see also Jones and Novak, 1999), and also plays a part in other forms of discrimination.
- *Social* The extent to which a person is integrated into society and enjoys its esteem, rewards, privileges and opportunities depends to a large extent on his or her ‘social location’ – that is, his or her status in terms of social divisions, such as class, race and gender.
- *Political* Access to power is not evenly distributed in society and once again relates to social divisions, the various dimensions of social organization. Questions of power and the implications of power relations are the major focus of Chapter 2.
- *Ethical* Banton (1994) argues that: ‘The best protections against discrimination are those in the hearts of people who believe discrimination is wrong’ (p. 36). Challenging discrimination is therefore a question of morality and thus of values.
- *Ideological* Grabb (1993) argues that inequality is maintained by, among other things, a mechanism of ideological control: ‘It entails the control of ideas, knowledge, information, and similar resources in the establishment of structured inequality between groups or individuals’ (p. xix).
- *Psychological* This can be subdivided into three aspects – cognitive, affective and conative, or, to put it more simply, thoughts, feelings and actions:
 - *Cognitive* Thought patterns can be seen to vary according to

social divisions. For example, there are significant differences in the use of language across genders and ethnic groups, with the speech patterns of dominant groups being seen as superior or more prestigious (Cameron, 1998; Guirdham, 1999; Scollon and Scollon, 2001; Thompson, 2003).

– *Affective* Emotional responses are also rooted in social divisions. For example, responses to loss can be seen to vary between men and women (Riches, 2002; Thompson, 1997a).

– *Conative* Behavioural norms follow distinct patterns in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, age and so on.

In each of these three cases, there tend to be clear social expectations as to how members of a particular group or social category should think, feel and act, with strong sanctions against those who fail or refuse to comply with these expectations (see Practice Focus 1.1).

◀ PRACTICE FOCUS 1.1 ▶

Sally was an experienced bereavement counsellor who enjoyed her work, even though it could be quite upsetting at times. However, the aspect of her work she found most demanding was her role in counselling men. She often found that there were significant barriers that many men had to overcome before they were able to talk freely about their feelings of loss – barriers brought about by masculine notions of toughness and emotional robustness. Sometimes it made her quite angry to think that such stereotypical expectations could cause additional pressures and difficulties at a time when they were very vulnerable, distressed and hurt. She had to be very careful to ensure that her annoyance about this did not affect her work with specific clients.

Existing inequalities are maintained through processes of discrimination that have the effect of allocating life-chances, power and resources in such a way as to reinforce existing power relations. It is through this interactive process between discrimination and inequality that the status quo tends to be maintained – with the net result that dominant groups benefit, while subordinated groups experience a degree of oppression. This contributes to a cyclical process in which the social and cultural order is reproduced – see the discussion of ‘autopoiesis’ in Chapter 6.

The main processes of discrimination that give rise to oppression will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 3 and so I shall say no more about them at this point.

PCS analysis

In order to develop our understanding of discrimination and the oppression that arises from it, it is important to recognize that it operates at three separate but interrelated levels: personal, cultural and structural (hence the term PCS analysis). Each of these levels is important in its own right, but so too are the interactions between them.

The personal level

One's thoughts, feelings and actions at an individual level can have a significant bearing on inequality and oppression. This is particularly the case when the individual concerned is in a position of power – for example, someone who has control over the allocation of resources (a very significant issue in so many work settings).

Discrimination at the personal level frequently manifests itself as prejudice. This involves forming a judgement and refusing to alter or abandon it, even in the face of considerable evidence that contradicts and undermines it. Often, such prejudicial judgements are based on *stereotypes*, a concept I shall discuss in more detail below.

Prejudice can be open and explicit or covert and implicit. An example of the former would be a teacher who once told me that she did not like homosexuals and saw them as a threat to the moral order. Many other people, by contrast, can be just as prejudiced without realizing that they are doing so. For example, a participant at a case conference commented that the parents concerned were 'quite intelligent for a black family'. When challenged that this was a racist remark, she became very upset and argued vehemently that she 'would not dream of being racist'. None the less, her assumption that black people were less intelligent than white people clearly revealed a degree of underlying racial prejudice.

Although it cannot be denied that prejudiced attitudes and behaviours do exist, we have to be careful to avoid the mistake of attaching too much significance to the personal level. Individual behaviour needs to be understood in its broader context if we are to have more than a partial and distorted view of the situation. The **P** level of prejudice and individual attitudes and actions is only one part of the overall picture.

Vivian and Brown (1995) are critical of a personality-based approach to understanding discrimination:

The problem, very simply, is that an analysis of individual personalities cannot account for the large-scale social behaviour that normally characterises prejudice and intergroup conflict more generally. If it were true

that prejudice derived from a disorder in personality, then we would expect the expression of prejudice or discrimination within groups to vary as much as the personality of members comprising the group. But in fact the evidence seems to indicate that prejudice within groups is often remarkably uniform.

(p. 59)

A reliance on personal explanations of discrimination is problematic in a number of ways, not least the following:

- It provides an excuse: Comments such as 'I'm not racist' or 'I'm not prejudiced' can be used as a refusal to consider the impact or significance of discrimination and oppression. It neglects, for example, the fact that discrimination can often be unintentional (a point to which I shall return below).
- It ignores wider issues: To see discrimination simply as a matter of personal prejudice is to ignore a significant range of cultural, social, political and economic factors.
- It 'blames the victim' (Ryan, 1971): By focusing on the individual level, we fail to recognize that discrimination is not one-dimensional – it affects different people in different and overlapping ways. An overemphasis on the personal level disguises the fact that a person can be both victim and perpetrator of oppression. For example, a black woman can experience both racism and sexism and yet still be ageist and disablist.

In order to go beyond the personal level, we need to consider the cultural context in which individuals operate. Although each individual is to some extent unique, we also have to recognize that individual beliefs, values and actions owe a great deal to prevailing norms and expectations. That is, the **P** level is embedded within the **C** level, as Figure 1.1 illustrates.

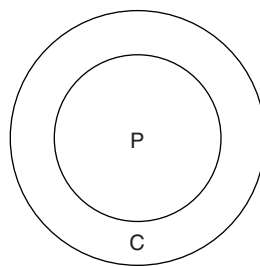


Figure 1.1 The personal embedded within the cultural

The cultural level

Culture is an important sociological concept which describes sets of patterns shared across particular groups. As Kendall and Wickham (2001) comment:

'culture' refers to the way of life of a group (including, possibly, a society), including the meanings, the transmission, communication and alteration of those meanings, and the circuits of power by which the meanings are valorised or derogated. By analogy, 'Cultural Studies' involves the study of a group's way of life, particularly its meanings (including its morals and its beliefs), with an emphasis on the politics of the ways those meanings are communicated. Cultural Studies must concern itself with the control of meanings and their dissemination, that is, with circuits of power and with forms of resistance.

(p. 14)

Cultural patterns can be identified through such factors as humour and language. Humour can tell us a great deal about what is valued in a culture, as well as what is feared or rejected. Humour often involves the use of 'demons', people or things that are pilloried and scapegoated, with the effect of emphasizing that they do not belong within that particular culture. In this respect, humour is used to set down boundaries, thereby defining the parameters of that particular cultural formation.

