The Politics of Empowerment in Australian Critical Social Work

This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration by the Candidate

I, Uschi Ursula Heidi Bay, declare that:

a) except where due acknowledgement has been made, this work is that of myself alone;

b) this work has not been submitted previously, in whole or part, to qualify for any other academic award;

c) the content of the thesis is the result of work that has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program;

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Table of Contents

Summary.......................................................................................................................... 1
Introduction..................................................................................................................... 3

Chapter One
Re-theorising “power” and em-power-ment .............................................................. 10
   Modernist critical social work empowerment practice.............................................. 11
   The idea of power in critical social work .............................................................. 13
   Problems with modernist conceptions of power.................................................... 16
   Reformulating power............................................................................................. 20
   Reformulating empowerment practice .................................................................. 22
   Problems with modernist theorising of power....................................................... 24
   The young women’s anti-violence project ............................................................ 27
   Power within the project ....................................................................................... 32
   Maintaining innocence ........................................................................................... 34
   Making social work processes visible .................................................................... 36
   Going public ............................................................................................................ 37
   Conclusion............................................................................................................. 40

Chapter Two
Foucault on power relations, politics and freedom.................................................... 43
   Power relations ...................................................................................................... 44
   Bio-power .............................................................................................................. 44
   Disciplinary power ................................................................................................ 47
   Pastoral power ...................................................................................................... 51
   Governmentality .................................................................................................... 54
   Neo liberal forms of government .......................................................................... 56
   Subjectivity ............................................................................................................ 61
   Practices of undefined freedom ............................................................................. 64
   Care of the self ................................................................................................       69
   Insurrection of subjugated knowledge ................................................................... 71
   Conclusion............................................................................................................. 75
Chapter Three

Arendt on power, political action and freedom.......................................................... 77
  Totalitarianism....................................................................................................... 78
  Arendt on political action .................................................................................... 81
  Plurality ............................................................................................................... 85
  Publicity and the common world........................................................................ 88
  Political action ..................................................................................................... 89
  Political subjectivity ............................................................................................. 91
  Freedom............................................................................................................... 97
  Equality ............................................................................................................... 103
  Conclusion.......................................................................................................... 107

Chapter Four

Empowering the poor ................................................................................................. 109
  Introduction ......................................................................................................... 109
  Introducing the family centre project .................................................................. 111
  Poverty ................................................................................................................. 115
  Poverty experiments ............................................................................................. 120
  Blameworthy cases .............................................................................................. 122
  Guaranteed minimum income scheme .............................................................. 127
  Jobs for the poor ................................................................................................. 132
  Composition of the families ................................................................................ 133
  The four-pronged idea of power ........................................................................ 135
  Power and identity ............................................................................................... 139
  Transferring power ............................................................................................. 141
  Conceptions of participation .............................................................................. 143
  Preparation for participation .............................................................................. 144
  The politicisation phase ...................................................................................... 148
  By the poor for the poor ..................................................................................... 149
  Conclusion.......................................................................................................... 150
Summary

This thesis aims to clarify what Australian critical social work empowerment practice is about and how critical social workers have thought and do think about power, politics and freedom. Recently Australian critical social workers have reconsidered how they think about power and turned to Michel Foucault’s insights on power both to critique their previous modernist conceptions of power and to use his insights to guide a reformulation of critical social work empowerment practice. However there are many authors who contest that Foucault’s theorising is useful for any kind of liberatory thinking or practice. This makes the use of Foucault’s insights on power to re-formulate empowerment practice contestable. In this study I aim to draw distinctions between aspects of Foucault’s work that can make a contribution to empowerment practice and those aspects that do not or cannot assist critical social workers to think about empowerment. To draw these theoretical distinctions is particularly timely, as the term “empowerment” itself is used, over-used and misused and appears to have almost contradictory meanings when used by the so-called political left and right.

One of the limitations of Foucault’s insights on power, especially in his early and middle work is the underdeveloped notion of human agency. This short-coming in his theorising led me to draw on the work of a political theorist, Hannah Arendt, who starts with the notion of human agency when theorising power, politics and freedom. Hannah Arendt is a strikingly original and inspirational political thinker. Arendt seeks to reclaim and revalue “the political”. Her understanding of political action is considered novel and I aim to show that it is highly relevant for critical social workers in pursuing empowerment practice. Arendt’s thinking about plurality, political action and freedom can make a key contribution to re-thinking critical social work empowerment practice.

If practice is a thought-filled activity then how we think about what we “do” is crucial. One of the implications of thinking with Foucault about critical social work empowerment practice is that empowerment is itself a power relation that requires careful scrutiny. Foucault’s early and middle work indicates how the “fitting empowerment subject” is produced through various experts’ techniques and political problematisations of deficit sub-populations. Foucault’s theorising suggests these processes of problematisation are crucial sites for political contestation. Arendt suggested that the possibility of political action is severely limited when the situation, the problem and the people to be involved in solving the problem are pre-
determined by experts.

I argue throughout this study that for critical social workers to re-think what empowerment means they also need to think of “politics” and “freedom” as central concepts, not just “power”. Arendt presents a politics that is no longer conflated with government (as in the State) or with ruling, or with political interests based on social or political identities. Politics becomes recognised as something that happens in the space between plural people. Power then becomes something that springs up between people when they act together. This means the necessity for governance and ruling is thus contested. Political action is attributed a “worldly” character by Arendt and is understood as dependent on and requiring interaction with others. I aim to show that Arendt’s notion of political action adds much to re-thinking critical social work empowerment practice.

Both Arendt and Foucault theorise power, politics and freedom in ways that aim to keep open the possibilities of beginning again and of founding something new. Both theorists aim to open agonal spaces of politics to keep power relations from congealing into domination. These agonal spaces require that critical social workers embrace the frailties of human affairs, its hostilities and antagonisms. Critical social workers acknowledging their own involvement in power relations is part of embracing the frailties of human affairs. To understand our involvement in power relations with others might assist critical social workers thoughtfulness in relation to others and also to recognise the limits of practices. To think politically, according to Arendt, means to learn to see the world how others see it, and through on-going discussion and disagreements to “act in concert” with others and find ways of living together in ways that allows people to flourish. Arendt offers a new way to think about the political that critical social workers could use to re-think “empowerment”.

2
Introduction

Beginning in the late 1960’s social work in a number of Western countries took what can be called a “radical turn”. In Britain, America and Australia social workers like Galper 1975; Solomon 1976; Throssell 1975; Corrigan and Leonard 1978; Bailey and Brake 1980; Dominelli and McLeod 1989 declared their support variously for Marxist, socialist, liberatory or feminist politics. At the start of the twenty-first century, the most recent iterations of this ostensibly political form of social work practice identified itself as critical social work, claiming as several exponents like Allen, Pease and Briskman (2003: x) do, that they seek to promote ‘social change to redress social inequality and injustice’. Or as another critical social worker puts it, in a knowing reference to the most famous Theses Against Feuerbach by Marx, critical social workers seek not to ‘just understand the world but to change it’ (Healy 2000: 13).

By disposition and temperament I was early attracted to, and persuaded of the rightness of this declared tradition of progressive, critical and leftish-leaning social work. As an undergraduate I found the idea that I could, and should “make a difference”, a compelling reason to train as a social worker. After graduating in 1982 I took up a succession of social work jobs in which I worked with young people, single mothers, people with disabilities, people I had learned to call “the poor”, older people and wards of the state. Over time while my enthusiasms for change did not alter I found I was becoming less and less clear about what it was that I was doing that either defined my social work practice as “radical” or “critical” or even made sense to me. I suppose that I might have just put this growing dis-ease down to growing older. Instead I decided to pursue a Ph.D thesis that explored several quite basic questions: what is critical social work? How do critical social workers think about politics, power and freedom and in particular what do they think empowerment is all about? Is critical social work grounded in a defensible conception of political practice? If nothing else my thinking about these questions demonstrated to me that my dissatisfactions with some of the core features of “critical social work” was not just a correlate of some unavoidable ageing process on my part, but related to some central political and theoretical problems.

Much of that sense of difficulty and a feeling that the issues that had not been resolved satisfactorily came to roost in the core idea, so central to so much critical social work, namely the idea of “empowerment”. Part of me wanted to sneer at the word “empowerment”. I had
come to think that “empowerment” was often a ruse used to trick people into thinking they were going to gain out of a situation when this was highly unlikely. I was concerned like Margolin’s (1997) that the idea of empowerment is used in every social work mission statement to justify social work intervention in the lives of “marginal” and “vulnerable” people. Yet my problem was that of course I do want social workers working with “marginal” people to do so in empowering ways. So, despite my problem with how the term empowerment was often used, the notion of “empowerment” still captured “something” for me that I felt was crucial for critical social work, although this “something” was difficult to identify and speak about. Sharing why, and how empowerment matters in spite of the term often being overused and misused in social work, proved to be one of my central objectives in this thesis.

Though this remains to be demonstrated in the body of my thesis I came to see that a number of key problems attended the development of “critical” or “radical” social work. The first problems had to do with the connection between “empowerment” and politics. Intuitively empowerment might be thought to have something to with politics. But what? As any number of writers have demonstrated, the connection between social work practice and anything that might sensibly be called political activity has tended to be weak. Writers from Ife (1997) to Mendes (2003) have pointed to the apparent lack of political engagement by Australian social workers, critical or traditional. This failure to engage in politics is explained by what is said to be an inadequate level of political literacy among social workers (Ife 1997; Healy 2000; Fook 2002; Allen et al. 2003). Ife argues that if social workers are to engage politically, then they will need to:

… remain politically aware, to keep up to date with current policy issues and broader political trends within the society, and to relate their practice to this political context (1997: 171).

Both Ife (1997) and Mendes (2003) have argued that if social workers are to engage more in political action especially to achieve social policy changes then there will need to be changes to the apolitical way that social work is taught. This goes to matters like the traditional separation of policy and practice in most social work curricula. One consequence of this separation is that social workers are ill equipped politically to work towards empowerment of so-called marginalised people (Ife 1997; Mendes 2003).
Yet the problem of the relation of social work to politics arguably runs deeper than these suggestions made by Ife (1997) and Mendes (2003). While the idea of “politics” is not central to discussions of empowerment in contemporary Australian social work texts, a far more serious problem is the way the concept of “power” has been made the central concept (Solomon 1976; Benn 1981; Lee 1994; Healy 2000; Fook 2002). Critical social work theory tends to privilege the concept of “power” as the central concept in empowerment (Solomon 1976; Benn 1981; Lee 1994; Healy 2000; Fook 2002). For instance, the concept of “power” is understood by critical social workers like Solomon (who is the social worker credited with introducing the concept of empowerment into social work) to be central in providing ‘insights into the possibilities for effecting an inequitable and oppressive power distribution in social system’ (1976: 16). Solomon draws on Bertrand Russell’s observation, which makes this point

… the concept of power is fundamental in the social sciences in the same way that energy is fundamental to physics (1976: 15).

Critical social work theorists claim that the concept of “power” provides both insights and solutions to structural inequality. Empowering the “powerless” to regain control over their lives is considered key in critical social work. Again one problem is that core ideas like “power” are not elucidated but tend to be treated as self-evident ideas. This means that in this study I had to pay attention to how critical social workers think and write about power.

As I will show in the body of my thesis if there are problems with “power” and “politics” then it might not be surprising to find that “empowerment” ostensibly the defining idea in critical social work might also be problematic. Empowerment remains a somewhat “obvious” or self-evident idea in Australian critical social work. This may be why simple yet fundamental questions like who is to be empowered and how they are to be empowered are sometimes raised but dealt with as if they require no further elucidation.

The question of “who” to empower tends to be taken for granted by critical social workers, in the sense that political action is usually expected to be grounded in social categories like gender, race, age, sexuality and socio-economic status (Solomon 1976; Benn 1981; Simon 1994; Lee 1994; Ife 1997; Healy 2000; Fook 2002). The successes of the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the gay and lesbian movement, and the disabilities rights movement reinforced this idea of getting “similar” people together to agitate for legislative changes, funding and recognition (Benn 1981; Ife 1997; Healy 2000). However, recent
political and social theorists, influenced by Foucault’s insights on how power works, have suggested that this approach tends to ‘reinscribe[s] the very relations of power that they attempt to undermine’ (Butler 1992; King 2001). This highlights the importance of the question of how did and do critical social workers conceive of political identity and the practices involved in establishing “disadvantaged” groups. This appears to be especially important as critical social workers are often in a position to select “who” ought to be empowered and engage in processes that define and select these so-called disempowered individuals or groups (Solas 1996; Fook 2002).

Several social workers also claim that the incursion of so-called “post” theories is undermining any possibility notion and practice of empowerment in social work (Pease & Fook 1999; Healy 2000; Fook 2002; Pease 2002; Allen et al. 2003; Healy 2005). For instance, Mullaly claims that:

[p]ostmodern and poststructural thought have discredited many of the concepts (meta-narratives), ideals (universalisms) and discourses that underpinned the modernist development of progressive social work (2001: 303, my italics).

Indeed, ‘the foundations of traditional social work theory’ according to Rossiter were ‘shattered by historical, social and intellectual currents of the past two decades’, leaving social work theory in ‘disarray’ bereft of both its epistemic tradition and its credibility (1996: 24).

Though it remains to be shown in what ways core ideas like “politics”, “power” and “empowerment” are deployed in critical social work theory in non-defensible or inarticulate ways, I have said enough to say why I have undertaken this critical and reflexive examination of critical social work theory. I turn now to spell out something of how I propose to do this. For the most part this thesis is a theoretical inquiry into empowerment theory. To undertake this inquiry I deliberately bring Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault into a kind of dialogic engagement with the issues I want to clarify.

I am grateful to Arendt who reminded us that thinking what we do is one of the most difficult things to try to do (Bessant, Watts, Dalton & Smyth 2006: 336). If practice is a thought-filled activity, then how critical social workers think about empowerment and the practices of power, identity, politics and freedom really matters to how empowerment social work can be practiced (Watts 2001). I want to explore how critical social workers do and can think about
and with the categories of "power", "identity", "freedom" and "politics", especially in relation to empowerment practice. I will argue that both Arendt and Foucault offer complementary ways of conceptualising power, freedom and political practice (Edwards 1999; Gordon 1999; King 2001; Stewart 2001; Allen 2002).

In chapter one of this study I analyse how some critical social workers have thought about power and empowerment practices (Solomon 1974; Simon 1994). Then, I explore two current leading Australian critical social workers, Jan Fook’s (2002) and Karen Healy’s (2002) attempts at articulating how to rethink power using Foucault’s insights on power. Their attempts at devising how empowerment practice prescriptions can be developed from this re-thinking of power with Foucault is significant to explore, to address the main question of this study: what is critical empowerment social work practice. However, applying Foucault’s insights on power to critical social workers’ desire to empower the “disadvantaged”, so they gain a better life, presents some serious theoretical difficulties, according to Ife (1999), McNay (1994), Cruikshank (1999), Gordon (1999), Stewart (2001) and Trainor (2003). I show how and why Fook (2002) and Healy (2000) leave us with some major puzzles and problems.

In chapter two of this study I engage with Foucault’s work more directly. I focus on Foucault’s work on biopower, disciplinary power, pastoral power and governmentality, his exploration of political rationalities and his later work on Care of the Self (1990). I also look at the work of two Australian social workers Trainor and Jeffreys’ (2003) who test the value of Foucault’s work for the social work project generally. Trainor and Jeffreys (2003) each take very different positions on what Foucault’s work overall has to offer to social workers. I will show that their analysis points to some major theoretical issues in Foucault’s work.

