

# Intersectionality as a Useful Tool: Anti-Oppressive Social Work and Critical Reflection

Affilia: Journal of Women and Social  
Work

2014, 29(1) 8-17

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DOI: 10.1177/0886109913510659

aff.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

This article introduces intersectionality as a usable tool for critical reflection, which as a part of the critical social work tradition aims to challenge oppression and inequality. It is argued that in critical reflection, oppression and injustice are often understood in general terms and that oppression and inequalities related to gender, sexuality, class, and race therefore risk being neutralized and undetected. The suggestion is made that by using an intersectional approach, which focuses the interplay and complexity between gender, sexuality, class, and race, critical reflection gets the capacity to keep central power relations in urgent focus.

## Keywords

anti-oppressive social work, critical social work, critical reflection, intersectionality, oppression

## Introduction: Oppression and Critical Social Work

Critical and radical social work has been occupied with oppression and the ways through which social structures shape social work practice since the 1960s. It criticizes traditional social work for maintaining and reinforcing oppression and inequality, as social problems are usually understood as an effect of the individual's lack of ability to cope with everyday life. By the view of critical social workers and researchers, social work should be a practice with an ambition to challenge inequality, marginalization, and oppression at a structural level by using structural understandings of social problems (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2002; Bailey & Brake, 1975; Dominelli, 2002; Pease & Fook, 1999; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

The interest in critical and anti-oppressive social work has increased during the last decades, and several critical social work theorists have stressed the need for critical perspectives in a world affected by and dependent on globalization and market economy (Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; Lewis, 2001; Morley, 2004; Stepney, 2005). Globalization creates economical standardization and increasing economical dependency between states. At the same time, it increases Western, industrialized countries' monopolies of technological, financial, communications, and weaponry resources.

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Within this context, governmental power is eroding and democratic control over policy is decreased as transnational corporations and international banks are becoming stronger (Dominelli, 2002; Fink, Lewis, & Clarke, 2001; Fook, 2002; Lewis, 2001; Morley, 2004; Stepney, 2005). Neoliberal principles have become dominant and affect the conditions of social work practice as the welfare states' services are minimalized. For example, in Sweden, the public monopoly of welfare services has been replaced by freer forms and has been exposed to competition between social services producers. The social security system is confined and excludes a growing number of people. These changes are hardly unproblematic, as they result in increasing social exclusion, poverty, and marginalization (Höjer & Forkby, 2011; Schierup & Ålund, 2011). For critical social work practice, which aims to challenge oppression and injustice, these changes implicate growing demands on usable tools for critical practice and for the critical social worker in Sweden, as well in other Western societies.

Critical reflection has been developed as part of this need and aims to bring knowledge of how social structures affect social work practice (Brookfield, 2009; Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002). Critical theorists have introduced reflection as a way for the social worker to develop awareness of how she and social work practice uphold oppression as part of an unreflective, everyday practice. By understanding oppression as a result of ordinary people's unconscious thoughts and feelings, it is possible to emphasize how oppression and injustice are upheld not first and foremost by outspoken racism, homophobia, or sexism, but by actions, thoughts, and feelings in everyday life (Essed, 1996; Young, 1990). For example, as Young (1990) explains, oppression might be understood as:

... the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well meaning people in ordinary interactions, media, and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life. (Young, 1990, p. 21)

For social work practice, this implies that a social worker might uphold and reproduce social structures and oppression even though they might just be doing their job with good intentions. Critical reflection deals with this challenge and focuses on the social worker and her unconscious assumptions and actions as part of reinforcing and maintaining oppression. By critical reflection, the social worker is getting knowledge and insights of how social structures work in everyday life, and therefore becomes capable of working against oppression and injustice (Brookfield, 2009; Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Mattsson, 2010; Morley, 2004; Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). In this article, I will argue that critical reflection is an important but challenging approach to social work. In the tradition of critical reflection, oppression and inequality are understood and explained in general terms, and gender, sexuality, class, and race are not emphasized as central categories of oppression and injustice. They therefore risk being unrecognized and neutralized when critical reflection is used in practice, especially since it is often particularly challenging to visualize oppression and inequality that relates to the social worker herself, her professional role and her private life, and not just to the client's vulnerability and exclusion. As a critical and anti-oppressive practice, social work needs a usable tool to be able to stay focused on gender, sexuality, class, and race to be able to visualize and understand oppression and injustice. Combing critical reflection and intersectionality might be a useful premise for this purpose.