Language can be seen to fulfil a similar role. It is an integral part of how culture 'operates' as a social force. That is, language both reflects cultural norms, assumptions and patterns and contributes to their maintenance and their transmission from generation to generation. In this way, language acts a vehicle for transmitting discriminatory ideas and values (Thompson, 2003).

One of the factors that binds together language and culture is the tendency to produce what Berger and Luckmann (1967) refer to as the 'taken-for-grantedness' of everyday life. Both lead to thoughts and actions that become routine and unquestioned, the 'wallpaper' in the background of everyday existence. Consequently, both language and culture can have the effect of conveying meanings beyond those intended, often without the person concerned even being aware that the process is taking place. In this respect, language and culture have much in common with ideology, a concept I shall discuss in more detail below.

Culture is an important concept in relation to discrimination and oppression in a number of ways:

- Its role as a boundary marker can be used to exclude or marginalize other groups. It can be used to create 'us–them' situations.
- Culture is, in itself, a site of discrimination. For example, racism is premised on the belief in the superiority of one culture over others (Ahmed, 1991).
- Cultural assumptions are often of a discriminatory nature. For example, assumptions about older people are often unduly negative and patronizing (Thompson, 1995a).

A significant feature of culture is the way in which members of a particular cultural group become so immersed in its patterns, assumptions and values that they do not even notice they are there – they become part of the 'taken-for-grantedness of everyday life'. This can be both positive and negative. It is positive, in so far as it contributes to 'ontological security', a sense of rootedness and psychological integration – an important element of mental well-being. It allows us to pursue our everyday activities without having to question every aspect of everything we do. We have to take a great deal for granted if we are to prevent an overload of sensory information. (The concept of 'ontological security' is an important one to which we shall return below.)

The more negative side of this cultural taken-for-grantedness is the potential for ethnocentrism. This is a term that refers to the tendency to see the world from within the narrow confines of one culture, to project one set of norms and values on to other groups of people. An ethnocentric outlook can be a major contributory factor to racism in so far as it:

- fails to recognize significant cultural differences and their importance for the people concerned; and
- is based on the false premise that one culture is superior to others.

The tendency towards ethnocentrism is therefore an important danger to be wary of at the cultural level. Indeed, we can go a step beyond this to argue that we need to be wary of unquestioned assumptions in general. We need to guard against the dangers of what I have previously referred to as 'egocentricity':

Anti-discriminatory practice entails recognising the significance of difference and diversity and thus avoiding too narrow a perspective. The term 'egocentricity' can therefore be used to describe the inability, or unwillingness, of an individual to go beyond his or her own perspective. Thus,

for men to appreciate the significance of sexism and to contribute to anti-sexism, they must begin to see what the world looks like through women's eyes. To see everything simply from a masculine perspective can lead to too narrow a view and a failure to appreciate the experience of oppression.

(Thompson, 1995b, p. 25)

An understanding of the cultural level is therefore necessary both to contextualize the personal level and to show its limitations as an explanation of discrimination and oppression. However, the cultural level also has limitations as an explanatory framework, and it too needs to be seen in a broader context – the cultural level is embedded with the structural level, as Figure 1.2 illustrates. Kendall and Wickham (2001) draw links between culture and what they call 'ordering': "Culture" is one of the names given to the different ways people go about ordering the world and the different ways the world goes about ordering people' (p. 24). This refers to how social structures intertwine with cultural patterns and formations – a point which introduces the importance of understanding the social structures of the S level.

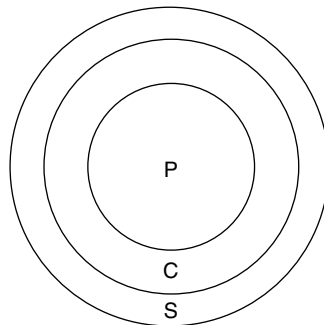


Figure 1.2 The cultural embedded within the structural

The structural level

Just as individual actions at the P level are circumscribed by the cultural context in which they occur, cultural factors also owe a great deal to the social structural level which underpins and envelops them. The S level comprises the macro-level influences and constraints of the various social, political and economic aspects of the contemporary social order. That is, cultural patterns do not exist in a vacuum – they are in constant interaction with:

- *Social factors*: issues relating to class, race, gender and other such social divisions.
- *Political factors*: the distribution of power, both formally (political structures, parties and so on) and informally (power relations between individuals, groups and so on).
- *Economic factors*: the distribution of wealth and other material resources.

Although I have presented these as separate sets of factors, they do, of course, overlap a great deal, each influencing, and interacting with, the other two.

A central theme that applies to all three aspects is that of power. Indeed, power is such an important concept with regard to inequality, discrimination and oppression that it merits a full chapter in its own right (Chapter 2). I shall therefore not explore its significance further at this point, except to emphasize that power is a key issue in understanding the macro-level structures of the S level.

The development of anti-racist thought provides a good example of the need to go beyond the cultural level and take on board issues that apply at the structural level. Multiculturalism is an approach to race relations that operates primarily at the C level. Donald and Rattansi (1992) are critical of multiculturalism for: 'identifying racism as the ideas in people's heads when it should be located in institutional structures' (p. 3) and they argue that:

It is not individual beliefs and prejudices about 'race' that are the main problem . . . nor the contents of different traditions. What matters are the structures of power, the institutions and the social practices that produce racial oppression and discriminatory outcomes.

(p. 3)

This is a point to which we shall return in Chapter 5.

In similar fashion, sexist assumptions and cultural patterns do not arise as a matter of coincidence – they are explained by reference to the need to protect vested interests, in this case to maintain men in positions of power and privilege (Walby, 1994). Structured inequalities are part and parcel of the social order and play a part in maintaining that order. As Grabb (1993) comments:

The study of social inequality is really the study of . . . human differences. In particular, inequality refers to differences that become socially structured, in the sense that they become a regular and recurring part of how people interact with one another on a daily basis. Structured

inequality involves a process in which groups or individuals with particular attributes are better able than those who lack or are denied these attributes to control or shape rights and opportunities for their own ends. One major factor in this process is that the advantaged groups or individuals tend to obtain greater access to the various rewards and privileges that are available in society. These benefits, in turn, serve to reinforce the control over rights and opportunities enjoyed by the advantaged factions, in a cyclical process that structures and *reproduces* the pattern of inequality across time and place.

(p. xi)

The processes by which such structured inequalities are reproduced are an important topic of study within social theory, and so I shall explore them in more detail below under the heading of 'structuration theory'.

◀ PRACTICE FOCUS 1.2 ▶

Tim had worked in a variety of settings in different parts of the country. He therefore had a wide range of experiences to draw upon. What this breadth of experience had taught him was that, although individual people are very different, there are also significant common themes that can be detected – cultural and structural patterns. Tim's earlier studies of sociology helped him to understand that discrimination and oppression have a lot to do with these cultural and structural commonalities. He was able to realize that discrimination was much more than a simple matter of personal prejudice. This broader perspective allowed him to develop a much better understanding of inequality and equipped him much better for practising in ways which promoted equality and valued diversity.