In chapter three of this study I explore what Arendt has to offer that might overcome some of the theoretical problems with Foucault’s theorising. For Arendt, power is always associated with a social agent. It is precisely the possibility of subjects acting in concert, in order to create something new that discloses the potentiality of human agency. If Parker, Fook and Pease (1999) are right to worry about Foucault’s analysis of power as always normalizing and ubiquitous, then Arendt’s notion of power has the potential theoretically to ‘enable humans to break away, or more precisely, to disrupt the hold of Foucauldian power’ (Gordon 1999: 204). Arendt provides a unique understanding of political action (Villa 1996; Canovan 1992; Stewart 2001; Walsh 2002). I argue that if brought together carefully Arendt’s and Foucault’s
theorising of power, politics and freedom can add much to critical social workers’ capacity for thinking about empowerment.

Both Arendt and Foucault value engaging with historically specific events. It is for that reason that I draw on several case studies to ground the theoretical analysis-cum-conversation I have established in this thesis. In chapter four I re-visit the Family Centre Project conducted by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence in Melbourne in 1972-75 (Liffman 1978; Benn 1981; Williams 1981; Gilley 1990) to reflect on specific events and thinking about empowerment practice, as undertaken by the social workers in this project. I have selected this Brotherhood of St. Laurence project because it is credited by Ife (1971) with demonstrating what “empowerment” means when translated into critical social work practice. Ife described this Project’s contribution to critical social work as ‘significant work in defining empowerment and in trying to put it into practice in working with the disadvantaged’ (1997: 151). I engage with this exemplary empowerment case example to explore in relation to Foucault and Arendt’s insights on power, politics, subjectivity and political action, and freedom; how their insights might inform critical social workers when thinking about empowerment practice.

In chapter five I explore a more recent example of “empowerment” practice based on my own experience of working as an equity practitioner in a Victorian higher education institution. The focus is on the ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy implementation over its first five years. This policy attempted to achieve social justice by aiming for previously under-represented groups to gain access to higher education, at the same rate as the rest of the population. This policy framework lends itself to an exploration of critical social work practices as critical social workers often aim to achieve social justice through changing the culture or practices of mainstream institutions. Often these attempts aim to eliminate discrimination on the basis of gender, sexuality, race, disability, low-socio-economic background and Non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), or locational disadvantage like residing in rural or isolated areas of Australia, or in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. I revisit this case example to re-think my own limited conceptualisations of power, politics, identity and freedom. In thinking about this case study example with Foucault and Arendt, new possibilities for political action and specific contestations of identity politics may become apparent.

I aim to show that Foucault’s and Arendt’s theorising of power, politics and freedom can contribute to critical social workers’ thinking and debate about empowerment theory.
Foucault’s thinking is used by critical social workers to particularly address the short-comings of conventional understandings of “power”. In this study I show how his work could be further used by critical social workers when thinking about power relations and empowerment. I also indicate some of the limits of his work for liberatory empowerment theories. Arendt’s work brings a completely fresh approach to power, political action and freedom which provides new ways for social workers to re-think these core categories in relation to empowerment practice. My hope is that the careful combination of Arendt’s and Foucault’s theorising of power, political action and freedom, illustrates another way to re-think and re-formulate empowerment.

In the final chapter of this study I draw together the important aspects of theorising about empowerment with Foucault and Arendt. I show how Arendt’s and Foucault’s insights can inform our thinking about empowerment practices. I conclude that we can engage in thinking about empowerment practice by analysing how power relations operate, by re-valuing political action and by understanding that political action is crucial to achieving equality, distinctiveness and freedom. I hope that this study can contribute to thinking anew about arrangements and practices that promote ways people can live full lives; or as Nussbaum (2005) puts it, ‘people can flourish’, or as Levinson (2000) hopes, ‘people can learn to live together’ in ways that share the common world.
Chapter One
Re-theorising “power” and em-power-ment

... what social workers do, every day, [is] at least potentially radical (Ife 1997: 179).

Empowerment is one of the most frequently invoked concepts in social work theory and practice of the 1980s (Simon 1990: 27).

the notion of empowerment is central to a social justice strategy … a simple working definition will suffice, namely: Empowerment aims to increase the power of the disadvantaged (Ife 2002: 53 italics in the original).

In Barbara Bryant Solomon’s 1976 text Black Empowerment: social work in oppressed communities the concept of power is championed as ‘a light shining down a hitherto dark corridor’. Solomon argues that this is especially so when attempting to build a coherent theoretical framework ‘in regard to specific principles of practice with black client systems’ (Solomon 1976: 12). In Solomon’s account the concept of “power” is central to critical empowerment social work practice. While arguing that “power” is central to any theory or practice of empowerment this might be thought an exercise in leaping at the obvious. However I want to suggest that this is far from being the case. Indeed, if anything, the category of power while frequently drawn on remains a somewhat fugitive idea and /or one that is intensely contested. To show both how and why this is so I want to explore what critical social workers find problematic about many conventional conceptions of power and what impact new ways of thinking about power associated for example with Foucault have on thinking about critical social work empowerment practice.

I begin by reviewing the way critical social work academics write about power in critical social work texts. I then focus specifically on two contemporary Australian critical social work authors’ re-thinking of the concept of “power” and their efforts to re-formulate critical empowerment social work practice. Firstly, I review Jan Fook’s text Social Work Critical Theory and Practice (2002) and her attempt to reformulate the concept of power so as to inform her model of empowerment social work practice. I then discuss Karen Healy’s Social Work Practices Contemporary Perspectives on Change (2000). Healy offers an analysis of a
critical social work project she conducted with another community worker, using a Foucaultian account of power to review the project. Using this local case study Healy challenges various aspects of modernist notions of “power”. Healy attempts to reconstruct critical social work practice based on re-thinking “power” and empowerment with Foucault’s insights on power. It is important to establish how Fook (2002) and Healy (2000) are re-thinking “power” and what kinds of proposals they have to make on how to practice critical social work in this study if we are to adequately address the question - what is critical empowerment social work practice.

Both Healy (2000, 2005) and Fook (1999, 2002) claim that the incursion of so-called “post” theories, specifically Foucault’s insights on power, have disrupted earlier modernist notions of power and have seriously challenged the theoretical possibility of critical social work empowerment practices. Yet both authors turn to Foucault’s insights on power when responding to his theoretical disruption and his challenges to the notion of modernist “power” in order to resolve these challenges. Both authors use aspects of Foucault’s work on power to actively engage in disrupting taken-for-granted aspects of the modernist conceptions of “power” in critical social work. Both aim to use Foucault’s insights on power to re-think and re-formulate critical social work empowerment practice. I show how Foucault’s insights on power are used to both disrupt earlier modernist thinking about power by critical social workers and how Foucault’s work is also used to re-think power and to re-formulate empowerment practice. Let me begin by briefly outlining how modernist critical social work empowerment practice is usually represented in social work texts.

Modernist critical social work empowerment practice

Modernist critical social work empowerment practice is based on critical theory. As Ife puts it:

Critical theory is specifically oriented to a discourse of liberation. It is therefore directly concerned with change and empowerment, and it is oriented to the kind of social justice that is such an important part of social work. Because of its link between the personal and the political, it is able to define human liberation and social justice both in individual and structural terms (1997: 136, my italics).
Ife (1997: 130) argued that in social work, critical theory ‘sought to relate critical analysis to ideas of political practice’. This is what significantly differentiates the use of the notion of empowerment, as a sense or feeling within a client in direct social casework, from a concept that also aims to theorise political engagement and to encourage critical social workers to engage in political practice.

Previously this kind of “political” position in social work has been expressed in the older “radical” or Marxist social work literature (e.g. Bailey and Brake 1975; Corrigan and Leonard 1978). Ife says that “radical” social work ‘can be criticised for being stronger on analysis than it is on prescriptions of what a ‘radical’ social worker should actually do’ (1997: 40). Fook attempted in her text Radical casework: A theory of Practice (1993) to characterise radical social work practice by linking direct and indirect practice. However this “radical” aspect has always been a marginal concern within social work, according to Ife (1997: 177). And the term “radical” has all but disappeared from contemporary social work texts. However rather than lose the focus on ‘structural analysis and perceived need for fundamental social change [which] is implied by the idea of radicalism’ (Ife 1997: 177), it is now common to find contemporary Australian social workers referring to themselves as “critical” rather than “radical” social workers. Healy claims that contemporary critical social workers use a rationale based on critical theory for their position in seeking to ‘empower their audience to transform the social order’ (2000: 21). Healy adds that ‘[i]t is this emancipatory intent, along with the belief in the capacity of human reason and action to achieve it, which characterizes critical social science (Fay 1987),’ (2000: 21).

Ife (1997) and Fook (1993) both claim that it is a combination of structural perspective and interpretative social science which establishes the connection between critical theory and social work practice. Ife insists that:

Individual empowerment is not possible unless links are made to structural empowerment issues, and the client is helped to see the connection between individual powerlessness/oppression and broader political questions, through a reflection on her/his own experience not simply of personal oppression, but as a member of one or more oppressed groups (1997: 136).

In this sense, empowerment at the structural level needs to be linked to the ‘lived experiences of the people concerned’ (Ife 1997: 136). Critical social workers like Ife claim that connecting “the personal” to “the political” is what distinguishes a practice as an empowerment practice.
Critical social work practice is said to require this explicit link between the personal and the political (Ife 1997; Healy 2000; Fook 2002; Pease 2002). According to Fook, drawing on Agger’s (1991, 1998) critical social theory:

‘Domination’ is structural, yet also personally experienced…Social members see themselves as removed from, disengaged or alienated from the power to act on and in their situation. Therefore there is a need to develop a consciousness which is able to view ‘facts’ as pieces of history that can be changed. This emphasises the power of agency, both personal and collective, to transform society (2002: 17).

Critical social workers say that they want to promote a fundamental ‘shift in power from established political, economic and cultural elites towards oppressed and powerless people’ (Galper 1980, cited in Healy 2000: 27). Critical social workers promote the analysis of “disadvantage” experienced by various population groups in society. It is on these societal analyses that strategies for empowerment of disadvantaged groups are often based. Yet what kind of understanding of power is to be found in critical social work? This fundamental issue requires further exploration here.

The idea of power in critical social work

Back in 1976 Solomon described the opportunities in using ‘power as a pivotal concept in social work practice’. This meant

... connecting the increasing knowledge about power operations in society to specific strategies for achieving change in the lives of traditionally powerless people (1976: 13–14).

Yet Solomon also allowed that using “power” as a pivotal concept in social work practice was problematic given that knowledge of power is ‘so fragmented and contradictory that contradictory practice strategies can be fostered’ (1976: 14). Solomon acknowledged that there are disparate conceptions of “power” in the social sciences, and that it depends on whether the concept is dealt with from a ‘psychological, economic, political, sociological, or even philosophical perspective’ (1976: 15). It appears that Solomon tended towards favouring some of Kenneth Clark’s attempts to pull together psychological and social perceptions of power, and specifically, his relating of ‘feelings of powerlessness to lack of self-esteem’ (1976: 15). Solomon drew on Clark’s suggestion that self-esteem
… is not determined by forces inherent within the organism but is dependent upon external supports and reinforcements, and controlled by the judgement of others who themselves are afflicted with the universal human anxiety of self doubt (1974: 163, cited in Solomon 1976: 15).

By linking this psychological and social perception of power to an analysis of the situation of blacks in the United States, Solomon claimed that:

… blacks and other minorities are dependent upon the judgments of their fellows… [meaning that] In essence, they are subject to externally imposed powerlessness (Solomon 1976: 15-16).

In this way, Solomon linked notions of powerlessness to a present and pervasive condition of systemic, institutionalized discrimination experienced by groups that suffer negative valuations.

According to Solomon, institutional racism was based on the negative evaluation of minority individuals and their communities, which results in

… their experience of systematic disadvantage from the policies, procedures, value sets, and normative behaviours in our social institutions’ (1976: 16).

For Solomon, this meant that power ‘may be the key concept linking microsystem and macrosystem processes’ (1976: 16). It is the concept of power that Solomon hoped would be the

… integrative concept in the effort to obtain an understanding of the various forces which serve to determine relationships in a social system (1976: 28).

As such,

The power deficiency so often seen among minority individuals and communities stems from a complex and dynamic interrelationship between the person and his relatively hostile social environment (Solomon 1976: 17).

From this analysis of power, Solomon developed a definition of powerlessness:

Powerlessness is defined here as the inability to manage emotion, skills, knowledge, and/or material resources in a way that effective performance of valued social roles will lead to personal gratification (Solomon 1976: 16).
This definition of “powerlessness” however can become easily focused on individuals’ perceived deficits and can reinforce social work practices that require clients to adapt to current social norms.

To explain how minority racial groups are affected by power, Solomon referred to what she called “indirect” and “direct” power blocks.

Indirect power blocks are those that are incorporated into the developmental experiences of the individual as mediated by significant others (Solomon 1976: 17).

This means that the acquisition of personal resources through primary care givers may be hampered if the negative valuation and stigmas attached to racial identity ‘become incorporated into family processes,’ which may lead to limited development of ‘interpersonal and technical skills’ (Solomon 1976: 18). These indirect power blocks can lead to a reduced ‘effectiveness in performing valued social roles’ (Solomon 1976: 18). Note that the ‘valued social roles’ themselves are not queried, but taken for granted, even as Solomon identifies the risks of standardisation within bureaucracies, if ‘done along lines consistent with the values, norms, life styles…of the dominant group, then a form of discrimination is evident’ (1976: 14). It is interesting that Solomon does not identify how the norms of the dominant group are linked to valued social roles.

“Direct” power blocks are understood as applied directly by some agent of society’s major social institutions. These direct power blocks may be inadequate health service provision in a particular community, or lack of educational opportunities to develop skills, or inadequate funding or income to perform roles like parenting adequately. Although, direct power blocks are often more visible they are also often more impervious to change, according to Solomon (1976). To Solomon, it already appeared that helping professionals tend to have found ‘potentially effective ways to bring about individual change but have been relatively ineffective in producing changes in social institutions’ (1976: 19). Yet critical empowerment social work requires change on all three levels, personal, interpersonal and political.

Solomon’s account of power did not say what power is per se or what the practices of power look like. Rather she tended to emphasise the supposed effects of power relations from a psycho-social perspective and did so in a fairly generalised way. However Solomon’s account of power functioned to shift the “blame” for black people’s oppression away from blaming individual black people to an emphasis on analysing power blocks in society. However
Solomon’s notion of power does not specifically address practices of “power”, “politics”, “identity” or “freedom” and so the notion of “power” itself remained conceptually a black box.

Solomon’s modernist conception of power treats minority individuals and communities as powerless, while claiming that it is a hostile environment that creates this powerlessness. Solomon called on helping professionals to produce changes in social institutions that transform delivery systems in ways that create new opportunities for minority groups. The kind of relationship that promotes building these opportunities is the practice of “combining forces”, rather than giving aid, which tends to be experienced as disempowering. In effect while “power” was treated by Solomon as the key idea it remains fundamentally unclear what “it” is or how “it” works. This tends to make any claims she might want to make about undoing the “powerless” state of various minority groups less than clear or convincing. In a body of recent work by Fook (2002) and Healy (2000) the unexplicated assumptions underlying this conventional approach to power have been made clearer which at least has the benefit of making clear the problems with those assumptions.