## **Intersectionality: Oppression as Complexity**

Intersectionality might be explained as an analytical ambition to explore gender, sexuality, class, and race as complex, intertwined, and mutual reinforcing categories of oppression and social structures (Davis, 2008; de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005). The background of intersectionality is found in feminist theory, which started to work with this complex understanding of gender to capture women's

different experiences of oppression during the 1990s. A main point for feminists was the ability to capture inequality and oppression within groups of women, and not only among women and men (Collins, 1989, 1990; Crenshaw 1991; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Rich, 1993).

Intersectionality has become a central way for feminist research to understand how women are positioned in patriarchy as well as within other systems of oppression, for example, those of class and race (Davis, 2008). Although the perspective is quite well used, it is also conceptualized and used inconsistently. For example, intersectionality has been described as a theory, a method, a perspective, a concept, and a framework (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013; Davis, 2008; Mehrotra, 2010). Different understandings and uses of intersectionality argue that the perspective might be used as a way to understand individuals' multiple identities, interlocking systemic inequalities at the level of social structures or multiplicity of social, historical, and cultural discourses (Chang & Culp, 2002; Davis, 2008; de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005; Lykke, 2010; McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

In social work, intersectionality has been used as an analytical approach during recent years and it has been a way to understand both complex identities and how social structures affect people's living conditions (Eliassi, 2010; Fahlgren, 2013; Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2005; Grönvik & Söder, 2008; Mattsson, 2005, 2010; Mehrotra, 2010; Murphy, Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, & Hamilton, 2009; Pease, 2010; Sawyer, 2012). Mehrotra (2010) argues that intersectionality is usable in social work and that different intersectional approaches in analysis strengthen the field. Drawing on McCall's (2005) typology, she describes different approaches in intersectional analysis usable for social work: *an intercategorical approach* that aims to understand how different social groupings are affected by structural inequalities and how identity is determined and shaped by social structures. *Intracategorical approaches* focus on diversity within social groups and illuminate lived experiences, multiple identities, and standpoints of people who are situated in the intersections of numerous oppressions. The third approach, the *anticategorical*, are generally aligned with a poststructuralist feminism that challenges the idea of social categories such as gender, sexuality, class, and race, and problematizes categories as real, fixed, homogenous, and bound by social structures (McCall, 2005; Mehrotra, 2010).

Using intersectionality, critical reflection might be understood as a mix of the different approaches (cf. Sandberg, 2013). A central aim for the reflection should be to understand the complexity of categories and power relations. At the same time, it must be stressed that the aim is to disclose and challenge social structures and oppression, which is why the anticategorical approach should be combined with an intercategorical approach which stress structural inequalities between different groups and how identity is shaped by social structures.

## Critical Social Work and Critical Reflection

A dilemma for the critical tradition in social work during the 1960s and 1970s was the difficulties in using the structural understandings of social problems in clinical social work on an individual level. A structural understanding of social problems tends to be far away from the client's everyday life. Social workers works and adapts in relation to organizations and bureaucratic rules, managers demands, and sometimes also to community cultures. In this context, it's easy to feel powerless and without personal responsibility and it is sometimes hard to hold on to ideological and political ideals focusing structural change (Brookfield, 2009; Fook, 1993, 2002; Fook & Gardner, 2007; McLaughlin, 2005; Morley, 2004; Stepney, 2005). Critical social work aims to challenge these problems and in recent years important works has been done by Jan Fook, who has also been working together with Fiona Gardner (Fook, 2002; Fook & Gardner, 2007). Fook (2002) might be understood as developing critical social work by changing the focus from how social structures affect people's living conditions, to focusing on how social structures affect social work practice, and the social workers'