Giddens (1990) argues that there are four sets of factors that characterize institutionalized relations of power in contemporary society. As Held (1992) comments:

In Giddens's view, there are four main institutional aspects to modernity: (a) capitalism (the system of production of commodities for markets, in which wage labour is also a commodity); (b) industrialism (the application of inanimate sources of power through productive techniques for the transformation of nature); (c) coordinated administrative power focused through surveillance (the control of information and the monitoring of the activities of subject populations by states and other organizations); and (d) military power (the concentration of the means of violence in the hands of the state). These four institutional dimensions of

modernity are irreducible to one another, for the form and logic of each one are quite different from those of the others.

(p. 32)

For present purposes, (a) and (c) are the important issues to consider:

- Capitalism involves the exploitation of one group of people (the proletariat) by another (capitalists) for the sake of economic advantage and power. This combines with, and draws upon, other forms of exploitation and oppression such as sexism (Bryson, 1999; Connell, 2002), racism (Culley and Dyson, 2001a), ageism (Marshall and Rowlings, 1998) and disablism (Oliver, 1990; Oliver and Sapey, 1999). The structural level therefore involves multiple forms of oppression (see Chapter 3), although it is sadly not uncommon for these matters to be oversimplified and treated in a reductionist way.
- Administrative power lies in the hands of many groups, not least people who often play a pivotal role in the lives of those who are vulnerable by virtue of crisis, distress, illness or other such factors. The disciplinary power of surveillance is an important theme that will be explored in Chapter 2.

Both these sets of issues are closely linked with the concepts of ideology and discourse, and it is to these that we shall be turning shortly. However, before doing so, there is one final point in relation to PCS analysis that I wish to emphasize, namely the danger of confusing or conflating the levels. Unfortunately I have come across instances of people using PCS analysis to argue, for example, that all white people are racist or all men are sexist. The argument tends to be presented as follows: Because we live and work in a society which is discriminatory at the cultural and structural levels, then individuals within that society must, by definition, be prejudiced and thus discriminatory. However, as we shall see in the pages that follow, this is a gross oversimplification which commits the theoretical 'sins' of reductionism (reducing a complex, multilevel explanation to a single-level one), determinism (neglecting the important role of human agency) and reification (treating a diverse group of people as if they formed a homogeneous whole) – see Thompson (2000a) for a discussion of theoretical adequacy.

Ideology and discourse

Ideology and discourse are two important concepts that have much in common – and both have a significant bearing on inequality, discrimination and oppression.

Ideology is a term that has been used in different ways by different theorists over the years (McLellan, 1995). Here I shall be using it in what is now perhaps its most common usage, namely to refer to sets of ideas, beliefs and assumptions in general and, more specifically, to those that reflect existing power relations.

Such ideologies provide frameworks for making sense of the social world; they enable us to construct meanings and maintain a relatively coherent thread or perspective – what is sometimes referred to in technical language as a *Weltanschauung*, a world-view. In this respect, ideology can be seen as inevitable. Our thoughts, actions and interactions pass through the filter of one or more ideologies – we inevitably have to take a great deal for granted in our everyday lives, to rely on sets of assumptions that underpin, guide and constrain how we conduct ourselves.

We can divide ideologies into two main categories: dominant and countervailing. A dominant ideology is one that represents and reinforces the position of one or more powerful groups. For example, patriarchal ideology supports the dominant position of men (Herrmann and Stewart, 1994). The ideas, beliefs and assumptions that characterize patriarchy help to maintain its position of dominance as a social force.

A countervailing ideology, by contrast, is one that does not enjoy such dominance and is, in fact, in opposition to one or more dominant ideologies. For example, feminism is an ideology (or set of related ideologies) that opposes, challenges and seeks to undermine the dominance of patriarchy. Consequently, we can see that ideologies often compete; they can enter into conflict, each trying to discount or discredit the other. As ideology is closely linked to power, struggles over power can often be seen as ideological struggles – power and control are commonly contested at the level of ideas and values rather than physical force (although the use of force is often available as a back-up if required).

Although ideologies often conflict with each other, this is not to say that they are necessarily internally coherent. Indeed, it is not uncommon for ideologies to encompass a range of contradictory or logically incompatible ideas – the power of ideology need not rest on rational argument.

In fact, ideology gains its ability to shape thoughts and actions through its ability to ‘get under one’s skin’, to become so ingrained that we do not question its existence or effects. In this respect, ideology operates as a form of ‘camouflage’. It becomes such an important part of the ‘taken-for-grantedness of everyday life’ that we do not

generally recognize that it is there. It is for this reason that ideological assumptions often manifest themselves as 'common sense', 'natural' or 'obvious' – that is, as beyond question. Billig (2001) comments as follows:

An ideology comprises the ways of thinking and behaving within a given society which make the ways of that society seem 'natural' or unquestioned to its members (Eagleton, 1991). In this way, ideology is the common-sense of the society. Through ideology, the inequalities of that society will appear as 'natural' or 'inevitable'. Thus, ideology comprises the habits of belief, which, for example, in former times, made it appear 'natural' that women should not be full citizens, or which, in our day, make it appear obvious that the street-sweeper be paid a fraction of the company director's remuneration. These ideological habits can be deeply rooted into language, and thereby, into consciousness.

(pp. 217–18)

This process of 'camouflage' is sometimes described in terms of Althusser's (1971) concept of 'interpellation'. This refers to the way in which an ideology 'hails' the individual and 'recruits' him or her. Interpellation therefore involves 'winning people over'. In this way, ideology plays a part in identity formation – ideologies have strong influence on how we see ourselves, how we construct our sense of self. This relates closely to the concept of 'ontological security' which I shall discuss in more detail below.

The concept of discourse has come to be used in ways that overlap to a large extent with ideology in the sense in which it has been used here. It is therefore important to clarify how the term is used and how it differs from ideology. Abercrombie *et al.* (1994) define discourse as 'a domain of language-use that is unified by common assumptions' and they go on to refer to Foucault's description of:

discourses of madness – ways of talking and thinking about madness – which have changed over the centuries. In the early medieval period, the mad were not seen as threatening but almost as possessing an inner wisdom. In the twentieth century the discourse of madness emphasises the condition as an illness in need of treatment. In the intervening centuries there have been other discourses of madness, treating madness and the mad in quite different ways.

(p. 119)

A discourse, then, is a 'way of talking and thinking' about particular aspects of social life. Although this is very similar to ideology, discourse is more closely focused on language. An important aspect of

understanding discourse is the related notion of 'text', as Burr (1995) explains:

anything that can be 'read' for meaning can be thought of as being a manifestation of one or more discourses and can be referred to as a 'text'. Buildings may 'speak' of civic pride, like the town halls and factories of the industrial revolution, or of a yearning for the past as in the recent trend towards 'vernacular' building. Clothes and uniforms may suggest class position, status, gender, age or sub-culture and as such can be called texts. Given that there is virtually no aspect of human life that is exempt from meaning, everything around us can be considered as 'textual', and 'life as text' could be said to be the underlying metaphor of the discourse approach.