Problems with modernist conceptions of power

Fook identified that postmodernist and poststructuralist theories challenge modernist conceptions of power (2002: 48). These challenges to modernist conceptions of power meant that empowerment practice needed to be re-conceptualised by critical social workers. Fook identifies five problematic aspects with modernist notions of power and by implication with how empowerment practice is conceptualised (2002: 48-52). Fook identifies these problems as: conceiving of ‘power as a commodity’, ‘binary oppositional relations’, ‘allowance for difference’, ‘accounting for contradictions’ and the ‘disempowering experience of empowerment’ (Fook 2002: 48-52). I will discuss each of these five problems here, as I aim to return to these points later, to analyse how Fook’s use of Foucault’s work on power addresses these problems and how Fook re-formulates critical social work empowerment practice.

According to Fook, drawing on Foucault, power is not a commodity. Power is not a ‘material entity that can be traded or given away, or transferred from one person or group to another’ (Fook 2002: 48). Although for instance Solomon (1976) does not refer to giving power to the
black individuals or community when describing empowerment social work practice, in Australian social work the notion of giving power to the poor was elaborated by for instance Liffman (1978) and Benn (1981) in the Brotherhood Project. This project was set up to fight poverty and “empower” the poor through transferring power to the poor.

According to Fook the modernist conception of power as a commodity means that ‘empowerment is therefore always at the expense of one group or person towards another’ (2002: 48, italics in the original). Fook concludes that ‘[i]f a worker empowers or gives some of their power to a service user, by definition the worker becomes disempowerment’ (2002: 48). This modernist notion of power implies that there is only a finite amount of power and so there will necessarily be competition for this limited power and thus “oppositional” relations generated between individuals and groups. Certainly some of the accounts of empowerment practice in social work suggest struggles between workers wanting to, but resisting giving up power to client groups, and of client groups seeking to grab more power from workers (Liffman 1978; Benn 1981; Gilley 1990).

Opposition or competition between groups is also implied in Fook’s claim that:

… we have to make choices about who can be empowered and the priority often implied is that whoever is the most disadvantaged, oppressed or marginal should be the chosen group (2002: 49, my italics).

To choose one group as the most disadvantaged group to be empowered is understood to mean that other groups miss out, and that this will cause conflict especially around the use of resources.

Fook indicates that the idea that you can choose whom to empower seems

… to split the world into two oppositional groups – the powerful and the powerless -- with the accompanying assumption that they are two mutually exclusive groups (2002: 49, italics in the original).

The problem Fook identifies for empowerment with this split is that “powerless” people often blame the dominant group for their troubles and in so doing shift responsibility for changing their affairs to the “dominant group”. According to Fook this means that “agency”, or a sense of capacity to act effectively ‘is shifted away from the group needing empowerment and, ironically back in the lap of the dominant group’ (2002: 49). Whereas Yeatman (1997) is concerned that, when these subject positions of “powerless” and “powerful” are taken for
granted and not contested, the social practices that sustain these identities are also not contested and thus cannot be transformed. Thus ‘defining one’s identity as ‘powerless’, can have a disempowering effect … [especially if] such an identity [is] ascribed from outside’, according to Fook (2002: 49). As Fook suggests it ‘can function to disempower those who are so labelled, since it is not a label of their own choosing’ (2002: 49). The option of resisting a “powerless” or “victimhood” identity is however only briefly mentioned by Fook (2002). Fook suggests that, ‘it is the control over the construction of Aboriginality [for instance], as well as the specific constructions, which are important’ (2002: 84-85, my italics). However, it is precisely the negative valuations in a racist social system that alerted Solomon (1976) to the need for empowerment. Solomon’s analysis suggested that black Americans did not have control over how society valued and regarded their social or political identity. Fook does not indicate how control over political or social identity is achievable. Her point however highlights the importance of the relation between power and identity unlike so much modernist critical social work theorizing which tends to conflate power and identity, according to Healy (2000).

Another key problem Fook identifies for empowerment, in relation to the idea of power, is the assumption that ‘we are striving for equality, that empowerment is about reducing inequality’ (2002: 49). More specifically, the problem as Fook states it, is with how equality is understood, as it is frequently assumed

\[ \text{… that equality = sameness. Therefore the process of empowerment necessarily means that all people and groups become the same (2002: 50).} \]

What worries Fook is that, ‘this type of thinking…leaves little room for personal choice and social difference’ (2002: 50). The effect of promoting one way of life as the way of life for all humans concerns Fook (2002). This suggests Fook is concerned with a notion of diversity. The impact of thinking about equality as sameness, Fook suggests,

\[ \text{… might also have the effect of actually silencing any number of other perspectives, if the tendency is to become like the mainstream (2002: 50).} \]

Fook is suggesting that empowerment needs to challenge ‘the power of the dominant group’s … hold over what is defined as desirable and normal’ (2002: 50). Fook considers that this ‘tendency towards cultural orthodoxy is a potential downside of empowerment (2002: 50). Fook’s point puts into question how critical social workers think about and understand equality, equity and diversity and how this relates to critical social work empowerment
Later I will explain Arendt’s thinking about “plurality” and her account of political action which may be useful to critical social workers when thinking about the relationship between difference and sameness. In a sense Fook is indicating that there is some element of empowerment that requires non-normative power relations to avoid the process of empowerment being focused on ‘all people and groups becoming the same’ (2002: 50). In my view Foucault attempts to articulate non-normative power relations, and although he does not always succeed, his theorising about power can stimulate critical social workers to attempt to think about empowerment in non-normative ways. However, Arendt is probably better at theorizing the processes needed to work in non-normative or political ways.

Fook is concerned that,

\[\text{despite the best intentions, our empowerment theory does not always translate well into practice. Sometimes in the attempt to empower, a disempowering climate and culture is set up (2002: 51).}\]

One problem for those wishing to empower others according to Fook is ‘how to exercise power without creating intimidating or contrary circumstances’ (2002: 54). Treating people in terms of labels and categories is part of the problem, according to Fook. Fook is again indicating that the relationship between power and identity is worthwhile exploring in relation to empowerment practice. Fook suggests that ‘constantly to define and relate to the “disempowered” as if that is all they are and ever will be can work to the contrary of their empowerment’ (Fook 2002: 51).

Fook (2002) has identified five key problems with modernist conceptions of power as discerned by postmodern and poststructural theorists. Although Fook’s (2002) discussion is brief, on the face of it, she appears to have identified some serious conceptual short-comings in the modernist way critical social workers’ conceptualised “power” and by implication empowerment practice. The challenges Fook (2002) identifies for modernist critical social workers in (re)theorising empowerment are significant and require serious engagement to establish whether and how these problems can be resolved. I want now to consider how Fook (2002) turns to Foucault’s work on power to reformulate the concept of power and empowerment. Whether Foucault’s work overall is adequate for this task is another and related question and one I will address more fully in the next chapter.
Reformulating power

To reformulate the modernist concept of “power” as outlined earlier, Fook turns to Foucault’s account of power. Fook explains her turn to Foucault’s theorising by claiming that, ‘Foucault’s understanding of power is widely regarded as helpful in incorporating the different ways in which power is experienced and exercised’ (2002: 52). Fook draws on a summary of Foucault’s approach to power, as prepared by Sawicki (1991) and quoted in Healy (2000: 43). This summary consists of the following three points:

- Power is exercised, not possessed
- Power is both repressive and productive
- Power comes from the bottom up (Fook 2002: 52).

Fook then offers a brief discussion of what the above three summary points mean for thinking about power, prior to outlining four steps of an empowerment practice.

According to Fook, because power is not possessed ‘it is not located with particular people, groups or structures, [and] may be everywhere’ (2002: 52). Fook is tentative about the notion that power may be everywhere. Foucault, in his early and middle work, made it clear that he thought power was ubiquitous and prior to politics and identity. The notion of the ubiquitousness of power is both an important insight and a serious problem in Foucault’s thinking about power. Perhaps it is the problem aspects of ubiquitous power that makes Fook (2002) hesitate about claiming that power is everywhere. The point Fook makes in relation to the idea that power may be everywhere is that ‘[w]hat is important is not where it is located, but how it is used, in different settings and by different people’ (2002: 52, my italics). Foucault’s understanding of power, Fook suggests means that ‘[p]ower is something people use and create rather than simply possess’.

Fook suggests that power is both repressive and productive, when she says that

Power involves the potential to control and restrict, to form and transform. Not only are individuals regulated by state power, but state power gives a life and identity for the individual through providing appropriate categorisations, a fabric through which to live their lives. At the same time that it subjugates, it also provides a creative structure (2002: 52).
Fook concludes that:

Thus individuals willingly participate in practices and structures which simultaneously empower and disempower. Power is both a good and bad thing (2000: 52).

This way of thinking about power makes it difficult to think about a reason for engaging in empowerment practice by social workers. As Fook’s (2002) claims provide no apparent reasons as to why people might resist or seek to change particular practices and structures, it is unclear how we might distinguish between power relations that are good and power relations that are bad. Perhaps, what Fook (2002) is indicating is that this is no longer a necessary question, because individuals are willingly going along with practices and structures that simultaneously empower and disempower?

As part of the explication of this idea, Fook states:

For example, in our earlier scenario Charles is both disempowered by his identity as a recently divorced man fighting a custody battle over his children, but at the same time this identity holds the seeds of a possibility for a new empowered identity, as politician himself (2002: 52).

It appears that Fook (2002) might be thinking that power is repressive when it is disempowering and that power is productive when it is empowering. This leaves intact a distinction between good and bad effects of power. According to Stewart (2001) it is theoretically necessary in order for empowerment to be possible that we are able to distinguish between the good and bad effects of power.

The last of the three summary points that Fook (2002) offers of Foucault’s understanding of power, is that power comes from below or the bottom up. Foucault is understood as claiming that the ‘superstructure does not produce local power relations; rather, it is the local relations that enable global phenomena of power’ (Healy 2000: 45). Power in the critical social work literature is often understood as operating in a top down fashion, meaning for instance that social workers are “powerful” because of their professional status within the hierarchical arrangements of the welfare state. Fook points out that:

Every person, despite her or his social status and location, exercises and has the potential to create some form of power…The key to understanding power in any one context is therefore to appreciate how it is expressed, experienced and created by different people at different levels (2002: 53).
Power is understood as “something” used by ‘different people at different levels’ (2002: 53). However, this kind of thinking about power does not specifically address what power is or how it is exercised, or how critical social workers might analyse what kind of practices of power are operating in a specific time and place.

Reformulating empowerment practice

Fook (2002) attempts to apply her re-thinking of “power” based on a summary of Foucault’s account of power to reformulate the concept of empowerment. Fook suggests an exercise to readers that asks them to consider:

How might the social worker practice empowerment, taking into account our reformulated concept of power and empowerment (2002: 53)?

A discussion by Fook (2002) of this question would have been most helpful. However, Fook (2002: 53-55) leaves it to the reader to answer or think about this question. Fook (2002) might have offered some guidance on how Foucault’s insights on power could inform rethinking of empowerment in relation to the earlier problems posed with modernist notions of power. For instance, how does Fook (2002) consider Foucault’s work on power to assist in resolving the issues about “equality” and “difference”? How can Foucault’s work help critical social workers to deal with inequality? Are these still relevant questions? Fook (2002) unfortunately does not elaborate on these points. Instead Fook proposes a series of questions, including:

• Who are we trying to empower?
• For what reasons should they be empowered?
• Who is already exercising what types of power, and what types of power might they potentially create? (2002: 53).

Fook does not address these questions directly, but instead proposes a process of empowerment practice. Fook attempts to articulate what empowerment practice might look like from ‘critical and postmodern perspectives’ (2002: 54). This empowerment process is to involve four steps.
For the first step Fook suggests that critical social workers:

… analyse/reflect upon (deconstruct) situations, focusing on how existing power relations and structures are supported and created. For example, what different assumptions about power support the existing state of affairs? (Fook 2002: 54, italics in original).

The first part of this step is very useful. It asks critical social workers to focus on how existing power relations and structures are supported and created. Foucault’s (1973, 1979, 1981) work offers some very interesting examples of attempting to think about and identify power relations in specific places and times, in relation to madness, criminality, sexuality and governmentality. Fook is right in suggesting that critical social workers draw on Foucault’s work to assist with this task of analysing existing power relations. By analysing how existing power relations are supported and created, there is the possibility that these power relations can be challenged and changed in ways that may be empowering.

In step two, Fook suggests critical social workers:

… redefine and reconceptualise the power relations and structures in non-oppositional terms, allowing for differences between the different players involved, including yourself (Fook 2002: 54, italics in original).

Fook (2002) insists that the way power relations are usually defined and conceptualised in oppositional terms needs to be changed. The injunction to redefine and reconceptualise power relations in non-oppositional terms suggests that this process will alter power relations for the better. Action on the part of the critical social worker is to be focused on re-thinking and re-defining power relations. However, it is unclear what this process involves and whether political engagement, debate, deliberation or collective decision-making with others is part of this task of re-defining power relations in non-oppositional terms.

Fook suggests that the third step points to the:

… need to develop a process of dialogue and communication so that different parties can come to understand how each experiences empowerment or disempowerment (2002: 54, my italics).

This point is interesting because it suggests interaction with “different parties” about how each player experiences “empowerment or disempowerment”. Although this focus seems to suggest that “empowerment” and “disempowerment” are experiences and thus feeling states within particular individuals; the discussion could also focus on how power relations are
operating or the specifics of practices of power in a particular situation and what their
differential effects might be on people. Further, how these power relations or exercises of
power relate to societal norms or political rationalities could also be part of this dialogue.
However, Fook provides few clues on how to engage and what to engage in this dialogue
aimed at achieving empowerment for all.

Fook (2002) is optimistic that when power relations are redefined and re-conceptualised in
non-oppositional terms, then the final step is ‘[t]o reconstruct and reconceptualise…the
situation in ways which are more empowering for all parties’ (Fook 2002: 54). Fook is
proposing that empowerment practice is about analysing power relations and negotiating
changed systems of power relations with the desired effect of creating an ‘empowering
climate’ (2002: 54) for all. I suggest that Foucault’s work on defining power relations and
mechanisms of power like biopower, discipline and governmentality could assist critical
social workers in thinking about power relations and empowerment practice. However more
elaboration of Foucault’s theorizing would appear necessary to guide such a task. An
understanding of the political also appears necessary to engage in “reconstructing” and
“reconceptualising” the situation. The role of political action in making such changes may
also need to be elaborated.

Fook has raised three important questions about critical empowerment social work practice.
The first question is how can critical social workers think about how power is used? The
second question is how can critical social workers think about “identity” and “difference”? And,
the third question is, how can critical social workers think in non-normative ways and
by implication about practices of freedom? I will explore these questions in relation to
Foucault’s work in chapter two of this study and in relation to Arendt’s work in chapter three
of this study. For now, I will turn to Healy’s (2000) account of re-theorising power with
Foucault, and her attempt to re-think and re-construct critical social work empowerment
practice.

Problems with modernist theorising of power

Healy (2000) also identifies some problems with the way critical social workers’ theorise
power. Healy (2000) is especially concerned with critical social workers propensity to
conflate power and domination. Yeatman had already complained of this when she suggested,
In the emancipatory social movements, to which contemporary critical forms of social work are linked, there is a tendency to collapse all forms of power together as domination (1997, cited in Healy 2000: 111).

Conflating power and domination is considered a ‘negative approach to power that pre-empts inquiry into local operations of power’ by several critical social work authors (Healy 2000: 111; Fook 2002; Pease 2002). A focus on local analysis of power is thus used by Healy (2000) in her analysis of critical social work practices to attempt to bypass critical social workers’ propensity to conflate power and domination.