ideas, emotions, and reactions. Fook argues that critical social work needs to be a critical reflection which helps the social worker to develop her professional role in relation to an understanding of social structures and the globalization context. She argues that critical reflection is a way to bring practice and theory together in a way that develops awareness of the ability to contribute to social change (Fook, 2002; Fook & Gardner, 2007; cf. Brookfield, 2009; Dominelli, 2002; Mattsson, 2010; Morley, 2004; Pease, 2006; Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).<sup>1</sup>

The critical reflection that Fook introduces aims to deconstruct our experiences and knowledge in a way that gradually illustrates how we are part of and sustain social structures and oppression (Fook, 2002; Fook & Gardner, 2007). To reflect critically means to focus on a chosen event or situation and to analyze the feelings, thoughts, and actions it involves in a way that opens up alternative ways of understanding. By the new ways of comprehending, it is possible for the social worker to become more aware of how social structures affect her, the client, and social work practice. The reflection gives alternative and more dynamic ways to comprehend, and therefore develops more complex understandings of social problems, the client, the social workers' positions, and the interaction with the client. By using a complex way of thinking, the social worker not only can develop an understanding of her own assumptions and conceptions, she might also in time change her way of thinking and acting as a result of her increasing knowledge (Brookfield, 2009; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). By this process, a possibility to challenge social structures and oppression is created, as the social worker develops an ability to work in ways that might challenge social structures and stereotypical images of clients. The critical reflection, therefore, is seen as a potential for social work to be a profession which actually changes society, since the social worker is able to change her actions when she understands how social structures affect social work practice.

In Fook's critical reflection, gender, sexuality, class, and race are implicit, but not in focus. She opens up the space for working on power and oppression related to, for example, gender and race; yet, she does not put them in the foreground, as she uses general understandings of power and oppression (also see Fook & Gardner, 2007; Morley, 2004). I would like to argue for taking one more step by using critical reflection with the specific ambition of analyzing and changing gender, sexuality, class, and race oppression. My argument is that critical reflection with the ambition to explore and disclose social structures and oppression needs to stay focused on gender, sexuality, class, and race, since these are elementary power relations with respect to marginalization, oppression, and injustice. It is also important to stress how these power relations tend to be habitual and taken for granted, which makes them particularly hard to make visible and keep in analytical focus; this is why it is especially important to work with a clear ambition to recognize them in critical social work practice.

An intersectional analysis aims to explore oppression and inequality focusing the interplay between different categories of oppression. The approach is based on a key understanding that gender, sexuality, class, and race are intertwined and reinforced "*in and through* relation to each other" (McClintock, 1995, s. 5, emphasis in original). No structure or category is homogenous, and the intersection between gender, sexuality, class, and race creates oppression and inequality both within and among groups (Davis, 2008; de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005; Lykke, 2010). Intersectionality is a usable approach for critical social work since it highlights gender, sexuality, class, and race and makes it possible to understand and problematize the unequal relation between the social worker and the client in a complex way.

## Theoretical Points of Departure

The critical tradition in social work has traditionally found its theoretical framework in structural theories. When developing the theoretical base for critical reflection, Fook finds her theoretical

framework in postmodern and poststructural theories. She argues for the possibility of using these approaches, as they manage to dispute and deconstruct the presupposed in a way that opens up for variations, subordinated narratives, contradictions, and complexities. The poststructural approach brings an understanding of reality to be a reflection of both external and internal structures of thinking. This places power relations situated in both external and internal structures—an understanding which opens up for the individual as a bearer and reproducer of social structures. Postmodernism calls the production of knowledge into question and understands knowledge as socially constructed. It recognizes the importance of context and highlights how knowledge is mediated by cultural, political, and social assumptions. The scientific idea of external, objective reality is problematized, as knowledge is understood as intimately connected with subjective values and judgments. Facts become facts as they are constructed as parts of historical, social, and political interests. For postmodernism, the aim is to open up for different experiences and to give them place and legitimacy in a way that gives room to question dominating truths and knowledge (Fook, 2002, s. 11ff; Fook & Gardner, 2007, s. 33; Morley, 2004). This approach is useful and important for critical reflection since it provides space for reflection which manages to question dominating ways of understanding social problems, clients, and the social work profession.