(p. 51)

Discourse is therefore an important concept in understanding discrimination and oppression, as discourses constrain and shape the way we think, speak and ascribe meaning. Many such discourses are discriminatory and therefore contribute to oppression. For example, medical discourse presents disability as a form of individual pathology, thereby disempowering and marginalizing disabled people (Oliver, 1990, 1996). Conversely, promoting equality can be seen to depend on constructing and supporting emancipatory discourses.

The position of discourse as a key theme in social theory owes a great deal to the works of the French theorist, Michel Foucault.

Foucault drew very close links between discourse and power, and it is at this level that the concepts of ideology and discourse overlap to a large extent – both are concerned with power and symbolic representations. However, the two terms have very different historical backgrounds.

Ideology, as it is currently understood, has developed from the narrower marxist conception of 'false consciousness', a set of ideas that serves to conceal the exploitative nature of capitalism from the proletariat. The problem with this conception of ideology is that it hinges on a distinction between truth and distorted ideas. That is, it assumes that there is an absolute truth that underpins social experience, an assumption that is seriously open to challenge, particularly from the point of view of social constructionism (Burr, 1995).

It is this narrow sense of ideology as an alternative to 'the truth' that Foucault rejects. The broader conception of ideology, though, as *any* set of ideas, beliefs and assumptions, is much closer to the idea of discourse, especially as used by Foucault. As Hall (1996) comments:

the term 'ideology' has come to have a wider, more descriptive, less systematic reference, than it did in classical Marxist texts. We now use it to refer to *all* organized forms of social thinking . . . It certainly refers to the domain of practical thinking and reasoning (the form, after all, in which most ideas are likely to grip the minds of the masses and draw them into action), rather than simply to well-elaborated and internally consistent 'systems of thought'. We mean the practical as well as the theoretical knowledges which enable people to 'figure out' society, and within those categories and discourses we 'live out' and 'experience' our objective positioning in social relations.

(p. 27)

It is beyond the scope of the discussion here to develop further the debate about the interrelationships between ideology and discourse. It will therefore suffice to note that it is the area of overlap between ideology and discourse that is of significance in my explorations of the theoretical foundations of inequality, discrimination and oppression.

To summarize, ideology and discourse are concepts which:

- describe clusters of ideas and assumptions that help shape our understanding of the world;
- form the basis of the frameworks of meaning we develop to make sense of our lives;
- are closely linked to the concept of power; and
- have a significant bearing on inequality, discrimination and oppression.

It is this final point that I now wish to explore further.

Burr (1995) makes the important point that ideas are not 'ideological' in their own right – it is the way they are used:

A version of events, or a way of representing a state of affairs, may be true or false, but it is only ideological to the extent that it is used by relatively powerful groups in society to sustain their position. Thus ideas in themselves cannot be said to be ideological, only the uses to which they are put. The study of ideology is therefore the study of the ways in which meaning is mobilised in the social world in the interests of powerful groups.

(p. 82)

Existing power relations are therefore maintained and reinforced by certain ideas operating ideologically.

A common theme in this respect is the use of biological explana-

tions as a means of legitimating the status quo. This can be illustrated in the following ways:

- *Racism* is based on the premise that there are biologically distinct 'races', some of which are inferior to others (Sardar *et al.*, 1993).
- *Sexism* often manifests itself in the argument that a woman's place is in the home because of her 'biological role' as a mother and thereby confusing childbearing with childrearing – see Chapter 3 (Gittins, 1993).
- *Disablism* involves seeing only a person's physical impairment and not recognizing his or her strengths, or the social processes that have an oppressive effect on disabled people (Swain *et al.*, 1993).
- *Ageism* arises from the tendency to see older people in unduly negative terms, to overemphasize the significance of physical and mental decline in old age (Thompson, 1995a).
- *Heterosexism* rests on the assumption that heterosexuality is biologically given or 'natural', while gay, lesbian or bisexual relationships are seen as 'abnormal' (Fuss, 1991).

These examples show that biological arguments are frequently used as a powerful means of legitimating social relations, particularly those that involve the dominance of some groups over others. However, the ideological nature of such biological explanations is demonstrated by the fact that such arguments quickly collapse when subjected to critical analysis – their power is ideological rather than rational. For example, Saunders (1993) focuses on biological explanations of gender differences and shows their lack of validity in three ways:

First, there is the failure of the various assumed relationships between biology and behaviour to 'stand up' in cross-cultural comparisons. We know, for example, that the assumed correlation between hormonal levels at certain periods in the female menstrual cycle and emotional states such as tension, anxiety, or irritability does not exist in many other cultures (see Bardwick, 1971: 27–33). This indicates that hormonal fluctuations during hormonal cycles are, to a large extent, *learned* rather than innate behaviour.

(p. 265)

That is, biological explanations focus on what is deemed to be common to all humanity and are therefore easily undermined by reference to cultural or other differences.

From this, she goes on to comment on the:

tendency to ignore or downplay the impact of cultural patterns on a particular sex difference. Margaret Mead, for example, found that in Arapesh culture, the lack of emphasis on strenuous work for either sex decreased the differences in somatotype – particularly muscular build (Mead, 1935). In other words, there is some social capacity to affect sex differences through cultural practices.

(p. 265)

Biological factors are therefore not absolute, and need to be understood within the broader context of complex interactions with cultural and other factors.

Finally, Saunders argues that: ‘a taxonomy of particular biological sex differences in no way serves as an explanation for the differential social evaluation of these differences’ (p. 265). This third argument is perhaps the most important one, in so far as it reflects a very common process underpinning discrimination and oppression, namely the tendency to attach significance to particular differences and assign different levels of value accordingly. For example, differences in skin colouring can be given considerable social significance, at great cost for certain groups whose skin colour is devalued, while other biological differences in terms of eye or hair colouring are given little or no significance. This echoes Burr’s point, mentioned earlier, that it is not the basic ideas in themselves that are ideological, but rather the way in which they are used to sustain relations of power and inequality through a process of legitimation – making certain ideas and assumptions appear ‘legitimate’ and therefore beyond question.

This is closely linked to the idea of diversity which is based on the principle of valuing differences between people rather than seeing them as the basis of unfair discrimination – a topic to which we shall return below.

◀ PRACTICE FOCUS 1.3 ▶

Barry was a well-meaning and considerate person who did not wish anyone any harm. However, when it came to issues of equality, he refused to make any changes to his behaviour. He dismissed such matters as ‘left-wing nonsense’. He believed that racial and sexual inequalities were ‘natural’ biological differences and were therefore not a problem. He was not able (or not willing) to recognize the ways in which such attitudes played a part in maintaining relations of inequality or to acknowledge the problems of oppression that arise as a result of racism, sexism and so on. Unfortunately, he also brought this attitude to his work, a fact which often caused friction between him and the people he was trying to help, due to his tendency to adopt a judgemental attitude towards them.

Sustaining such relations is an example of *hegemony*, an important concept in understanding ideology. Hegemony refers to 'dominance', the ability of a set of ideas to become a dominant force. Clegg (1989) explains that: 'Hegemony involves the successful mobilization and reproduction of the *active* consent of dominated groups' (p. 160). The term implies that dominance is maintained more by the power of ideas than by coercion. Ideologies become internalized and tend to influence us without our recognizing it.