Healy (2000: 73) claims that when ‘power is represented as a possession of individuals and groups who hold privileged positions within overarching social structures’ as is the case in critical social work theory, social workers and service users are dualistically represented as the “powerful” and the “powerless”. The structural analysis offered by critical social workers:

… presupposes an existing condition of client disempowerment and marginality. Fitting subjects, therefore, of empowerment social work are socially despised persons, families and groups (Simon, 1994:23).

A similar relationship between identity and power is offered by Susan Kenny, a well-known Australian community development author, when she argues that,

The term ordinary people and powerless people refer to those who are disadvantaged in society, who do not hold powerful positions and do not have ease of access to power structures (1994:18, italics in the original).

Yet several social work authors find this presumption problematic. Solas (1996) considers it paradoxical that in order to practice empowerment a “fitting subject” needs to be first constituted as disempowered. The processes constituting the client as “powerless” simultaneously constitute the social worker as “empowered” and “powerful”.

However as Ife indicates structural approaches to empowerment have demanded that social workers focus on working with ‘groups such as women, Aboriginal people, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities and so on’ (1997: 136). Power and identity is in this sense part of the link between the “personal and political” in empowerment practice and social workers are to help the client see
… the connection between individual powerlessness/oppression and broader political questions, through a reflection of her/his own experience not simply of personal oppression, but as a member of one or more oppressed group (Ife 1997: 136).

This is the kind of so-called “identity politics” which modern social movements like the women’s and gay liberation movements rely on, and which Healy argues, Foucault’s work challenges. Foucault’s early and middle work

… suggests that the formation of identities is vital to the modern operations of discipline and surveillance. [And] modern power [is said to] operate to bind individuals to identifications, which in turn, requires that individuals submit to power…in order to maintain a coherent sense of self, …the practices of identity politics exemplified by the forming of collective identities such as ‘woman’, ‘gay’ or ‘differently able’ can reinforce the modern operations of power (Healy 2000: 53).

Healy concludes that, ‘[t]o embrace an identification is, then, to constitute oneself through the very terms that make surveillance and disciplining possible’ (2000: 53). Yeatman (1993, 1995, 1997) too is concerned that if someone embraces an identity in a way that ‘fails to provide a basis for positive engagement with politics’ it might instead contribute to ‘a politics of rancour and hatred’ (Healy 2002: 53).

Yeatman argued that a structural analysis linked to identity tends to fix the status of “oppressor” and “oppressed” and as such ‘pre-empts investigation into how subject position of ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’ are constituted and how social practices of oppression are locally sustained and hence how they might be contested’ (1997, cited in Healy 2000: 53). The binary opposition between “oppressor” and “oppressed” according to Tapper (1993: 134, cited in Healy 2000: 53) suggests that ‘those situated as oppressed have little or no access to power [and] that powerlessness is proof of one’s goodness and the other’s [the oppressor’s] evil’.

It is understandable that ‘social workers feel ambivalent about power or, more accurately, about their own power’, according to Laragy (1997, cited in Fook 20002: 109). Social workers ‘feel uncomfortable with the idea of having power and often, therefore, construct themselves as relatively powerless’ (Fook 2002: 109). Both Ife (1997) and Fook (2002) have positioned critical social workers as having to work within hostile environments that severely constrain their capacity to empower. Social workers are positioned as relatively powerless within their employment contexts (Fook 2002). At the same time, when power is conflated
with domination and oppression, this means that “having power” converts the social worker into the “oppressor” who may be guilty of dominating service users.

This conceptualisation of power in the worker-client relationship has led some practitioners to conclude that the most empowering action a worker can take is to minimize their involvement with oppressed people; that is, to transfer skills and knowledge as efficiently as possible and exit themselves from the lives of service users (see Middleman and Goldberg 1974; Healy 2000: 34).

As I will suggest later this understanding of power was pronounced in the Family Centre Project in the 1970s where social and welfare workers were expected to “exit themselves from the lives of services users” as quickly as possible, to promote the empowerment of the poor (Liffman 1978; Benn 1981).

Other critical social workers continue to emphasise the importance of egalitarian and dialogical relations between social workers and their clients (Dominelli 1995; Ife 1997). The striving for egalitarian and dialogical relations is supposed to address the oppressive role of social workers. The emphasis on achieving egalitarian relations between social workers and clients has been a notable feature of a lot of the critical and anti-oppressive social work texts (Dominelli 1995; Ife 1997; Allen et al. 2003). Healy suggests this emphasis is part of the

Prefigurative strategies [that] aim for the realization in the current context of those forms of social relations, particularly equitable relations, that would characterize a transformed social order (2000: 28).

Healy (2000: 111) argues that this tendency to conflate “power” and “domination” leads to a ‘negative approach to power that pre-empts inquiry into local operations of power’. To avoid this conflation of power and domination, Healy focuses on a local practice illustration, ‘the young women’s anti-violence project’ (2000: 78) to stimulate our thinking about how power operates within critical social work practice. Next I outline how Healy used Foucault’s work to think about power in ways that aims not to conflate power with domination, or powerlessness with a stigmatised identity.

The young women’s anti-violence project

Healy identifies as ‘a member/researcher with Young Mothers for Young Women’ (1996) a participatory research project she initiated and conducted with a community worker Karyn Walsh in Brisbane and a core group of young mothers (May 1994-April 1995). The young
mothers in the participatory action research project ‘engaged in an action-reflection process about their experiences of violence’ with the social worker and a community worker (Healy and Walsh 1997: 46). Healy and Walsh describe this process as being similar to ‘the work of Freire (1972) [because] participants were involved in reflecting on their experience of violence and asking questions about why this experience occurred and how it could be responded to more effectively’ (1997: 46). As part of this project the young women made contact with many young mothers throughout South East Queensland to research the young women’s vulnerability to violence (Healy & Walsh 1997: 46). Some of the young women became involved in a public education campaign ‘to challenge those gender stereotypes that contribute to violence against women’ (Healy & Walsh 1997: 47). The young women have spoken about their experience of violence in both public (radio interviews) and at professional forums with human service workers, conferences and government consultative councils.

Healy indicates that her

… interest in this project arose from experience as a social worker in a youth service where I became aware of the extraordinary levels of violence in the lives of homeless young women, particularly amongst young mothers (2000: 68, my italics).

‘[T]he focus of the project was the exploration of the links between gender and violence in the lives of young mothers’ (Healy 2000: 98). The social worker’s critical feminist understanding influenced the selection of the core participants which comprised:

… seven young women between the ages of 17 and 24 years, all of whom were (or had been) teenage mothers with between one and four children each, most had experienced homelessness, all were in a low income bracket and all identified that they had been subjected to violence, such as sexual assault, child abuse and domestic violence (Healy 2000: 69).

Healy’s description of the participants indicates a structural and gender analysis of the young women’s circumstances, from a poststructural perspective as Solas’ earlier comment suggests the young women involved in the project were “fitting subjects” for empowerment.

The participatory action research project approach to working with the young women exemplifies the key strategy often advocated by activist or critical social worker- a kind of consciousness-raising process ‘whereby the oppressed move from a position of self-blame to an understanding of structural origins of their suffering’ (Healy 2000: 31). Healy set about
reviewing her participatory action research project armed with Foucault’s work on “power” with a view to deliberately disrupt the orthodoxy of critical social work processes. This destabilizing work, according to Healy

… can help social workers to extend and diversify what counts as social change and hence what qualifies as critical social work practice (2000: 5).

Healy used Foucault’s theorising of power relations within the participatory action research project to show how power relations operated between the young women in their interactions during the project meetings.

Healy understands Foucault to encourage ‘social workers to look to the rich data of everyday practice to understand how social practices are sustained and can be challenged’ (Healy 2000: 45). Fook echoes Healy’s point by stating ‘[t]his ‘bottom-up’ view of power encourages looking at how power is expressed in the richness of everyday relations’ (2002: 53).

According to Healy, ‘Foucault insists on an ascending order of analysis’…which ‘begins within specific contexts of social practice’ (2000: 45). This is why Healy says she

… will focus mainly on an analysis of the operations of power, identity and change within a context of activist practice. This context, which I will refer to as the ‘young women’s anti-violence project’ (2000: 68, my italics).

It appears that Healy is defining the “context” as the project itself, which has the effect of obfuscating how the project itself is also a historically specific event and constituted through various power relations, mechanisms of power and techniques of power. This has been done in spite of Healy’s earlier comment that:

… recognition of context is crucial because social work, whether orthodox or critical, cannot evade the historical context in which its practices, like the practices of all human service professions, are embedded (2000: 61).

It is important to note that Healy’s young women’s anti-violence project was funded by the Queensland Department of Health (Healy 2000: acknowledgments) and that this funding relationship was part of the “context” of the project. According to Petersen and Lupton (1996), the dominant public health discourse in Australia promotes a notion of governing that aims to maintain order, and to discipline populations through self-regulation and self-discipline. This disciplining of “at risk” populations is understood as an operation of power relations, which encourages people to govern themselves and to act upon themselves in such
ways that it means ‘the police, the guards and the doctors do not have to’ (Cruikshank 1993: 330, cited in Pease 2002: 140; Rose 1999). Given the project’s funding source, questions about the project’s relation to this kind of political rationality may be significant. As Petersen and Lupton argue the ‘new public health is at its core a moral enterprise, in that it involves prescriptions about how we should live our lives individually and collectively’ (1996: xii).

Fook suggested starting with an analysis of how power relations operate when thinking about critical empowerment social work practice. This step may guide critical social workers to focus on the relationship between the project’s focus and the current political rationality of the new public health discourse. Critical social workers might find Foucault’s discussion of bio-power or bio-politics particularly useful in analysing these kinds of power relations. Foucault encourages critical social workers to reflect on how interventions are problematised. Foucault proposes that exploring ‘government’ in the broadest sense of that word, reveals how a problem is elaborated and how a problem is made thinkable in a particular form and how this problematisation tends to strongly imply the kinds of ‘diagnosis, prescription and cure’, the kinds of intervention promoted for dealing with these perceived difficulties and failures (Rose and Miller 1992:183 cited in Ballard 1998:125).

Indeed, Healy recommends:

… an ongoing reflexivity about the linkages between this project and the processes of governmentality to which social work practices in the postmodern era are increasingly subjected (2000: 146).

However Healy (2000) does not spell out the linkages between her project and processes of governmentality, nor does she engage with what Foucault’s notion of governmentality is about, and how it might relate to understanding power relations within the project and beyond.

Instead, Healy indicates that Foucault promotes:

… an ascending analysis of power, starting, that is, from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been- and continue to be- invested by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination (1980e 99, cited in Healy 2000: 45).

Healy interprets Foucault’s emphasis of “starting with the infinitesimal mechanisms” when
investigating power relations, as requiring an investigation of power relations within social work practice at the local level with a focus on the verbal interactions between the young women participants, workers and in their public forums. However this seems a rather introverted view of the matter, a point made by Brass who insists,

A micropower focus, however, does not mean selecting the smallest possible site of personal interactions and examining it intensely, but rather extending one’s gaze in all directions from that site. One examines the networks of power throughout society rather than those extending downward from some ultimate source or structure of power (2000: 319, my italics).

Foucault suggests that to analyse power means asking 'how these mechanism of power have been and continue to be invested by ever more general mechanisms' (1980: 99, my italics). That is in order to undertake an ascending analysis of power, means linking an analysis of power relations to Foucault’s analysis of:

… various forms of power, like discipline, bio-power (which is about the state’s concern for the populations’ health and productivity), police (which is a form of policy making, that aims to ‘increase the happiness of citizens in a way that also enhances modern political rationality’), pastoralism and government (the conduct of conduct) (Simons 1995:39).

Foucault coined the term ‘governmentality’ (Brass 2000:317). Foucault’s notion of governmentality indicates how various forms and practices of power operate through subjects regulating and disciplining themselves in relations to these forms and practice of power. People are understood to actively police their own lives and to conform or collaborate with practices of power through their own processes of self-regulation and self-discipline (Pease 2002: 140).

Using Foucault’s notion of governmentality is one way critical social workers could identify what political rationalities are operating and how people are adapting and subjugating themselves to these logics and practices of self (Rose 1996, 1999, Miller 1992, Gordon 1999, Lemke 2001, McDonald, Marston and Buckley 2003). In addition, it means inquiring into how resistances to political rationalities or mechanisms of power are incorporated into further strategies aimed at governing various populations (O’Malley 1996). Foucault’s work on governmentality is useful when identifying the power relations involved in how the critical social work project with the young women came to be constituted. Foucault encourages us to
explore how “fitting subjects” of empowerment are constituted and how subjects constitute themselves as subjects of empowerment.

**Power within the project**

Rather than focus on the historical and specific context of her project, Healy takes us into an analysis of power operations *within* the project itself, to the micro-politics of power. According to Healy, the young women participants

... forged a foundation of collective understanding and action, the young women emphasized the shared knowledge that derived from their experience as young mothers and survivors of violence...as a *vital foundation* for outreach and action with other young women (2000: 108, my italics).

This “commonality” was achieved through a “consciousness raising” process and a ‘selection of activist practice models including participatory action research, feminist practice principles and structural social work’ (Healy 2000: 78). ‘The critical perspectives advanced through the project’, according to Healy, ‘enabled the participants to move, to varying extents, from a situation of self-blame to a recognition of the structural origins of their experience’ (2000: 105). As Moreau, an early advocate for structural social work states:

A key concern is to prevent clients from unduly scapegoating themselves or others for material situations that are largely out of their personal control, to collective rather than to individualize their situation...’ (1990: 54).

However the ‘privilege accorded to these critical ideas meant that participants were compelled to represent themselves in ways consistent with them’, according to Healy (2000: 106). This highlights the way that participants learn what it is they must say about themselves within particular regimes of “truth”.

Healy (2000) suggests that throughout the project there were various political processes at work, some of which operated to exclude some participants who held different views to the critical analysis promoted through the project and also suppressed some related aspects of all participants’ lives. The role the critical social workers might have played in opening up multiple and possibly conflicting perspectives with the young women participants was not explored. Rather Healy focused her analysis on how the privilege granted “critical ideas”
meant that participants exercised power over each other in compliance with these ideas. Outside the group process itself, Healy claims that the critical perspectives were implicated in a personal sense of failure for those participants who remained in violent relationships, because of the expectation that ‘they would have changed sufficiently through the project to refuse violent treatment in their current contexts’ (2000: 107).

For example three participants told Healy outside the project meetings that they were still sporadically involved with partners who were violent towards them. The expectation that there would be no dissonance between their “public voice and private experience” by the young women in the project reveals that understanding ourselves as made up of multiple selves with plural and possible conflicting interests may have been more useful to the young women (Haber 1995: 2). It is

\[ \ldots \text{this ever-present possibility of the other (whether in actual others or in ourselves) guarantees the possibility of a rich understanding of ourselves and our relation to others, and also points at a mechanism for explaining why it is possible to resist hegemonic power regimes (Haber 1995: 2).} \]

O’Sullivan has made the strong point that one of the results of suppressing difference, is that it automatically eliminates ‘the pre-condition for the political’ (1997: 741). One effect of suppressing difference within the project was to preclude new ways of engaging with each participant and with others, like the radio hosts, and feminist human service workers who attended the young women’s forums.