Fook (2002) starts with the postmodern understanding of knowledge and then she develops a splendid theoretical framework for critical reflection. She uses poststructural understandings of language, power, and discourse in a way that brings understanding of how social structures affect social workers at an individual level. Without a doubt, when her theoretical approach is used in critical reflection, the reflection surely becomes a way to bring theory and practice together in a way that can make oppression and power relations visible. Even though, there are two problems with Fook's theoretical framework worth discussing. One is the incapacity of postmodernism to handle power relations. The postmodern aim to open up and investigate alternative knowledge and experiences in a way that is not interested in what is true or more accurate, also opens up for relativism where all knowledge and experiences are equally truthful. Postmodernism is focused on the deconstruction of the truth rather than to actually investigate and illustrate power relations and social structures. If critical reflection aims to explore and change social structures, postmodernism is not unproblematic since it bears the risk of falling into relativism. Fook's solution of this problem is to combine her postmodern approach with Foucault's theory on power (Fook, 2002; Fook & Gardner, 2007). Even though I really do like this solution, I see a problem in that Fook stays with an understanding of power which does not emphasize the specific aspects of social structures related to gender, sexuality, class, and race. This is the second problem in her theoretical framework; that is, gender, sexuality, class, and race are not highlighted as central social structures and forms of oppression.

Using intersectionality as a basis for the reflection would take the critical reflection one step further. Understanding intersectionality as a way to explore how power relations are created and reinforced by the interplay between gender, sexuality, class, and race, it is possible to keep them in urgent focus. In theoretical practice, this means to combine postmodern thinking and poststructural theories on gender, sexuality, class, and race. As intersectionality is not a theory in itself, there is a need for developing a theoretical framework. It is possible to use the same general understandings of how structures, power, and identities work and affect our lives as Fook recommends, but with the difference that specific theories which explain aspects of gender, sexuality, class, and race structures, are necessary. Intersectionality gives a specific ambition to hold on to and understand interaction between gender, sexuality, class, and race as a basis for—and upholding of oppression and inequality (cf. Davis, 2008, p. 73). By using an intersectional approach and, for example, poststructural feminist and postcolonial theory, the reflection would be based in a tradition of understanding how social structures affect people's living conditions which also emphasizes gender, sexuality, class, and race (cf. Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). This would solve both the problem with the postmodern relativism and the problem with the risk of neutralizing or making aspects of gender,

sexuality, class, and race invisible when not emphasizing them in the theoretical framework. Gender, sexuality, class, and race are crucial categories for understanding oppression and injustice. At the same time, they tend to be normalized and invisible, which makes them challenging to recognize, explore, and transform (Dominelli, 2002). Critical reflection needs a powerful understanding of the relation between oppression and the intersection of gender, sexuality, class, and race. A reflection carried out without that kind of understanding risks reinforcing oppression and injustice.

## Intersectionality in Social Work Practice

Following is a structure in three steps for how to critically reflect on a specific incident: (inspired by Fook, 2002, p. 43, 89ff; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Mattsson, 2010; Morley, 2004).

- Step 1: Start with identifying a critical incident and describe it with as much specific details as possible. It could be any practice experience that made you stop and think, and react on what have happened. Write down your description, as writing is a good way to think the incident through, and to actually remember it and its different parts. It is natural that your description develops as you are writing it.
- Step 2: Make a critical reflection on your description. Start with identifying power relations operating in the incident. By using intersectionality as a base for the reflection, it is possible to stay focused on gender, sexuality, class, and race as central categories of oppression and how they actually work in and affect social work practice. When understanding how power relations might affect the social worker, the client, and the social work organization, it is possible to investigate alternative understandings and actions.
- Step 3: Reconstruct and redevelop new and emancipating strategies for theory and practice which are possible, as the social worker identifies and understands the means of social change and recognizes her agency and her own construction of power.