John Thompson (1994), in his discussion of ideology and modern culture, identifies a number of processes through which ideology operates, including the following:

naturalization A state of affairs which is a social and historical creation may be treated as a natural event or as the inevitable outcome of natural characteristics, in the way, for example, that the socially instituted division of labour between men and women may be portrayed as the product of the physiological characteristics of and differences between the sexes. A similar strategy is what may be described as *eternalization*: social-historical phenomena are deprived of their historical character by being portrayed as permanent unchanging and ever-recurring.

(p. 140)

An example of naturalization would be the assumption that old age is 'naturally' a time of withdrawal or disengagement from social life (Cumming and Henry, 1961). This, then, would be an example of ageist ideology – the portrayal of older people in unduly negative terms. The other end of the age spectrum provides an example of eternalization, namely the social construction of childhood. The concept of childhood has changed and developed over time, and is not 'eternal' (Archard, 1993). However, the assumption that children must necessarily occupy a powerless position with little or no emphasis on rights (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Thompson, 2002b) is an historical (ideological) product, rather than an inevitable 'eternal truth'.

These are important examples, as they illustrate that ideological assumptions underpin many of the issues that human services workers face on a day-to-day basis. This in turn emphasizes the need to develop an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the workings of ideology and discourse, particularly as they play such an important role in legitimating power relations and their attendant inequalities, discrimination and oppression.

Anti-essentialism

The earlier discussion of biological explanations as legitimations of inequality provides a good example of 'essentialism'. This is a term that refers to the tendency to ascribe our behaviour to 'essences' or fixed qualities. Such essences take different forms but all have the effect of justifying the status quo and acting as an obstacle to positive change:

- *Biology* Women are seen as the weaker sex; black people are seen as intellectually inferior (Richardson and Robinson, 1993; hooks, 1992).
- *Personality* Selfhood is seen as fixed and immutable: 'I can't help being the way I am' (Thompson, 1992a; 2003).
- *Destiny* Many people believe that their lives are governed by a predetermined destiny.

Although these are not the only examples of essentialism, they should be sufficient to illustrate this important concept. Essentialism acts as an ideological legitimation for inequality. Structures of discrimination and oppression are held together to a certain extent by essentialism due to its inherent resistance to change. Existing inequalities and structures of power therefore owe a great deal to essentialism for their continuation. Consequently, *anti-essentialism* can be seen as a prerequisite for promoting equality.

A key aspect of essentialism is 'bad faith', the denial of responsibility for our own actions. Bad faith is:

a form of self-deception in which we deny or seek to avoid our freedom. We claim that our actions are beyond our control and we seek comfort and reassurance in some form of determinism, whether it be biological, psychological, environmental or even religious.

(Thompson, 1989, p. 30)

The concept of bad faith is a vitally important one in terms of understanding the theoretical foundations of promoting equality. This is because:

1. Bad faith 'legitimizes' existing inequalities – it denies that we are able to promote change and regards injustice as natural or unchangeable.
2. The denial of freedom at the personal level undermines the potential for freedom at the structural or sociopolitical level.

The first of these points is particularly relevant to working with people and their problems, as the problems encountered are often not unconnected with issues of personal responsibility and bad faith. Consider, for example, the matter of child abuse: it is not uncommon for sex offenders to deny responsibility for their actions, to be unwilling to face up to the consequences of their abusive behaviours (Morrison *et al.*, 1994; Thompson, 1992b).

The second point is significant in broader, macro-level terms. Bad faith involves relying on a form of essentialism in which we refuse to accept the possibility of change – we construct a view of ourselves as individuals who are dominated by forces beyond our control. This inherent conservatism at the **P** level thereby acts as a barrier to change at the **C** and **S** levels. As I have argued previously:

Existential freedom – the process of self-creation – is a prerequisite for political liberty. To deny the former is to foreclose the latter and thus render authentic social work impossible.

If, as the determinists would have it, we have little or no control over our own action, political praxis is rendered meaningless as collective action would equally be beyond our reach.

(Thompson, 1992a, p. 188)

The argument can equally be applied to working with people and their problems in general, rather than specifically to social work.

◀ PRACTICE FOCUS 1.4 ▶

Sandra was a determined worker who did not give up easily and worked very hard to help people resolve their difficulties. However, when she worked with Pauline, a woman who had experienced domestic violence, she eventually had to give up and resign herself to the fact that Pauline was not prepared to accept that she could live independently without having to rely on a very violent man. Pauline believed she was ‘too weak’ an individual to live independently, that it wasn’t her nature to cope with matters without her partner. In this way, her bad faith was condemning her to likely further incidents of violence. Sandra felt powerless to help protect her, so deeply ingrained was Pauline’s belief that she could not change and therefore had to accept her fate of violence. However, Sandra could also recognize the way in which she and some of her colleagues also tended to rely on similar forms of bad faith at least part of the time.

Authentic practice can therefore be seen as an important aim to pursue. ‘Authentic’, in this sense, is used as the opposite of bad faith.

Authenticity involves being prepared to accept the challenge of facing up to the sometimes harsh reality that we are responsible for our actions, without relying on essentialist notions that the ways in which we act and interact are fixed, predetermined or beyond our control. Authenticity does not imply that we have *full* control over the circumstances that we find ourselves in – that would be an equally naive oversimplification that denies or neglects wider cultural or social forces and their profound influences.

Essentialism is therefore partly explained by the ontological concept of bad faith (ontology is the study of being and is therefore an important part of existentialism). However, another important concept to consider is that of 'ontological insecurity', as used by Laing (1965) and Giddens (1991). Ontological insecurity refers to a lack of 'existential wholeness', or the ability to deal with the day-to-day demands of human existence we each face in our lives. As Giddens (1991) puts it: 'To be ontologically secure is to possess . . . "answers" to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses' (p. 47). A lack of such security can manifest itself as a fractured or disrupted self. Giddens refers to Laing's (1965) discussion of this subject:

The ontologically insecure individual, [Laing] points out, tends to display one or more of the following characteristics. In the first place she may lack a consistent feeling of biographical continuity. An individual may fail to achieve an enduring conception of her aliveness . . . Secondly, in an external environment full of changes, the person is obsessively pre-occupied with apprehension of possible risks to his or her existence and paralysed in terms of practical action . . . Thirdly, the person fails to develop or sustain trust in his own self-integrity. The individual feels morally 'empty' because he lacks 'the warmth of a loving self-regard'.

(1991, pp. 53–4)

Ontological security and essentialism can be seen to be closely associated in some respects. Essentialist notions of fixity and immutability can be recognized as props that are used to guard against the risk, threat and contingency that are part and parcel of human life. An absence of ontological security is therefore implicated in the maintenance of patterns of inequality in so far as a fear of change makes for an inherently conservative approach to social life.

◀ PRACTICE FOCUS 1.5 ▶

Lawrence had experienced mental health problems since his teens and had been a hospital in-patient on a number of occasions. At times, he felt very insecure and had delusions that his body was lit-

erally in the process of falling apart. Medication had, over the years, played a part in trying to deal with this problem but had not been entirely effective. What did seem to help was the counselling he received from Shobu, as this was geared specifically towards issues of ontological security, drawing on the principles of existential counselling. By recognizing the problem as being one of ontological security, Shobu was able to address the issues more directly.