In analysing the power relations within the project, Healy claims that participants used power in ways that dominated certain participants’ capacity to speak. Healy indicated that the young women who did not speak with a “critical voice” were silenced by the other young women in the group. One young woman ‘exited it [the project] prematurely, due primarily to the offer of a skills training program’. Yet Healy observes that this same young woman’s input was rejected bluntly and frequently by the group because it did not fit the “critical truths” advanced through the consciousness raising process. Healy finds it ironic,

\[ \ldots \text{that critical truths can also be used to effect relations of domination; that is, to subdue the voices and experiences of those they are intended to liberate and with whom dialogue is sought (2000: 104).} \]

However Healy limits her observations to how adherence to “critical ideas” in effect
delimited “what could be said by whom” within the project, and the social workers did not appear to challenge these effects, according to Healy’s account (2000). This analysis tends to focus on the way power relations silenced some participants. In other words, Healy emphasized the idea of power as a relation of domination.

Healy turned to poststructuralism to analyse power relations between participants. Healy claims that ‘[p]oststructuralism enables a fuller disclosure of the operations of power in practice than has been possible in the critical tradition alone’ (2000: 134). According to Healy,

… previously unthinkable operations of power are revealed when critical post theories destabilize the link between power and identity… [It] allows that even relatively powerless people, such as service users, may in some instances exercise power in relation to powerful others, such as service workers (2000: 134).

Healy hopes to destabilise the relationship between power and identity and between the “powerless” and “powerful” by disrupting the assumptions about “who” can and does exercise power. However Healy warns that:

The recognition of the capacities of service users to exercise power both for their own empowerment and for domination is an issue that must be dealt with sensitively and cautiously (Healy 2000: 134).

Healy argues that:

A critical appraisal of this power can only occur in the full recognition of the domination to which service users have been subjected by human services, both historically and contemporarily (2000: 134).

There appears to be some nervousness around the notion that the so-called “powerless” exercise power and a suspicion, shared by others, that the exercise of power will inevitably lead to the domination of others (Liffman 1978, Benn 1981, Healy 2000). The young women participants were also suspicious of power as domination, when they expressed dissatisfaction with the human services workers’ inability to acknowledge their use and exercise of power.

Maintaining innocence

Healy describes how the young women participants asked human service workers at one
public forum, ‘how their [human service workers] work practices demonstrated prejudice towards young mothers’? (2000: 112). The human service workers, who had attended the public forum, were ‘sympathetic to the critical view that underscored the young women’s questions’. Yet, these workers ‘found it difficult to accept that the general criticism of human service workers could apply to them… [they saw themselves as] positive workers’ (Healy 2000: 112, my italics). These human services workers, according to Healy,

… tend to locate their own practices outside this history [the role social workers have played in subordination of oppressed populations, both historically and contemporarily] as innately different to the practices which precede them (2000: 123).

By maintaining this view of their practices as innately different and intentionally “positive”, social workers did not acknowledge their involvement in current governing powers and practices. As Healy rightly indicates:

In thinking that the critical truths we proclaim as activists are in some way more pure and enlightened, outside the forces of history and local contexts that shape our activities, we doom ourselves to repeat the mistakes we see in the practices of our forebears (2000: 96).

Human service workers by insisting that their practices are “positive” or that they are “positive” workers are failing the young women by not acknowledging their necessary imbrication in governing powers, which effects both constraints and possibilities on them as workers and by extension on their relations with the young women (Orlie 1997). In this way the new language of positivity echoes older appeals to “altruism” or “benevolence” by more traditional social workers.

The human service workers ‘found it difficult to accept that the general criticisms of human service workers could apply to them’ (Healy 2000: 112). This kind of perception suggests that human service workers think of themselves as innocent of power relations because of their personal positive intentions towards the young women. This belief positioned the workers as being both outside power and innocent of exercising power over others. Foucault’s notion of the ubiquitousness of power makes such a space outside power impossible. Further, good intentions alone do not guarantee that the exercise of power over others will always be beneficial.

The young women were dissatisfied with the response from the workers. ‘As one participant lamented, [t]hey [the workers] wouldn’t admit ANYTHING was wrong’ (Healy 2000: 113,
capitals in the original). Healy’s interpretation of this event was that the more complex and contradictory power relations evident ‘beyond that of ‘powerful’ or ‘powerless’, [did not] come to the fore’ (2000: 113). The workers reacted to the young women’s view of them as unfair, because most of those present ‘were employed in small non-government organizations and most identified as feminists’ (2000: 113) As Healy points out:

Yet despite their professional and personal investment in critical practices, or perhaps because of it, they would not tolerate a general critique of their power that failed to engage with the complexities around their experiences of power and their attempts to do things differently (2000: 113).

What Healy is highlighting here, is a point also made by Orlie that:

… when we envision power as domination – and we do so whenever we speak of power becoming inscribed in or pressing upon an object - we tend to elide subjects’ participation in governing powers (1997: 33).

Foucault’s (1980) later work on governmentality makes each individual’s participation in governing powers evident. It seems that Healy is attempting to articulate this imbrication with governing powers and is pointing to the necessity of critical social workers to engage with the complexities around their experiences and practices of power relations. Workers’ attempts to do things “differently” as a way of working alongside the young women may be possible if workers and clients can challenge the effects of different forms of power as they operate specifically and locally to position and constitute both worker and service user.

**Making social work processes visible**

As long as power is conflated with domination any attempt to make some power relations visible is considered dangerous. Healy warns several times about the dangers of revealing the micro-physics of power and how it might be used to further constrain or control researchers and social workers. For instance, Healy speculates that:

… it may be that the lack of critical research into conventional practice settings has served a protective function in so far as activist social workers within these contexts have been shielded from particular forms of surveillance, whilst, of course continuing to be subjected to others (2000: 146).
‘[M]aking social work processes visible’, according to Healy,

… should be approached with some caution and with an ongoing reflexivity about the
linkages between this project and the processes of governmentality to which social work
practices in the postmodern era are increasingly subjected (2000: 146).

This concern with making critical social work processes visible suggests not only that power
is “dangerous” and generally repressive but also that visibility makes people more vulnerable
to the exercise of power. This point echoes Foucault’s concerns in his early and middle work
that disciplinary techniques reverses the role of visibility in relations of power and that
distinct modes of visibility are now a key component of social control (Gordon 2002: 125).
Foucault is concerned that visibility primarily functions to increase control and surveillance of
those identified by power relations as troublesome sub-populations (Gordon 1999).

However, visibility may also be a necessary component of resistance and the possibilities of
transformative politics. For instance, Arendt recognised the importance of “visibility” for
political action. Arendt (1951) argued that visibility was necessary to maintain freedom and to
prevent isolation, while invisibility leads to increasing social control. How visibility
functioned, in the young women’s anti-violence project, is explored by Healy in relation to
the young women participants “going public” with their experiences of violence.

**Going public**

Healy explores what happens when,

As part of a broad vision of social change, activists urge the transformation of private
concerns into public issues… This means that at some point oppressed populations must
publicly contest the injustices they face (2000: 118).

Healy draws on Foucault to grapple with the ‘limitations encountered by the project group’
(2000: 119) in going public. One of Healy’s key concerns was how the media and other
human service professionals put pressure on the young women to reveal intimate details about
their personal lives.

Initially, rather than resist this concentration on their personal experiences (particularly
those of victimization), the young women actively engaged with it… [even when Healy
and her co-worker raised concerns about public self-revelation]. The participants argued
that telling their stories was liberating for them and that it could assist others to break the cycle of violence (Healy 2000: 119).

It is not surprising that the young women believed telling their stories was liberating for them. As Healy indicates, ‘[i]n the activist social work literature, the consciousness raising process is represented as an instrument of liberation’ (2000: 101). Foucault was always suspicious about the imperative to tell the truth about oneself. He thought it was part of a modernist operations or a humanist ruse, to fool people into believing that self-knowledge leads to liberation.

During the first part of the anti-violence project’s group consciousness-raising process, Healy and her co-worker encouraged the young women to tell their stories and privileged their ‘lived experience’ as a ‘site of truth’ (Healy 2000: 81). In this way, the critical social workers’ privileged the young women’s life stories as “data” for the process of personal and social change and so reinforced the efficacy of confessional technology. The “consciousness raising” process the young women participated in with the two social workers, prior to taking their experiences of violence to the media, relied on the broader notions that speaking your truth promoted liberation for both yourself and others. The consciousness raising process promoted an understanding of “lived experience” as a site of truth and reiterated the idea that it is possible to speak the truth to power to influence change.

According to Healy, however

The young women became more ambivalent about this process over time and resisted requests to speak at public meetings and they began to formulate a media policy which focused the discussion on the network’s work rather than on individual’s experiences (2000: 118).

Healy points out that Foucault has ‘written extensively on the role of confession in modern systems of surveillance and control’ (2000: 119). Healy (2000) clearly identifies the young women telling their stories to the media and public forums through this kind of confessional technology as a form of domination. Foucault often insisted that:

The agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and who is not supposed to know. And this truth finally takes effect, not in the one who receives it, but in the one from whom it is wrested (1981a: 62, cited in Healy 2000: 119).
It is clear that Healy believes that the use of confessional technology can operate to further dominate marginal groups, especially in the public domain. However, the anti-violence group process prior to going public in the media and forums had also used confessional technology. The “lived experiences” of the young women were used in disciplining the young women in the anti-violence project, as Healy (2000) claims through both productive and repressive power relations. According to Healy,

Far from being innocent of the operations of professional power, lived experience can be used to extend professional power…my co-worker and I would sometimes use our knowledge of the participants’ lived experience, gained over the course of the project to also challenge statements made by them (2000: 131).

Healy indicates that this use of power was often a

… positive use of power in so far as we challenged negative or self-blaming statements…yet, the knowledge of the particular service user can serve as a justification for suppressive forms of power (2000: 131).

According to McNay (1992: 87) and prior to Foucault’s later work on the practices of the self, Foucault’s work posited a ‘confessing subject [that] is both the instrument and effect of domination’ with no way out of ‘this inevitable cycle where resistance is transformed into domination’,

Self-disclosure is thus often a crucial element in those technologies of self which aim to constitute individuals along the lines of a restricted set of images of subjectivity because it is the means through which clients offer themselves up for analysis, classification, prediction and control (Jeffreys 2003: 140).

As Healy (2000) is not using Foucault’s later work on the practices of self, she neither sees nor can offer a way out of this inevitable cycle where confessional technology becomes a power relation that produces or reproduces domination.

In concluding this section on Healy’s attempt to reconstruct critical social work practice using Foucault’s early and middle work several points are worth making. Healy’s engagement with how critical social worker’s conflate power and domination and power and identity is aimed at alerting critical social workers to focus on ‘understanding how power can be used in ways that extend democracy and empowerment’ (2000: 126). Healy claims that critical social workers far from minimising power need to act in the full knowledge of the exercise of
power. Healy does not however escape the problems set loose by the conflation of power and domination, despite the discussion of the coercive effects and productive effects of power in critical social work (2000: 126). This is because Healy is drawing on Foucault’s early and middle work, in which Foucault’s theorising itself does not separate power from domination. In his later work, Foucault does try to separate power and domination by proposing that situations of power could be understood as consisting

... often of asymmetrical, but nonetheless mobile, contestable, relational effects...

subjects of power authorize, carry, elaborate, and extend governing effects, if always within the constraints created by others “free” exercise of power (Orlie 1997: 76).

In his later work, Foucault articulates the difference between domination and power and defines domination as any time that individuals’ possibility for manoeuvering is restricted and severely limited, whereas relations of power promote differences and agonal games of power and truth. In a sense, Foucault’s later work (1984, 1990, 2003) without dispensing entirely with the notion of ubiquitous power opens up spaces in relation to ourselves and others to think and do differently by articulating some practices of undefined freedom.

Healy indicates that critical social workers need to move beyond the categories of “powerless” and “powerful” to really address power relations. According to Orlie, if critical social workers can articulate their own role in current rule, and in governing powers, it becomes possible also to analyse how these governing powers ‘at times, accumulate and solidify into states of domination’ (1997: 77). Governing powers can and do solidify into states of domination, according to Foucault (1984). However to read the relation between human service workers and young women as always one of domination, according to the later Foucault, is not necessarily applicable. Only where ‘a subject is imposed upon as to be without freedom of movement or response’ (Foucault 1984: 2-4, cited in Orlie 1997: 76) is the relation one of domination. Hence the notion and practice of freedom remains a critical problem for critical empowerment social work practice.

Conclusion

In concluding this chapter it appears that both Fook (2002) and Healy (2000) are mainly using Foucault’s early and middle work when they attempt to re-think empowerment practice. Yet in his early and middle work Foucault ‘suggests that it is futile to differentiate between
controlling and non-controlling forms of social work’ (Healy 2000: 71) thus making it impossible to draw a distinction between power and domination. This inability to differentiate “power over” or “power to” or “power with” is a problem for re-theorising empowerment. According to Stewart (2001) the concept of empowerment requires that we be able to distinguish between controlling and non-controlling power relations. The problematic aspect of conceiving of power as “power over” only means that there is a:

... substantial neglect of a direct engagement with both the analytic possibilities and political implications of a distinctive concept of ‘power to’ (2001: 31).

Stewart also claims that Foucault’s work always remains ‘within the framework of power over, that is of domination’ (2001:18). Others, like McNay (1994), Orlie (1997) and Jefferys (2003) concur with the claim that Foucault’s early and middle work on power still retained a ‘fundamentally negative conception of power as imposed and inscribed’ (Orlie 1997: 76). However, they treat Foucault’s later work as offering a clearer distinction between relations of power and relations of domination. Foucault suggests that:

... the problem becomes not one of avoiding or minimizing relationships of power but, rather, one of establishing conditions ‘which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination’ (Foucault 1988: 12, cited in Jeffreys 2003: 148).

Indeed Foucault’s historical studies of criminality, madness and sexuality trace the emergence of networks of power in relation to techniques of control, surveillance, and discipline and the new kinds of knowledge about human behaviour these practices made possible (Finlayson and Valentine 2002: 59). Foucault’s early and middle work focuses on analysing subordination, oppression and domination of the “powerless”. This focus is shared by many critical social workers and by critical social scientists, who according to the feminist Sawicki ‘are united in seeing power as fundamentally linked to domination’ (1991, cited in Healy 2000: 19).

However this early and middle work of Foucault’s is often criticised for formulating the individual as being one of power’s prime effects. According to Simons,

By denying the existence of a human essence of authentic self, Foucault rules out the possibility of an emancipatory politics whose goal it is to liberate the human subject. He contests a whole tradition of Western thought, which considers the inner self to be a realm of freedom, ultimately untouchable by power (1995: 59).

It remains an important task and one to which I turn in the next chapter to establish whether
Foucault’s work overall can assist critical social workers to think about power, politics, identity and freedom when attempting to practice in empowering ways.
Chapter Two

Foucault on power relations, politics and freedom

… to meet the challenge of postmodernism … [social work needs to develop] a more adequate understanding of the challenge itself and to distinguish between two broad approaches to postmodernism and within Foucault’s overall work (Jeffreys 2003: 163).

… poststructuralism values contingency for the promise it whispers: things can and will be different; we must make them so (Cruikshank 2001:5).

The work of Michel Foucault constitutes one of the most admired, emulated and contested bodies of work in the social sciences and humanities of the past half century. As I showed in the previous chapter, Foucault’s work on power has been drawn on by a number of key theorists of critical social work as they seek to explore the interplay of power and empowerment. I argued there that writers like Fook and Healy offer a partial reading of Foucault’s insights on power. Here I am specifically interested in exploring how Foucault analyses power relations and what his work offers to critical social workers when they analyse power relations. Authors like McNay (1994), Simons (1995), Orlie (1997) and Jeffreys (2003) suggest that it is only when Foucault’s later work is taken into account that it becomes possible to think about empowerment with Foucault. The practice of empowerment relies on the possibility of agency, politics and freedom. Indeed Foucault seems to have turned to issues like this in his later work. This does not necessarily mean that Foucault’s early and middle work can be discarded when thinking about power relations, the constitution of identities, and practices of power, or “arts of government”, despite the predominantly repressive understanding of power in this phase of his work. Here I want to explore all of Foucault’s work and to consider what his work offers critical social workers in thinking about what is critical empowerment social work practice.