The three steps give structure for critically working through an incident or situation. By making reflections, it is possible to explore new ways of thinking and feeling about the chosen incident. It is possible to find other ways to understand what has happened and the role the social worker plays in the situation. The structure is important in doing the reflection, as its various steps are what keeps focus on analysis and evolves new insights and understandings.

Step 2 is a crucial analytical part of the reflection, and using intersectionality as a tool especially affects this step. It is in this step that intersectionality as an approach is practiced, and where analysis and theory are in focus. Theory is important in critical reflection; without theory it is hard for the reflection to actually bring new understandings of the incident, understandings that reveal the effects of power in the situation. Power relations related to gender, sexuality, class, and race are difficult to actually see, recognize, and acknowledge. For example, in Sweden, a gendered-balanced workforce is often stressed as important in social work practice. Gender balance is understood as necessary both according to gender equality policies and to an understanding of women and men as completing each other in corresponding to what is perceived as males and females different needs in treatment. Indirectly, male and female social workers come to represent femininities and masculinities that are supposed to be heterosexual, middle class, and "Swedish." As a result, they tend to uphold and reproduce stereotype gender and class hierarchies, heterosexual norms, and white Swedish supremacy (Fahlgren, 2013; Mattsson, 2005; Sawyer, 2012; cf. Lewis, 2001). By using feminist and postcolonial theory which both use a critical approach to shed light on social orders that are usually taken for granted and therefore reinforce and uphold oppression and injustice at the same time, the critical reflection enables understanding power beyond the common sense that usually makes us blind to it and its effects. The critical reflection with its focus on gender, sexuality, class, and race

brings awareness and knowledge on how power relations work and affect the social worker, and how the social worker herself functions as a bearer of these structures. By using an intersectional approach in critical reflection, the reflection will show how conceptions of social workers, “clients,” and social problems are constructed and upheld. It will do this by asking deconstructing questions about used understandings and concepts: What is included and incorporated in the social workers understandings of herself and of the “client?” What is excluded? What is visualized? What remains unnoticed and invisible? How does this contribute to the positions of the social worker as normal and the “client” as deviant? And most importantly, how does these constructs uphold conceptions and power relations related to gender, sexuality, class, and sexuality?

By these kinds of questions, raised with poststructural feminist and postcolonial understandings which are used when reflecting on the answers, critical reflection will give urgent answers on how these constructions reinforces oppression and injustice in case of gender, sexuality, class, and race, and it will make a more complex understanding of the social worker, the “client,” and of social problems possible. The reflection becomes a usable tool to make the “unconscious assumptions and reactions of well meaning people” (Young, 1990, p. 41) conscious and visible.

Step 3 in the critical reflection reminds us of the importance of the reflection being anti-oppressive and challenging of power relations. It is at this point that the social worker can explore alternative ways of handling different power relations. When understanding the effects of power relations and how gender, sexuality, class, and race intersect and reinforce each other, the social worker can develop an alternative thinking and alternative actions. By understanding, she can start working in a way that challenges, rather than reinforces oppression and injustice. This work, however, demands continuous reflection; there is no finishing or end point in doing critical social work or in being a critical social worker. The critical social worker never knows it all.