Ontological insecurity is, of course, not the only factor involved in maintaining inequality. It is, however, an important one in so far as it affects the personal, cultural and structural levels:

- *Personal* Identity, self-worth and psychological well-being owe a great deal to the development of ontological security. As Giddens (1991) comments:

A person with a reasonably stable sense of self-identity has a feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively and, to a greater or lesser degree, communicate to other people. That person also, through early trust relations, has established a protective cocoon which 'filters out', in the practical conduct of day-to-day life, many of the dangers which in principle threaten integrity of the self.

(p. 54)

Confidence, self-esteem and personal resilience – factors important in mitigating and challenging inequality – are closely associated with ontological security.

- *Cultural* A culture's characteristic patterns of shared meanings, values and assumptions both support and are supported by a degree of ontological security. In attempting to maintain a relatively stable sense of self, we draw heavily on the cultural forms we find all around us and those into which we have been socialized. In this way, cultural norms and patterns become enmeshed with aspects of personal identity and selfhood. Ontological security is therefore an important issue at those points where the **P** and **C** levels interact.
- *Structural* Forms of structural disadvantage can have the effect of providing a narrowly circumscribed form of ontological security. For example, sexism has a tendency to produce a set of narrowly defined expectations with regard to how women and men should think, feel and act. Such expectations can be seen to be oppressive and constricting in so far as they exclude a range of opportunities and life chances. However, despite these costs, there are benefits that need to be acknowledged – particularly the ontological security

Conventional logic is *analytical*. That is, it involves breaking situations down into their component parts so that a complex matter can be understood in simpler terms. Such an analysis, by its very nature, produces a snapshot rather than a moving picture. It is therefore ill-equipped to account for conflict, change and development . . . Dialectical reason does not contradict or invalidate analytical reason, it goes beyond it. Analytical reason breaks things down into their component parts, and this is an essential first step in the process of understanding. It is, however, only a first step and needs to be followed by *synthesis* – the linking together of those parts into a coherent whole. This process of synthesis, or . . . totalization, is the hallmark of dialectical reason . . . The basis of dialectical reason is conflict. The dialectic refers to the process by which conflicting forces come together and produce change.

(Thompson, 2000a, p. 68)

Issues of inequality, discrimination and oppression can be seen to be characterized by interaction, conflict and change (or resistance to change), and so dialectical reason is an important part of the theoretical foundations of promoting equality. It will therefore feature at various points in the chapters that follow.

An important point to emphasize with regard to the dialectic is that it refers to a continuing process, a perpetual series of interactions. One common misunderstanding is that the syntheses produced by dialectical interaction are, in some way, final outcomes or end results. This view of the dialectic fails to recognize the *dynamic* nature of dialectical reason – it refers, by definition, to a continuous process of change. This is a point to which I shall return in Chapter 2 when I address the postmodernist critique of the dialectic.

Structuration theory and beyond

Ontology, the study of reality, is an important set of issues to consider with regard to promoting equality due to the fact that social reality relates both to personal issues such as selfhood and loss (Thompson, 2002a) and to broader sociopolitical issues of power, discrimination and oppression. The relationship between the personal and the sociopolitical is a long-standing concern of social theorists. A consideration of social theory can therefore help us to develop our understanding of this important area. Some aspects of social theory will be addressed in Chapter 2 but, for present purposes, I wish to explore one particular element, that of ‘structuration theory’ – an approach associated with the leading contemporary sociologist, Anthony Giddens.

Giddens (1984) is critical of interpretive sociology with its overemphasis on the individual, but also berates structural theories that pay almost exclusive attention to wider social factors. Structuration theory is an attempt to bring these two sets of factors together, to understand individual and social factors *in relation to each other*. He argues that:

The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time. Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors.

(p. 2)

‘Social practices ordered across space and time’ refers to the actions of individuals and groups understood in their social, cultural and historical context. A key element of this theory, therefore, is the attempt to understand social reality in terms of both *structure* – the significance of social divisions and other aspects of social organization – and *agency* – the exercise of choice. While many forms of social theory address either structure or agency, structuration theory is characterized by a focus on structure *and* agency and the ways in which they are intertwined.

In this respect, structuration theory has much in common with existentialism (Thompson, 1992a), a philosophy which:

aims to understand human existence in terms of freedom and responsibility, and the problems and complexities we encounter when we exercise such freedom (in the form of choices and decisions) and take responsibility for the consequences of our actions. It seeks to locate such freedom (the fundamental freedom of being responsible for ourselves) in the wider social context of the structure of society, in terms of social constraints and influences, for example class (Sartre, 1976), race/ethnicity (Sartre, 1948) or gender (de Beauvoir, 1972).

Existentialism emphasizes the dialectical interaction of individual factors (my choices, values, actions) and wider sociopolitical factors (the oppressions of sexism and racism). It is not a case of working out which dimension is more important, the personal or the social, but rather a matter of understanding existence as a constant interplay of the two, a dynamic process simultaneously personal and social.

(Thompson, 2000a, p. 73)

◀ PRACTICE FOCUS 1.6 ▶

Tina was a nurse who had recently transferred to a children's ward after many years of working with adults. One of the first thing she noticed when she transferred was the early age at which boys and girls started to display gender-specific behaviour. As a parent who had tried to avoid bringing up her children in line with sexist stereotypes, she found it depressing to note how strong were social pressures to conform to stereotypical gender expectations, even for preschool children. This situation puzzled her for quite some time. She was beginning to wrestle with an understanding of the complex issues of structure and agency.

An important concept in this regard is that of the dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity. This refers to the interaction of the internal world of subjective experience with the external world of nature, social structure and other people. The point to emphasize is that social reality needs to be understood not in abstract terms as *either* subjective *or* objective, but rather in concrete terms as a perpetual interaction of subjective and objective factors, each influencing the other (Figure 1.4). The common thread that links structuration theory and existentialism is that of social constructionism. This is a term used to describe theoretical approaches that are critical of traditional models of society which fail to recognize the significance of perception and meaning. Burr (1995) comments that:

Social constructionism insists that we take a critical stance towards our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world (including ourselves). It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world. It is therefore in opposition to what are referred to as posi-

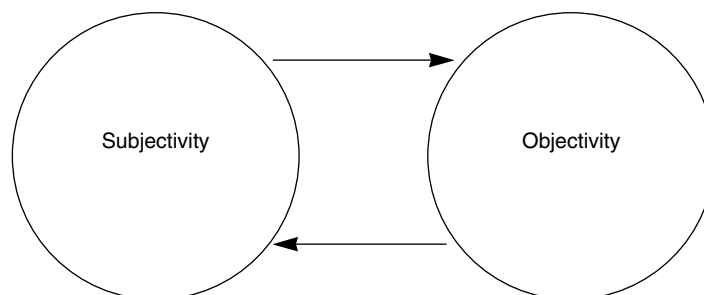


Figure 1.4 The subjective-objective dialectic

tivism and empiricism in traditional science – the assumptions that the nature of the world can be revealed by observation, and that what exists is what we perceive to exist. Social constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be.