I begin with Foucault’s early and middle work and his elaborations of power relations, while keeping in mind that, Foucault did not ‘elaborate a theory of power… [because of his view that] theory only exists and is only intelligible when it is set against and among particular cultural practices’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 188). Hence elaborations of power relations are found in Foucault’s specific works like the History of Sexuality (1981), the Birth of the
Clinic (1973) and Discipline and Punish (1979), as well as his lectures relating to governmentality (1981, 2001a). I also turn to Foucault’s later work (1983, 1990) on practices of undefined freedom and conceptions of the political as a “politics of ourselves” (Bernauer and Mahon 1994: 147). My interest is in what Foucault’s thinking offers critical social workers when thinking about empowerment social work practice. Along the way I will indicate any theoretical limitations his work may present.

Power relations

Foucault offers numerous explorations of various forms of power through his historical examination of sexuality, criminality, madness, care of the self and the genealogy of pleasures. I hope to indicate both the limits and enabling aspects of Foucault’s early and middle theorising of power relations, in order to assist critical social workers’ thinking about empowerment practice. According to Fook, the first step in empowerment practice requires critical social workers to analyse and reflect on ‘how existing power relations and structures are supported and created’ (2002: 54). Dreyfus and Rabinow concur,

… if power is not a thing, or the control of a set of institutions, or the hidden rationality to history, then the task for the analyst is to identify how it operates (1982: 185).

Bio-power

Foucault spoke about what he called “bio-power” to identify a new relation between modern social sciences and political ends in his History of Sexuality (1981). Bio-power deals with issues such as social hygiene, rates of fertility and mortality, and birth control. Bio-power represents a form of power relations in which political attention, in a consistent and sustained fashion, is for the first time in history focused on the human species and populations using a range of scientific categories. Foucault (1981) proposes that this knowledge of the population is used for political ends. Foucault states:

At the heart of this economic and political problem of population was sex: it was necessary to analyze the birthrate, the age of marriage, the legitimate and illegitimate births, the precocity and frequency of sexual relations, the ways of making them fertile or
sterile, the effects of unmarried life or of the prohibitions, the impact of contraceptive practices – of those notorious “deadly secrets” … (1981: 25-26).

Foucault identifies the spread of bio-power as the point at which ‘social welfare programs became professionalized’ (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982:141). This suggests a link between particular ways of thinking about people and professional technologies in social work programs because bio-power is a form of power that operates to mark certain individuals as requiring professionalised social work intervention. Bio-power is concerned with and functions to produce “at risk” members of the population and opens their lives to scrutiny, surveillance and increasing efforts of self-governance, in line with the norms of society. From this perspective, Healy’s (2000) example of the young women’s anti-violence project concerns itself with an “at risk” population. This was because these young women were “teenage mothers” who had experienced some type of violence in their lives, and in a sense, became through the project, objects ‘of political and scientific concern’ (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982: 139). Through the project they become knowable in certain ways to human service workers, themselves and through the forums and media exposure, to the public. This project belongs to a long history of governmental interventions addressing “problems” like sex, illegitimate births, unmarried lives and mortality, which form the classic themes of “bio-politics”.

In using even this small aspect of Foucault’s analysis of power relations, critical social workers are alerted to the way choices about “who” to empower are already imbricated in governing powers (Orlie 1997). Fook’s question about “who” social workers should choose to empower, in this instance, is already implicated in broader practices of population control and management. Even though Healy is taking a “critical” social work approach to the anti-violence project with the young women, she does not appear to question the very terms of the project, its focus and selection of participants. Foucault’s account of bio-power adds these questions to an analysis of power relations. This is an example of how Foucault’s early and middle work can challenge the way critical social workers have thought about the process of selecting disadvantaged groups or individuals to empower. It highlights the importance of Healy’s point that the relations between power and identity is vital for critical social workers to explore when analysing power relations. Fook’s questions about “who” to empower and “for what purpose” are worth exploring in relation to Foucault’s elaboration of mechanisms like bio-power, especially if critical social workers want to transform power relations.
Foucault argued that the “individual” had become a subject of bio-political power on the part of the state, insofar as the individual ‘could contribute to the strength of the state’ (1982: 139).

The lives, deaths, activities, work, miseries, and joys of individuals were important to the extent that these everyday concerns became politically useful … the emergence of the modern individual as an object of political and scientific concern and the ramifications of this for social life now become Foucault’s major problematic (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982: 139).

In this respect Foucault provides an account of why states everywhere began to intervene in people’s lives and can account for the emergence of the individual as an effect of power. Foucault’s early projects and middle work involved a critique of “ego as the humanist subject”, in order to analyse the constitution of the subject within a different historical framework (Foucault 1986: 59). Foucault’s earlier explorations were aimed at exploring how the “individual”, through particular practices and mechanisms of power, becomes an object of political and scientific concern. In effect, Foucault asked how did power relations constitute “individuals”. His kind of exploration necessarily “de-centred” the individual, and yet critical social work with its lingering humanist sentiment, tends to have individuals and their actions at the centre of their thinking (Rojek, Peacock & Collins 1988). The effect of Foucault’s early and middle exploration of how power relations constitute the individual obscure individual people’s agency, creating some theoretical problems for critical social workers in thinking about empowerment practice, as empowerment relies on human agency.

As Foucault indicated in a series of lectures bio-power or bio-politics is best approached as a form of state racism. Simons observes for example that Foucault thought that:

When, as the nineteenth century advanced, bio-politics was deployed throughout the population, state racism was born. The life of the species became a political issue, giving rise to projects for the eugenic ordering of society, as well as wars in which whole populations were mobilized and massacred in the name of the preservation of the species or race (Simons 1995:34).

In reflecting back on Solomon’s discussion of black empowerment, in the first chapter of this thesis, in view of Foucault’s analysis of bio-power, Foucault’s work promotes that critical social workers shift their attention, from a psycho-social notion of power, to how practices of bio-power may be supporting or promoting state racism.
Foucault’s early and middle work explores the complexity and ubiquity of power relations in constituting subjects and modern forms of domination. According to Stewart, this is

Foucault’s principle substantive contribution to social analysis, [which] is seen to lie in his delineation of distinctly modern forms of domination, that is those of disciplinary power and bio-power respectively (2001: 18).

I want to turn to Foucault’s discussion of disciplinary power to explore what this aspect of his work can offer critical social workers when thinking about power relations.

**Disciplinary power**

The rise of modern disciplinary power techniques is illustrated in fascinating detail in Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish* (1979). Although the book is about penal history, Foucault argues that disciplinary power

… centres around the production of ‘docile bodies’: the organization, disciplining and subjection of the human body in such a way as to provide a submissive, productive and trained source of labour (McNay 1994: 92).

The aspect of Foucault’s historical account of the changes in practices for dealing with criminality from the middle of the eighteenth century to the mid twentieth century, that is important for my inquiry is his description of the shift to a new “economy” of power. According to Foucault, the kind of sovereign power manifested by the seventeenth or eighteenth century monarchs was considered too excessive, arrogant, arbitrary, ‘sometimes lenient and inconsistent, but sometimes over hasty and severe’ (1977: 80). It was these characteristics of sovereign power that focused the changes on to more efficient practices of power, rather than as is often proposed the desire to be more just, fair or humane in punishment. Foucault claims that:

The true objective of the reform movement, even in its most general formulations, was not so much to establish a new right to punish based on more equitable principles, as to set up a new ‘economy’ of the power to punish, to assure its better distribution, so that it should be neither too concentrated at certain privileged points, nor too divided between opposing authorities; so that it should be distributed in homogenous circuits capable of operating everywhere, in a continuous way, down to the finest grain of the social body (1977: 80).
In this way, Foucault argues that this penal “reform” did not have a single origin. It was neither the enlightened members of the public, nor the philosophers, nor the social groups opposed to the parliament who produced this shift. Rather the changes can be attributed to the overall project of achieving a new distribution of the power to punish, and of a new distribution of its effects, through which many different interests came together (Foucault 1977: 81).

This is an important insight for critical social workers when they think about how change occurs. Cruikshank’s work, *The Will to Empower* (1999) also reflects her experience of finding different interests came together when garbage containers were locked up. Cruikshank could not find one source or origin for this change. Her example makes it clear that seeking a single locus of power can be futile and not how change comes about. Ife (1997) has also warned critical social workers to be aware of the trap of seeking a single locus of power on which to focus change activities.

Foucault concluded that the penal “reforms” were about reducing ‘its economic and political cost by increasing its effectiveness and by multiplying its circuits’ (1977: 89). Central to his analysis was the idea that:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or a piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power (1980: 98).

The main idea is that there is no innocent space outside power (Healy 2000). Critical social workers when exploring power relations need to acknowledge their own involvement in the practices and relations of power and to acknowledge how they are simultaneously undergoing and exercising power (Foucault 1980: 98). It is this kind of thinking about power relations that provides a way forward in thinking beyond conventional categories like the “powerful worker” and the “powerless client”. It also highlights the point that change is not always progressive. In this instance, punishment was not necessarily about becoming more humane. According to Foucault the shift meant punishment became more efficient and more invasive into everyday life.
In the late eighteenth century Foucault identifies the … beginning of a period in which the body was endowed by various experts with a range of properties indicating types of crime, sexual aberrations and states of grace, health and mind (Hewitt 1992: 156).

Foucault shows how these various experts engaged in the “means of correct training”, using mechanisms like observation and designing spatial arrangements in schools, barracks, workshops to allow continual surveillance and measurement of bodies and their capacities against a standard measure or norm. According to Foucault, disciplinary power operates around the norm. Disciplinary power operates through the technique of examination or assessment, where

All behaviour falls in the field between good and bad marks, good and bad points quantifiable on an arithmetical economy, allows a continuous calculation of plus and minus points, the disciplinary apparatuses hierarchized the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ subjects in relation to one another (1977: 181).

This disciplinary power operates at all levels, whether at the entire population, a group or an individual, by comparing each unit’s characteristics against a norm. This micro-economy of differentiation operates to make available knowledge and worth of an individual’s ‘nature, their potentialities, their level or their value’ (Foucault 1977: 181).

‘[D]iscipline judges individuals “in truth”’ (Foucault 1977: 181). The process of assessment in critical social work, the process of selecting individuals into various programs on the basis of their identity, or belonging to an oppressed group, in a sense makes judgements about the individual’s ‘nature, their potentialities and their… value’ (Foucault 1977: 181). This raises a question that critical social workers need to address when thinking about empowerment practice: what power relations and practices of power, techniques and mechanisms are producing the “truth(s)” that makes some groups or individuals “fitting subjects” for empowerment?

Foucault discusses how these power relations produce “who” people are in The Subject and Power (1982). Foucault suggests though that struggles for liberation are not exactly for or against the “individual,” but rather are struggles against the …“government of individualization”…all these present struggles revolve around the question Who are we?… This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life
which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects (1982: 212).

Healy’s concerns with how the young women were treated for example in radio interviews, identifies this disciplinary power, and its effects on the young women. The emphasis was focused on “who” they were. The young women were allowed to speak about their personal experiences of violence, but denied other possible speaking positions, because their “lived experience” simply positioned them as “victims of violence”. The media policy, which the project participants later developed, focused on presenting their findings about experiences of violence not as particular and personal experiences, but as the “results” of their group’s analysis. This media policy was to open up other speaking positions for the young women, for example as “experts” on the phenomenon of domestic violence. However, this positioning also requires that the young women related to themselves and the other participants in the project, on some level as objects of scientific and political concern (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982: 139). Healy’s dissatisfaction with this situation relates to how the young women were made into “objects of study” and how through this operation of power certain “truths” were imposed on these young women.

Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary power and bio-power indicates to critical social workers both their own involvement in these forms of power relations, and the importance of identifying the normative aspect of critical social work. Foucault declares that disciplinary power is a

\[ \text{... power whose task it is to take charge of life needs continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms...Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize...it effects distributions around the norm (Foucault 1981:144).} \]

According to Foucault,

\[ \text{The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social worker’-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it, his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements (Foucault 1977: 304).} \]
The challenge posed to critical social work is firstly to understand how, where and when disciplinary power relations and techniques are used, and then to think about how these practices operate to both enable and constrain. Before addressing this challenge further, I want to explore another of Foucault’s identified power relations, the mechanism of pastoral power.

**Pastoral power**

Foucault argues that pastoral power is an old power technique which originated in the very earliest Christian institutions. Christian pastoral power was a very special form of power. Its ultimate aim was ‘to assure individual salvation in the next world’ (Foucault 1982: 214). It was a power that did not merely command, but ‘it must also be prepared to sacrifice itself for the life and salvation of the flock’ (Foucault 1982: 214). According to Foucault,

> It is a form of power which does not look after just the whole community, but each individual in particular, during his entire life. Finally, this form of power cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it (1982: 214).

Foucault claims that this pastoral power while initially linked to religious institutions ‘suddenly spread out into the whole social body’ (1982: 215). ‘Its individualizing tactic characterised a series of powers: those of the family, medicine, psychiatry, education and employers’ (Foucault 1982: 215).

This new form of modern pastoral power emphasised not salvation in the next world, but health and ‘well-being (that is, sufficient wealth, standard of living), security, protection against accidents’ in this world (Foucault 1982: 215). Over time, official pastoral power increased and state apparatuses and public institutions, like hospitals and “private” institutions, like the family, all exerted pastoral power. Pastoral power, according to Foucault, focused on the

> … development of knowledge of man around two poles: one, globalizing and quantitative, concerning the population; the other, analytical, concerning the individual (1982: 215).

Pastoral power is a significant technique in Foucault’s description of the recent ‘tricky
combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques, and of totalization procedures’ (1982: 213).

Foucault treated the modern operation of powers as having a tendency ‘to be depersonalised, diffused, relational and anonymous - totalizing more and more dimensions of social life’ (1982: 193). That is ‘[m]odern power is ‘disciplinary’ and ‘confessional’; its goal is normalization and the production of docile and useful bodies’ (Haber 1994: 81). Foucault appears to treat these power relations as mainly repressive and oppressive, including the productive aspects of power, as he highlighted how the self was an effect of disciplinary and normalizing power regimes (Haber 1994:77). The earlier comments by both Fook (2002) and Healy (2000) suggesting that productive power is positive and empowering are not found in Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary, bio-power or pastoral power. In Stewart’s (2001) terms, Foucault does not make a distinction between “power over” and “power to” or “power with”, in his middle and early work. All power relations are relations of “power over”, even those power relations that produce effects that may be welcomed by some people in some circumstances. It is only later that Foucault acknowledges how power relations may both enable and constrain.

Ian Hunter (1996) highlighted one important aspect of pastoral power in his analysis of the “assembly of the school” showing how pastoral power is a method of subjectification that forms the self-reflective and self-regulating student. Spreading the spiritual practice of the Christian church to the lay people in the parish, meant that through techniques like self-examination and self-reflection,

...individuals become ethically self-concerned and seek to compose themselves as the “subjects” of their own conduct (Hunter 1996: 158).