## **Critical Reflection and Intersectionality Challenges**

Intersectionality practiced in critical reflection is probably best described as a combination of the anticategorical and the inter-categorical approach (McCall, 2005; Mehrotra, 2010). The reflection aims to understand and challenge the complexity of different categories which are intertwined and reinforce each other. This also means that the reflection might end up in dissolution of gender, sexuality, class, and race where it is actually hard to see or understand structural inequalities, as they appear too complex and dynamic. I would like to stress the importance of understanding that using intersectionality in critical reflection means to understand and analyze the intersection of gender, sexuality, class, and race at maybe the most complex level. Observing the effects of social structures is generally easier on a structural level than in a micro context or at an individual level where structural patterns easily become invisible in the complexity that tends to dominate. This is why it might be fruitful to understand the use of intersectionality in critical reflection as a combination of the anticategorical and the inter-categorical approach, where the latter one stresses and focuses on structural inequalities between different groups and the effects of social structures on identity (cf. Sandberg, 2013). Otherwise, the reflection bears the risk of ending up unable to reflect on structures at all (Pease, 2010). Once again, this also stresses the importance of using theory when reflecting; theory is what gives the ability to go beyond the unconscious assumptions of everyday life that reinforce and uphold oppression and injustice.<sup>2</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The last decade’s increasing inequality, discrimination, and marginalization in Western societies has created tensions and demands on equality and social justice, and an increasing interest in critical and anti-oppressive social work (Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; Lewis, 2001; Morley, 2004; Stepney,

2005). Critical reflection, developed by those such as Fook (2002), for example, is part of this tradition which aims to challenge oppression and change society as it brings awareness and knowledge of social structures, inequalities, and oppression to the social worker. It focuses especially on how the social worker reinforces oppression and social structures by her ways of thinking, feeling, and taking action. The argument made in this article is that combining critical reflection with intersectionality is a way to stress the importance of focusing on how social structures related to gender, sexuality, class, and race, contribute to oppression of marginalized groups. Critical reflection tends to understand social structures and power relations in general, rather than in specific terms, which risks neutralizing the power relations of gender, sexuality, class, and race. To combine critical reflection with intersectionality is to create space for work on power relations and oppression. It gives a tool to keep focus on gender, sexuality, class, and race as power relations, and challenges the potential risk of neutralization.

Intersectionality is a useful way of thinking in social work and in critical reflection; it gives an analytical tool which is able to capture dynamic power relations and oppression in a way that is sensitive to differences and oppression both within and among groups. This way of understanding social structures and power relations as complex and dynamic is a possible way to avoid stereotyping and simplifying understandings of gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity as homogenous and static categories. In critical reflection, the understanding of these power relations as complex and dynamic, combined with the ambition of understanding power relations, keeps social structures and oppression in focus.

Critical social work points out the need for a social work practice that contributes to equality, social justice, and social change. By working with critical reflection using intersectionality as a way of understanding and analyzing, it is possible for social workers to become more aware and conscious of social structures and oppression in social work and within their own practice. By being more conscious of how social structures affect social work and reinforce oppression and power relations, it is possible for social workers to change both the way they think and act.

The development and use of critical reflection also carries the risk of critical social work becoming reduced to an individual level only, which actually might result in a loss of the critical dimension. Critical social work has raised important critiques of traditional social casework for working on an individual level where social problems are understood as individual problems and not as problems related to greater social structures and society (Adams et al., 2002; Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 1993, 2002; Pease & Fook, 1999). At the same time, critical reflection places critical social work on an individual level and focuses on the social worker's prejudices, conceptions, thoughts, and actions. There is also a risk of critical reflection becoming a reflection work for social workers, not addressing transformations of social structures and power relations. Critical reflection, therefore, needs to keep reminding itself of the critical dimension in the reflection, as well as the aim of working on power relations and oppression. Critical social work has to be working on several levels of society: the individual, the organizational, and the structural.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1. Sakamoto and Pitner (2005) define *critical consciousness* in a way similar to Fook's critical reflection. Critical consciousness is a reflection where the social worker becomes aware how she perceives difference and power dynamics. Their thinking is very interesting, but they don't present a method for reflection, which is why I focus on Fook's ideas in this article.



2. If interested in critical reflection Fook (2002), *Social work Critical Theory and Practice*, Fook and Gardner (2007) *Practicing critical reflection. A resource handbook*, and in Swedish, Mattsson (2010) *Intersektionalitet i socialt arbete. Teori, reflektion och praxis*, are recommended.

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