(p. 3)

Social constructionism rejects the tendency to see social factors as ‘given’, natural or absolute. Such factors are *socially constructed* – they arise as a result of social processes and the interaction of social forces. Personal identity or selfhood is a good example of a socially constructed phenomenon that is commonly perceived as a given, predetermined entity over which we have little or no control. Structuration theory, by contrast, shows identity to be a social construct, owing much to the interaction between structure and agency. As Giddens (1991) comments:

The self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences; in forging their self-identities, no matter how local their specific contexts of action, individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications.

(p. 2)

As Giddens implies, identity is continually forged in and by social interactions, rather than predetermined by biological or other factors. In this respect, the micro-level process of identity formation and maintenance closely parallels the macro-level processes involved in the reproduction of social structures and relations. Social structures (including power and domination, as we shall see in Chapter 2) are continually reproduced through routine social practices, through taken-for-granted thoughts, feelings and actions which both *reflect* and *reinforce* existing social relations and divisions:

- Routinized social practices are strongly influenced by, and channelled through, dominant norms and cultural patterns and therefore *reflect* the status quo.
- The tendency to maintain such patterns of routinized practices thereby serves to perpetuate social structures and relations – it *reinforces* the status quo.

Once again we are engaged with questions of ideology and discourse – the subtle ways in which ideas, assumptions, values and social practices maintain the social fabric with all its attendant structures and systems. Ideological processes can therefore be seen as an

integral part of structuration. They are aspects of the C level which stands between, and interacts with, the P and S levels of agency and structure respectively.

A further important concept is that of 'duality of structure'. This refers to the fact that: 'the rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction' (Giddens, 1984, p. 17). That is, the actions of individuals and groups not only produce the specific outcomes of those actions (agency), but also contribute more broadly to the continuity of social systems (structure). What is needed, then, is an appreciation of both structure and agency – it is not a matter of 'either-or'. As Giddens (1984) comments:

All competent members of society are vastly skilled in the practical accomplishment of social activities and are expert 'sociologists'. The knowledge they possess is not incidental to the persistent patterning of social life but is integral to it. This stress is absolutely essential if the mistakes of functionalism and structuralism are to be avoided, mistakes which, suppressing or discounting agents' reasons ... look for the origins of their activities in phenomena of which these agents are ignorant. But it is equally important to avoid tumbling into the opposing error of hermeneutic approaches and of various forms of phenomenology, which tend to regard society as the plastic creation of human subjects.

(p. 26)

This is an important passage that incorporates three very significant points:

- Day-to-day social activities involve a great deal of knowledge and skill. Agency is not simply a matter of caprice – choices or decisions made at random. It is rooted in the complexities of social system but is not *determined* by them.
- Functionalist and structuralist theories have tended to present a distorted picture of social reality by *underemphasizing* the role of agency, by concentrating on social structures to the almost total exclusion of issues of choices, intentions, wishes, fears and aspirations. This is an example of determinism.
- Some forms of hermeneutical or phenomenological theory (that is, those which emphasize the importance of perception and meaning) have tended to *overemphasize* the role of agency, failing to recognize the powerful role of social structure in shaping, enabling and constraining the actions of individuals and groups. This is another example of reductionism.

In these respects, the notion of 'duality of structure' is consistent with both social constructionism in general and existentialism in particular. It also has much in common with the 'realist' theories of writers such as the sociologist Bhaskar:

Bhaskar argues that human action does not create society but either maintains or changes it in some way – this is the sense in which the two are not independent of each other. Societies do not 'determine' agents, but they survive and change only through acting individuals. Bhaskar suggests a 'transformative' model of human action: societies provide the raw material, human beings act on it, and societies come out at the other end. The crucial property of human action . . . is that it is *intentional*; it aims at achieving something . . . [H]uman beings not only monitor their action (i.e. know what they are doing) but monitor the monitoring – they can reflect on what they know, assess it, make judgements and choices. In this respect they are crucially different from societies, which are structures of social relationships.

(Craib, 1992, p. 20)

Although a more detailed analysis of structuration theory, realism, social constructionism and existentialism would no doubt identify subtle yet significant differences, for present purposes there is sufficient common ground to justify building later discussions in this book on the key concepts of agency and structure. These, then, will be recurring themes in the chapters that follow.

One of the main benefits of structuration theory is that it provides a coherent way of understanding the interplay of personal factors (agency) and the sociopolitical context (structure). In this respect it goes beyond both psychologism (the tendency to focus on the individual and to neglect wider social factors) and sociologism (the tendency to focus on wider social structures and lose sight of the individual). Structuration theory is premised on the dialectical interplay of these two domains – the personal domain of agency and the sociopolitical domain of structure – and therefore succeeds very well in integrating the two dimensions of human reality.

However, in concentrating on these two areas, it neglects a third – namely the cultural level. In my view, the weakness of structuration theory is that it presents the relationship between agency and structure as a direct one – a direct dialectical interplay. However, this leaves insufficient scope for the central role of culture (as the domain of shared meaning and symbolic systems) as a mediator between the two. That is, it neglects the central role of culture in:

1. *Shaping how the structural domain is experienced by individuals, groups and communities.* It is through sets of meanings (at the cultural level) that the structural domain influences us (through the ideological use of discourses). For example, I am likely to respect the authority of, say, a police officer not only because he or she has the power to arrest me, but also because an important part of my socialization was an acceptance of a culture that taught me to value and respect law and order.
2. *Maintaining social structures through processes of legitimation.* The (structural) wheels of power keep turning because they are oiled by the systems of meaning which support them and make them seem 'normal' or 'natural'. For example, the predominance of men in managerial positions can be seen to owe much to the discourses of masculinity and managerialism which play a key part in reproducing the status quo of a structure in which positions of power belong primarily to men – the male-dominated structure is 'normalized' by a culture which constructs it as 'natural'. See the discussion of 'autopoiesis' in Chapter 6.

What we have, then, is not simply a dialectic between agency and structure (which in itself generates a very complex psychosocial reality), but rather two sets of dialectical interactions: agency–culture and culture–structure (see Figure 1.5), which make for an even more complex matrix of interactions – in effect, a 'double dialectic' of agency, culture and structure.

The relationship between the individual and culture has a vast psychological and microsociological literature, although not necessarily from a dialectical frame of reference. However, when it comes to the interplay between culture and structure, there is less of a theory base to draw upon. Rubinstein (2001) makes the important point that: 'Structure and culture are drawn on to explain action, but their "interpenetration" is missed' (p. ix).

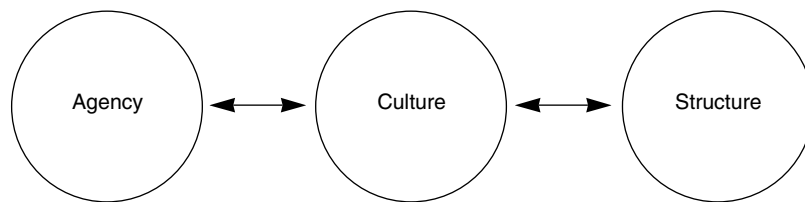


Figure 1.5 The double dialectic of agency, culture and structure

What PCS analysis presents, then, is an extension of structuration theory to attempt to integrate a mediating cultural level between the established domains of agency and structure. The implications of such an undertaking are beyond the scope of the present work, but it is none the less important to note that what is needed is a theoretical perspective which builds on structuration theory, but integrates this with some of the insights of cultural studies within a framework which addresses all three levels: personal, cultural and structural.