Foucault made a similar point earlier:

The political, ethical, social philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from state institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries (Foucault 1982: 216).
Hunter’s analysis of the self-reflective and self-regulating student also relates to confessional technology. Techniques of confessional technologies are frequently used in critical social work and clearly relate to Foucault’s elaboration of pastoral power, as the kind of power that, ‘cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds’ (Foucault 1982: 214). Foucault argues that, pastoral power ‘implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it’ (1982: 214). This means that when critical social workers analyse power relations, they need to inquire into the relations between particular norms and the kind of relationships to the self encouraged by critical social workers. For instance the “critical” analysis the young women in the anti-violence project were encouraged to undertake, established a certain kind of relations to their selves which, as Healy (2000) indicated, promoted that the young women felt like they were failures.

Given Foucault’s concern with confessional technology and its relation to domination, it is interesting to note how critical social workers currently propose to deal with his challenge to these forms of practice. For instance, according to Healy,

…poststructuralism encourages the retention of critical practice strategies such as consciousness raising, whilst opening these strategies for critique (2000: 138).

Yet opening the notion of “lived experience” and the strategies of consciousness-raising to critique does not necessarily go as far as Orlie (1997) suggests we need to go. Orlie proposes that

… the practice of freedom involves contesting the necessities of those techniques and the governing discourse that elaborate and extend them (1997: 77).

Contesting the necessity of consciousness-raising, confessional technologies and the governing discourses that extend and elaborate them, also challenges the very notion of the “confessing subject” and its relation to itself, to others and to Truth(s). This is what Foucault claimed he was attempting to understand namely the axis between power, ethics and truth(s) (Simons 1995). This means that when thinking about power relations one of the tasks is to analyse the way the fitting subject of empowerment is constituted through self-reflection.

One way to approach this task, according to Rajchman, is to analyse the costs of self-constitutions:

One task for “critical thought” is thus to expose [the costs of our self-constitution], to analyze what we did not realize we had to say and do to ourselves in order to be who we
are…The experience of critical thought would start in the experience of such costs. Thus before asking, or at least when asking, what we must do to behave rationally, this kind of thinking would ask: what are “the forms of rationality” that secure our identity and delimit our possibilities? It would ask what is “intolerable” about such forms of reason? (1983, cited in Sawicki 1994: 294).

It is to these “forms of rationality” that I turn next, by way of exploring Foucault’s notion of “governmentality” and his account of neo-liberalism as a political rationality.

Governmentality

Foucault’s accounts of disciplinary, bio-power and pastoral power are linked to governmentality as they also target ‘the individual as means with which to maintain social control’ (McNay 1992: 68). According to McNay, ‘Foucault attaches his notion of practices of the self to a concept of governmentality’ (1992: 67). Edwards (1999: 15) adds that, ‘it is pastoralisation which defines the art of governmentality, it is pastoralisation which renders the individual monitor of his/her own life’. As Burchell puts it:

Foucault saw it as a characteristic (and troubling) property of the development of the practice of government in Western societies to tend towards a form of political sovereignty which would be a government of all and of each, and whose concerns would be at once to “totalise” and to “individualise” (1991: 3).

The notion of “governmentality” is well worth exploring. However, we need to keep in mind that Foucault was still analysing power as domination, when he argued that modern power relations operated to simultaneously totalise and individualise all and each of us.

According to Lemke (2001), Foucault defined and explored a fresh domain of research into what he called “governmental rationality”, or, in his own neologism, “governmentality”, between 1970 and 1984. Foucault presented this work in both thirteen annual courses of lectures at the College de France in Paris and in lectures and seminars on the question of government, delivered on his frequent visits to the United States, particularly at Berkeley (Gordon 1991: 1). Foucault describes his approach to politics as asking questions of it that ‘are not determined by a pre-established political outlook and do not tend toward the realization of some definite political project’ (1986: 375). Foucault states that he approached politics instead
CHAPTER TWO – FOUCALUT ON POWER RELATIONS, POLITICS AND FREEDOM

… from behind and cut across societies on the diagonal, problems that are at once constituents of our history and constituted by that history: for example, the problem of the relation between sanity and insanity; the question of illness, crime, or sexuality. And it has been necessary to try to raise them both as present-day questions and as historical ones, as moral, epistemological, and political problems (1986: 376).

Foucault indicated that ‘by asking this sort of ethico-epistemologico-political question one is not taking up a position on a chessboard’ (1986: 376). This is quite a different stance to what critical social work promotes when its advocates adopt a political position by for example positioning themselves “alongside the oppressed” and “against the State”. Because Foucault takes an approach to politics of questioning politics rather than taking a prior and particular political stance, he is often criticised for not outlining a political program to make the world a better place (McNay 1992; Jeffreys 2003).

Foucault uses the concept of governmentality to explain how the state is not a … unified apparatus of domination, but is made up of a network of institutions and procedures which employ complex techniques of power to order social relations (McNay 1992: 68).

Foucault understood the term “government” as much broader than referring to the State. He called on an older meaning of “government” as the “conduct of conduct” entailing that the term catches everything from “governing the self” to “governing others” (Lemke 2001: 191).

According to Foucault,

“Government” did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection, but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others (1982: 221).

Foucault was ‘interested in government as an activity or practice’ (Gordon 1991: 3). The “arts of government” was understood as ‘knowing what that activity consisted in, and how it might be carried out’ (Gordon 1991: 3). Gordon suggests that,

A rationality of government will thus mean a way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government (who can govern, what governing is; what or who is
governed), capable of making some form of that activity thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it was practised (1991: 3).

Foucault applied this notion of governmentality or the “arts of government” in his work on liberal and neo-liberal forms of government. Foucault’s explorations indicate the kind of processes critical social workers could undertake with others to examine power relations, political rationalities and practices of power. For instance, Dean’s work on the “constitution of poverty” (1999b) is an excellent example of how governmentality thinking can be used to address the ways an idea like “poverty” has been thought about and acted on. Dean focuses specifically on the constitution of poverty in the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century in England. This historically specific exploration illustrates the kinds of practices of government that make certain interventions thinkable and practicable, as well as constituting certain identities and positing various characteristics to be amended in the relation to the constituted norm. Dean linked his research on the constitution of poverty up to the 1830’s to a “genealogy” of liberal governance.

Neoliberal forms of government

Foucault in his 1979 lectures focused on the study of liberal and neo-liberal forms of government, ‘concentrating in particular on two forms of neo-liberalism: German post war liberalism and the liberalism of the Chicago School’ (Lemke 2001: 192). According to Lemke, Foucault’s concept of governmentality is useful for analysing neo-liberal forms of government.

The neo-liberal forms of government feature not only direct intervention by means of empowered and specialized state apparatuses, but also characteristically develop indirect techniques for leading and controlling people without at the same time being responsible for them (Lemke 2001: 201).

This neo-liberal strategy leads to all sorts of ‘areas of social responsibility becoming a matter of personal provision’ (Lemke 2001: 201). The development of the welfare state in Australia was based on a notion of collective responsibility for social security against unemployment, illness, old age, and childhood dependence (Jamrozik 2005). Currently, many critical social workers and social policy analysts state that the dominant political rationality in Australia is ‘economic rationalism, also known as neo-conservatism, [or] the new right’ (Ife 1997: ix). For
instance, Healy announces that the language of managerialism has achieved ascendency and that the ‘McWelfare’ state has arrived!’ (2000: 1-2). Fook highlights the processes of globalisation, a type of “capitalist imperialism” imposed on the developing world and the rise of an “enterprise culture” that is being promoted under the mantra, ‘Excellence, efficiency and effectiveness’ (2002: 21). These economic rationalist notions are understood as “dismantling” the welfare state and reducing it to a minimalist welfare state or a post-welfare state (Healy 2000, Jamrozik 2005). This has caused some alarm, as Fraser states, ‘[a]t a time when an aggressively expanding capitalism is radically exacerbating economic inequality’ (2000: 2).

Foucault adopts a different view arguing that the modern State has integrated pastoral power by reorganising it,

… at a particular juncture in the sixteenth century, out of which arose a new political rationality, a new kind of relationship between the social entity and the individual (Simons 1995: 40).

Edwards suggests that in consequence

… the economy is the reason par excellence for the acquisition of knowledge of the populace, and thus the medium par excellence of pastoralisation. The onus rests on the economic individual through duty: to be educated, work, stay healthy, and take out relevant insurance in order to perpetuate well-being, and thus utility as an economic actor (Edwards 1999: 9).

Foucault is focused on the way that,

… the economy allows the political, i.e., the art of government, to permeate throughout the social world, disciplining the lives of every individual. Through the creation of an apparent need for each individual to fulfil moral and social duties, the economy becomes the means by which governmentality is exercised (Edwards 1999: 11).

According to Lemke it is through,

… his history of governmentality [that] Foucault endeavours to show how the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other’s emergence (2001: 191).

According to Lemke, ‘the concept of governmentality demonstrates Foucault’s working hypothesis on the reciprocal constitution of power techniques and forms of knowledge’ (2001: 191).
191). The way a problem of government is represented defines a discursive field in which exercising power is “rationalized”. The way that concepts are delineated or arguments and justifications presented, enables a problem to be addressed and ‘offers certain strategies for solving/handling the problem’ (Lemke 2001: 191). In this way it structures specific forms of intervention. A political rationality is not neutral or purely representative of reality, rather it:

… itself constitutes the intellectual processing of reality which political technologies can tackle. This is understood to include agencies, procedures, institutions, legal forms, etc., that are intended to enable us to govern the objects and subjects of a political rationality (Lemke 2001: 191).

For instance, according to Jeffreys, Foucault

…‘exposes’ both humanism and liberalism as instruments of a ‘governmental rationality’, for while liberalism aims to free people from forms of control by the state, it is also concerned to ensure that people’s public and private behaviours will be conducted according to appropriate standards (2003: 96).

It is Foucault’s analysis of “governmental rationality”, which he claims has guided his approach ‘to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subject’ (Foucault 1982: 208).

Foucault links the “arts of government” to various shifts in political rationalities and the role of economism and poverty. Foucault’s historical analysis of pastoral power and economism attributes a key role to poverty. According to Procacci, for example poverty is extremely important in governmentality, because through it

… a new rationality imposed itself…one which tied the existence of poverty to the destiny of society itself…pauperism became perceived as unnatural as well as anti-social (1991: 145, cited in Edwards 1999: 8).

Given critical social workers’ attempt to eliminate and alleviate poverty, the relationship between the “arts of government”, particular governmental rationalities and the constitution of the subject are thus key aspects when thinking about poverty and power relations with Foucault. I will explore this in some depth in later chapters of this study.

Neo-liberalism, according to Rose (1999), is a mode of governing which promotes a form of “governing” aimed at governing “at a distance” without directly taking responsibility for people. Neo-liberalism as a political rationality requires that individuals relate to themselves
and their own conduct in specific ways. Lemke adds that ‘[n]eo-liberalism encourages individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form’ (Lemke 2001: 202). Previously extra-economic domains are now rendered “economic” and are colonized by criteria of economic efficiency enabling a closer link to be forged between economic prosperity and personal well-being (Miller and Rose 1990).

An example of how critical social workers could use Foucault’s notion of governmentality to think about specific power relations and techniques is to explore the new “self-esteem” movement in California. Recall that in 1976 Solomon suggested that from a psycho-social perspective ‘feelings of powerlessness relate to lack of self-esteem’ and that self-esteem ‘is dependent upon external supports and reinforcements…the judgements of others’ (1971: 15). In short Solomon considered that self-esteem problems by black communities required dealing with state racism. Whereas, currently, the “self-esteem” movement… promises to solve social problems by heralding a revolution - not against capitalism, racism, the patriarchy, etc., but against the (wrong) way of governing ourselves (Lemke 2001: 202).

The concept of self-esteem has shifted from being dependent on external support and on struggles against state racism, to focusing on the way people relate to their inner selves and to how they govern themselves. These shifts in how “self-esteem” was and is understood can be explored partly through Foucault’s idea of governmentality. According to Cruikshank, … ‘self-esteem’ opens people to rule themselves in line with the good of society. This relationship of the self to the self, according to Foucault, is a political relationship (Cruikshank 1996: 248).

This governmental relation of oneself to oneself is dependent on voluntarily applied technologies of selfhood, rather than coercion, force or social control engineered from above, according to Cruikshank (1996: 248). As Pease (2002: 141) argues with Cruikshank ‘that we make our selves governable by taking up the goal of self-esteem’. However, as Cruikshank points out, self–esteem advocates ‘do not recognize the extent to which personal life is the product of power relations’. Gloria Steinem, according to Cruikshank fails to:

… realize the extent to which personal life is governed and is itself a terrain of government. The “inner voice” that she teaches us to listen to is the voice of pure and unmediated self-knowledge. She assumes that women have a natural subjectivity that is
hindered or repressed by power, rather than shaped and constituted by power. Steinem
fails to grasp the difficulty of distinguishing subjectivity from subjection (1996: 248).

According to Stewart the difficulty in distinguishing “subjectivity” from “subjection” is
impossible if we rely on Foucault’s early and middle work. Stewart argues that, ‘Foucault
seeks to establish a direct unequivocal relation between subjectification and subjection’
(Dews 1984: 87, cited in Stewart 2001: 19). Stewart insists that Foucault treats these
processes as “domination” pure and simple.

McNay (1994) points to the difficulty of teasing out the relation between “subjectivity” and
“subjection”. On the one hand, governmental strategies seek to augment the happiness of
citizens in terms of the conditions and quality of life. On the other hand, the achievement of
such ends results in an intensification of regulatory controls over citizens: ‘to develop those
elements constitutive of individual’s lives in such a way that their development also fosters
that of the strength of state’ (McNay 1994: 121). Foucault catches this problem by posing the
question, how can people be empowered without at the same time having power relations
intensify through the process of empowerment? (Simon 1995). To some extent Healy’s
(2000) analysis of the young women’s anti-violence project tries to untangle the effects of the
intensification of power relations over the young women from the potential liberatory
intentions of the project with the young women. Even so when clients take up a goal like
self-esteem as Pease argues this ‘does not mean that there is no exercise of power. Rather,
clients may be exercising power upon themselves’ in consenting to participate in social work
programmes (2002: 141). As Fook (2002) put it, people go along with processes that are
simultaneously empowering and disempowering.

It may be important that critical social workers deal with this problem by distinguishing
between subjection and subjectivity, by studying ‘the way a human being turns him–or herself
into a subject’, as Foucault treats power as a “subjectivising” force (McNay 1994: 122). There
are some recent social work examples of studies on how people turn themselves into subjects
in interaction with social workers. For instance Wearing’s (1998) discussion of “making
clients’ identities” provides examples of how subjection and subjectivity processes operate
when people present to social welfare agencies. Several of Taylor and White’s (2001)
explorations of clients’ self-representation to social workers for assessment, also explore the
interaction of subjection and subjectivity. One recent study of poverty in Australia, by Peel
(2003) again, highlights the relations between subjection and subjectivity, when people
residing in low-income areas or estates are made to represent their woes and troubles in particular ways by researchers, human service workers and the media (2003). These examples present a predominantly negative interpretation of

… the constitution of subjectivity as a process of subjection either to an external party or in the form of an internalization of social norms [which] suggests a form of power which makes individuals subject to someone else by control and tied to one’s own identity by self-subjugation (McNay 1994: 123).

To some extent Foucault imputes this subjectivising power to the State when he claims that, … because power relations have come more and more under state control… one could say that power relations have been progressively governmentalized, that is to say, elaborated, rationalized and centralized in the form of, or under the auspices of, state institutions (Foucault 1982: 224).

In his early and middle work, Foucault does appear to present the relation between “subjectification” and “subjection” as direct and unmediated. However, later Foucault does through his re-thinking of “autonomy” introduce a possible space of freedom between “subjectification” and “subjection”, by encouraging people to think about and challenge how they are constituted by political rationalities and how they are relating to themselves.