Emancipatory practice

A central premise on which this book is based is that the practice undertaken in working with people and their problems is pivotal with regard to discrimination and oppression. That is, such practices can either condone, reinforce or exacerbate existing inequalities or they can challenge, undermine or attenuate such oppressive forces. Consequently, it needs to be recognized that we 'walk a tightrope' with regard to inequality, and therefore have to be prepared to deal effectively with the challenges that arise if existing discrimination and oppression are not to be inadvertently strengthened.

In view of this, a form of practice that explicitly addresses inequality, discrimination and oppression needs to be developed. Indeed, a basic argument to be developed throughout the book is that practice needs to operate within a discourse that is overtly geared towards promoting equality and valuing diversity in order to ensure that inequalities are positively addressed.

Giddens (1992) draws a distinction between life politics and emancipatory politics. The latter refers to: 'individual and collective demands for freedom and justice and the struggle against barriers that prevent the possibility of leading an autonomous life' (Cassell, 1993, p. 33). The former, by contrast, relates to: 'how power can be used to arrange the world in a way which permits self-actualisation' (Cassell, 1993, pp. 33–4).

There is a strong parallel here with a distinction I have previously drawn between existential freedom and political liberty:

Existential freedom – the process of self-creation – is a prerequisite for political liberty. To deny the former is to foreclose the latter and thus render an authentic social work impossible.

If, as the determinists would have it, we have little or no control over our action, political praxis is rendered meaningless as collective action would equally be beyond our reach. Where social workers accept a voluntaristic, humanistic approach, politics cannot be excluded. Workers

and clients are circumscribed by the broader socio-political factors. Social work practice, when seen in this context, is part of a dialectic between individual and collective concerns, between existential freedom and political liberty. The two are necessarily intertwined.

(Thompson, 1992a, pp. 188–9)

(The references to social work in this passage can readily be applied to the broader framework of working with people and their problems in a variety of contexts.)

Political liberty parallels emancipatory politics in so far as both refer to the sociopolitical context in which power and the related issues of inequality, discrimination and oppression are very much to the fore. The potential for creating change in the broader systems and structures is a key issue here. To ignore that potential is to adopt a defeatist attitude and to become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. On the other hand, to be unrealistic about that potential can be a significant stressor and can undermine the validity of any emancipatory project by overemphasizing the part individuals can play in promoting social change (see Chapter 5).

Existential freedom parallels life politics in so far as both are concerned with the process of self-creation. Deterministic theories that reject human agency can be seen to act as a barrier to emancipatory politics (challenging discrimination and oppression) and life politics (countering bad faith and alienation).

The challenge of promoting equality needs to incorporate both life politics and emancipatory politics, as both have an important part to play in countering discrimination and oppression (Figure 1.6):

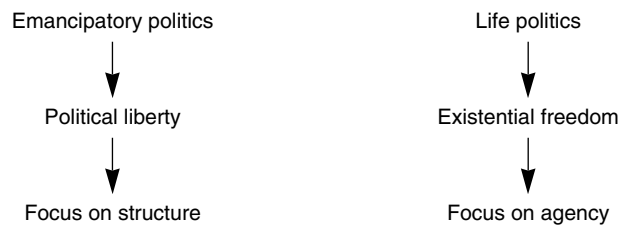


Figure 1.6 Emancipatory vs life politics

- Emancipatory politics involves identifying and addressing barriers to equality and social justice. This applies to a much broader field than the helping professions – the whole of the sociopolitical sphere

of human existence, in fact – but none the less *includes* ‘people work’. Indeed, as such work so often involves vulnerable or disadvantaged groups and individuals, it can be seen to be of particular significance within the overall picture of promoting social justice.

- Life politics involves identifying and addressing barriers to self-actualization. A key aspect of this is *empowerment* – the process of supporting individuals and groups in exercising as much control over their own lives as possible. This has the potential benefits of not only improving the quality of life of the persons concerned but also contributing more broadly to the process of challenging oppression (Ward and Mullender, 1993) through the raising of emancipatory awareness, the assertion of rights, identification of injustices and deprivations and so on.

From this it should be clear that the two forms of political praxis, although distinct, are closely interrelated and influence each other in subtle but important ways.

As I shall discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, it is important to be realistic about the extent to which professional practice can play a major role in producing social change at a macro-level. However, being realistic entails avoiding both overambition *and* defeatism. As Wineman (1984) comments: ‘Mainstream politics rest on the reality of unimaginably destructive concentrations of power. Radical politics rest on a refusal to despair; rest on stubborn faith in contrary possibilities’ (p. 248).

This is an important point to note. However, we should also note that radical approaches have been criticized for their narrowness (Pearson, 1975; Thompson, 1992a), for their failure to go beyond emancipatory politics and to take on board Giddens’s concept of life politics. The emancipatory practice to be discussed in this book is to be seen as radical in the sense of wishing to tackle problems and issues *at the root*, rather than in terms of their surface manifestations. However, it also needs to be recognized that radical practice in the narrow sense in which it is often conceived does not form an adequate basis for a genuinely emancipatory practice.

Emancipatory practice involves helping to set people free from:

- discriminatory attitudes, values, actions and cultural assumptions;
- structures of inequality and oppression, both within organizations and in the social order more broadly;
- the barriers of bad faith and alienation that stand in the way of empowerment and self-direction;

- powerful ideological and other social forces that limit opportunities and maintain the status quo; and
- traditional practices which, although often based on good intentions, have the effect of maintaining inequalities and halting progress towards more appropriate forms of practice.

The development of such an emancipatory practice, one that truly promotes equality and values diversity, is a challenge that faces everyone in the human services. One important step in that direction is a fuller understanding of the concept of power and its role in the balance between equality and inequality. It is for this reason that Chapter 2 is devoted to the topic of power.

Conclusion

This has been a wide-ranging chapter, in so far as it has covered a great deal of conceptual ground in a relatively short space. It has reviewed a range of theoretical issues relating to equality, discrimination and oppression and has argued for a multidimensional approach – one which is not satisfied with either a micro-level focus on the individual or a macro-level focus on the wider social sphere. It is not even satisfied with an approach which recognizes the importance of both these domains and the interactions between them (structuration theory), as even that neglects the importance of the cultural level of shared meanings which mediates between the domains of agency and structure. What is needed even to begin to do justice to the complexity of discrimination and oppression is an approach based on the ‘double dialectic’ of agency, culture and structure – in other words, PCS analysis.

It is important to remember that the chapter is entitled ‘Theoretical foundations’ – that is, it offers only a foundation on which to build. The remaining chapters accomplish some of that building but by no means all of it. We remain a long way from an adequate theoretical understanding of the intricacies and subtleties of promoting equality.

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