Subjectivity

Foucault dislocates and challenges the dominant liberal account of subjectivity. Liberal subjectivity treats ‘the subject as a self-contained, unencumbered, rational and a priori entity who performs a voluntary act of political contract’ (Williams 2002: 23). However Foucault treats the subject as an actor who cannot be autonomous and who cannot stay outside or untouched by power relations. As such

Foucault argues that Man, the subject or the author cannot be considered the foundation, origin or condition of possibility of discourse. Rather, the subject…can be defined as an element within a discursive field (Simons 1995: 25).

Stewart suggests (2001) that Foucault considers the subject as solely an effect of power. Recall that Fook earlier proposed that ‘at the same time that it [state power] subjugates, it also provides a creative structure’ (2002: 52), and Foucault also suggests that, the
… subject is indebted to the limits, however oppressive, imposed on him or her for the possibility of being anyone at all, having an identity and capacities to act (Simons 1995: 4).

Fook concluded that:

… individuals willingly participate in practices and structures which simultaneously empower and disempower. Power is both a good and bad thing (2000: 52).

Foucault’s understanding of power practices and relationships that constitute subjects and which tie people to truths about themselves tends to treat this as an oppressive relationship in his early and middle work. For this reason, Foucault concludes that we need to work on our limits, the limits of ourselves, especially

… in so far as our subjectivities are tied to truths of science. The work of freedom might then involve reconceiving ourselves in relation to another form of truth (Simons 1995: 5).

For Foucault, Fook’s so called “appropriate categorizations” are significant sites for political struggle. Foucault calls on us to “refuse who we are”, ‘mean[ing] that we should refuse to remain tied to the identities to which we are subjected’ (Simons 1995: 2). Foucault suggests that we struggle against the ways that we are individualised and constituted by the practices of power even as these produce “who we are”. This struggle however is not about attacking an ‘institution of power, or group, or elite, or class, but rather [about attacking] a technique, a form of power’ (Foucault 1983: 212).

Butler seems to undo something of the force of the critiques of Foucault’s early and middle work’s conflation of subjugation and subjectivity by suggesting that it is:

… wrong to conclude that the view that the subject is discursively constituted precludes the possibility of agency…Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency… The subject is not a thing, a substantive entity, but rather a process of signification within an open system of discursive possibilities (1990, cited in Sawicki 1994: 299).

Sawicki points out that,

… it is the foundationalist subject (the autonomous individual) that is challenged by post-structuralist arguments against the humanist subject, not the practices of assuming subject positions and representing oneself… the latter of which are inevitable (1994: 301).
Foucault challenges any grounding of politics in a foundational subject. He wants to focus on the ‘production of certain forms of subjectivity in terms of their costs’ (Sawicki 1994: 301). The cost of a “dependent” subjectivity for welfare recipients, according to Fook (2002: 78), may be unreasonably high. To be identified as “welfare dependent” in Australia’s “culture of poverty” discourse, for instance means to be understood as “trapped” in a pervasive and self-perpetuating poverty. It means being treated as a member of the “underclass” and being construed as an object of moral reform (Leonard 1997: 51, cited in Fook 2002: 78). When the costs of a political identity are too high and unreasonable, what can be done to gain freedom and refuse “who” we are made to be?

McNay argues that it is exactly ‘through techniques of self-government that individuals can resist this ‘government of individualisation’ (1992: 68). In his later work, Orlie suggested that Foucault set out to ‘theorize the conditions and goals of this resistance’ and encourages us to create new subjectivities and practices of freedom’ (1997: 75). Even so Foucault reminds us how we are a both “made” and “make” ourselves under conditions not of our making and at times outside of our agency. This middle path, as suggested by Simons acknowledges that, ‘power is both constraint and freedom, there being no powers that are unconditioned, nor a realm of free capacities’ (1995: 4).

Foucault treats power as the ‘condition for the possibility of individual subjectivity’ (Allen 2002: 135). Individuals are subjected in a dual sense:

…they are subjected to the complex, multiple, shifting relations of power in their social field and at the same time are enabled to take up the position of a subject in and through those relations’ (Allen 2002: 135, italics in original).

It is worthwhile here to explore how through techniques of self-government individuals can resist this “government of individualization” (McNay 1992: 68). Self-government is regarded as implying both the ways that individuals police themselves and the ways in which individuals ensure their freedom. Foucault argues that individuals through being a thinking subject can refuse these imposed subjectivities through analysing the costs of these subjectivities and by fashioning new forms of subjectivity, and through these processes the subject attains an unstable and undefined freedom.
Practices of undefined freedom

Foucault’s (1982) essay on the subject and power is read by McNay (1994) as reformulating power in terms of the concepts of freedom and autonomy, which is tantamount to a retrospective critique of the notion of disciplinary power in which the concepts had only figured in the form of covert normative assumptions (1994: 127).

Others, like Bernauer and Mahon do not read Foucault’s later work as a retraction of or self-critique of his previous work, rather they claim that ‘Foucault’s passion for freedom in his last works, then, is not novel, [but] it does speak with a new accent’ (1994: 143). Jeffreys reads Foucault’s overall work as furthering ‘the cause of human liberation, not by transforming the world, but by transforming ourselves’ (2003: 103).

According to Foucault, ‘no political issue is more significant than how the person is defined and how one’s relationship to one’s self is organized’ (Bernauer and Mahon 1994: 146). The relation to one’s self is the most important ethical and political issue in Foucault’s later work. Foucault, especially in Care of the Self (1990) explored how the early Greeks related to themselves through various practices, and provides an example of how the relation to oneself and others could be based on different aspects of oneself or one’s behaviour (Foucault 1990, Dean 1995, 1999a). Instead of focusing on a person’s “efficiency”, as we are encouraged to do in neo-liberal practices of government, our ethical practices might better be focused on that person’s wisdom or care for others. The relationship with particular rules of comportment could also be deciphered and altered (the mode of subjection) (Foucault 1990, Dean 1995, 1999a). For instance, rather than the mode of subjection being to reveal the truth of one’s self, it may be to show respect for interconnections with others. Foucault (1990) illustrates the possibilities of altering these relations by revealing past practices which formulated different relations to oneself. He posits that the type of being one is attempting to become through a variety of ethical practices is both historically contingent and open to change (Davidson 1994: 115). To be pious is now no longer generally the type of being most people aspire to become. In this way, the ‘conception of the political struggle as a “politics of ourselves” becomes central to Foucault’s last work’, according to Bernauer and Mahon (1994: 147). His new problematic becomes ‘How should one develop a form of subjectivity that could be the source of effective resistance to a widespread type of power?’ (Bernauer and Mahon 1994: 147).
Foucault turned as so many others have done to the Greeks before Christianity to explore ethics as a relation of the self to the self. He claimed to find in the ‘ancient ethics of existence…a degree of autonomy exercised by the individual in relation to the more general social and moral codes’ (McNay 1992: 85). This of course is a classic mis-reading as Vlastos and others point out the whole idea of self was of a self tied up and defined teleologically as part of a larger god centred/nature constrained whole. Foucault understands that it is Christian ethics that ‘require the subordination of the individual’s moral conduct to an externally contrived set of principles’ (McNay 1992: 85). Conformity, the call to obedience, accordingly, ‘obliterates the autonomy of the individual’ (McNay 1992: 85). Foucault finds the modern secular ethics even more insidious, because:

Modern power operates not by ignoring individuals, but by claiming to have arrived at the ‘truth’ of the individual and, thereby, limiting individuality to a ‘set of very specific patterns’ (Foucault 1982: 214, cited in McNay 1992: 86).

According to Foucault (1990) ancient Greek ethics were free of these normalizing pressures. Even though,

… they operate around certain central moral imperatives, the privileged moment within these ethics is what Foucault calls a ‘certain practice of liberty’, whereby the ancient Greek is free to establish a relation with himself, idiosyncratically to stylize his existence in order to maximise the pleasure, beauty and power obtainable from life (McNay 1992: 86).

It is this capacity for an “autonomous aesthetic of the self”, which Foucault offers as a way to resist the normalizing tendencies of modern society. The drive to “know thyself”, with its relentless focus on the endless examination of one’s inner life, Foucault regards as a dominant characteristic of modern power relations. Indeed, Foucault warns of falling prey to theoretical models and highlights the importance of problematising ‘the grounds of our more habitual or taken-for-granted beliefs’ (Jeffreys 2003; Taylor & White 2001). Disrupting the taken-for-granted notion of “know thyself” is a key disruption for critical social workers and the practices of confessional technology and the assumptions about the relation between inner self, truth, freedom and power. Yet this disruption may be transformative.

To Foucault, then, domination can be opposed through the work of thought, when what is ‘given’ becomes translated into a ‘question’: that is, when one questions or problematizes
stable mechanisms of power (dominant, accepted ways of thinking and acting), a space for freedom is opened up (Jeffreys 2003: 150).

Because Foucault posits freedom as the condition of power, ‘there already exists a possibility for resistance’ (Kulynych 1997: 325). Yet many of Foucault’s critics find this concept of resistance both too indeterminate and underdeveloped (Fraser 1992). For instance, Fraser is frequently quoted, in regard to the lack of normative basis of Foucault’s call for resistance, as asking:

… Why is struggle preferable to submission? Why ought domination to be resisted? Only with the introduction of normative notions of some kind could Foucault begin to answer such questions. Only with the introduction of normative notions could he begin to tell us what is wrong with the modern power/knowledge regime and why we ought to oppose it (Fraser 1992: 29).

Many feminists criticize Foucault’s work alleging he cannot tell us what is wrong with modern power regimes and so ‘possesses only limited political relevance’ (Taylor 2003: 260). Resistance without certain norms appears untenable for formulating an oppositional politics (Fraser 1992; McNay 1992). However, some feminists have defended Foucault by arguing that his critical interrogation of norms is not merely negative or destructive, but rather

… identify conditions under which norms become normalizing, clarify the oppressive nature of normalization, create opportunities for developing non-normalizing and therefore emancipatory modes of existence (Taylor 2003: 260).

For ‘Foucault the promise of politics may be located in transgressive ‘work’ on both individual and collective limits in ways that maximize opportunities for practicing freedom’ (Taylor 2003: 268). This means that power relations are kept dynamic ‘(a condition for the possibility of freedom) and thereby combats the move towards states of domination (static power relations; possibilities for freedom are minimal or absent)’ (Taylor 2003: 269).

Rather than understanding Foucault as apolitical, Taylor (2003) and Jeffreys (2003) consider that Foucault’s position on the politics of ourselves and his suggestions for practices of undefined freedom is a reasonable position to take in the light of his overall work. Foucault for example drew on his understanding of historical events, when he declared that ‘it is impossible to guarantee emancipatory change’ (Taylor 2003: 273). This perspective requires people ‘to approach political activity from the rather unlikely perspective that injustices and oppression are not going to be permanently eradicated’ (Taylor 2003: 273). Foucault’s
approach to politics requires ‘people to work, and work hard, not only on society but also on themselves without guidance and with no guarantee of success’ (Taylor 2003: 273). As such, practices of liberty cannot be determined in advance but can only be arrived at within a specific context understood through analysis of power mechanisms and techniques that come from everywhere (Foucault 1989: 395).

‘Foucault develops the idea of the ‘specific intellectual’ as part of a rethinking of the theory/practice relationship, and in opposition to what he describes as the ‘universal intellectual’ (Jeffreys 2003: 125). Unlike the “universal intellectual” ‘who claims to speak from a pure, objective position of truth/knowledge to the world of power relations’, the “specific intellectual” deals with ‘real, material, everyday struggles’ (Foucault 1980: 126, cited in Jeffreys 2003: 126). This gives the “specific intellectuals” a

… view from somewhere …from their class position, the particular conditions of their life/work and the specificity of the politics of truth within contemporary society (Foucault 1990: 132, cited in Jeffreys 2003: 126).

And this means the task of the “specific intellectual” is to practice criticism.

Foucault says that this practice of criticism is informed by a ‘philosophical ethos consisting in a critique of what we are saying, thinking and doing through a historical ontology of ourselves’ (1978: 5). This means that criticism:

… is no longer going to be practiced in search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying… And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think (Foucault 1978: 6).

According to Jeffreys,

Our judgments then, regarding our ways of being and thinking, and our relations with others, should be grounded in our concrete experiences rather than being determined by the ‘abstract generalities’ of science or by the theorizing of the ‘Universal intellectual’ (2003: 127).
This ethos is not to be an “empty dream of freedom”. Rather Foucault treats this as an ‘historico-critical attitude [that] must also be an experimental one’ (1978: 6).

I mean that this work done at the limits of ourselves must, on the one hand, open up a realm of historical inquiry and, on the other, put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take (Foucault 1978: 6).

There are three key questions Foucault thinks we need to answer. They address the ‘the axis of knowledge, the axis of power, the axis of ethics’ (Foucault 1978: 7):

How are we constituted as subject of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions? (Foucault 1978: 7).

Thus Foucault suggest that the critical ontology of ourselves requires an attitude and ethos … in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them (1978: 7).

This means that critical social workers might need to think in terms of a new relation between power and freedom around an ethos or attitude of critical inquiry and the experimental transgression of our limits. According to McNay,

Foucault seeks to redefine the concept of autonomy so as to reconcile the critical interrogation of the socio-cultural and emotional determinants of an individual’s situation with a capacity for critical independence or self-governance (1992: 104).

To Foucault this means not submitting to the “government of individualization”, by constantly questioning what is considered natural in one’s own identity. Importantly, Foucault suggests that the injunction to “know thyself” tends to require a relation to one self as an object, whereas he is calling on us to relate to our selves as free.

The general idea is to expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a natural necessity (Rose 1999). The next step given that we are not given to ourselves, according to Foucault is that we need to create our selves as works of art and reinvent ourselves in an on-going way. However one of the difficulties McNay identifies with this call to invent ourselves anew is that Foucault does not explain how ‘subjects [can] have another perspective on the same historical and social processes? (1992: 153). Haber asks, ‘how can, or why should,
subjects which are the effects of power also subvert it? (1994: 98). Not only does Haber find it difficult to identify the necessity of resistance for marginalised groups in Foucault’s work, she finds it ‘even more problematic from the standpoint of oppositional politics [to find a] strategy for recovering an empowered, oppositional self’ (Haber 1994: 104). Jeffreys (2003) responds by suggesting that once Foucault redefines “autonomy” to permit some independence of “thought”, “thought” can then create the space between normativity and normalization, where at least partial reinvention of subjectivity may be possible.

The creation of new subjectivities is considered important in the “undefined work of freedom”, according to Foucault. This work is undefined because Foucault quite rightly has ‘no desire to legislate for others’ (McNay 1992: 146). This work is undefined because it also needs to take place through the practice of criticism within specific contexts, through an excavation of the ontology of our selves and our practices. Finally this work is undefined because Foucault seeks to avoid any normative claims or to side step them. McNay indicates that Foucault makes a tendentious link between normativity and normalization, between totality and totalising (1992: 157). This assumes that all norms are normalizing in ways that always dominate. Foucault’s suggestion that we work at the limits of our “selves” means exploring norms to identify how they function both as enabling and constraining of freedom.

Care of the self

‘To take care of the self one has to take care of one’s activities’, according to Foucault (1990). It concerns some authors that Foucault appeared to encourage a turn towards an “inner self” and to potentially reinforce the “government of individualization”, which he ostensibly was encouraging people to refuse and subvert (Haber 1994; McNay 1992). McNay is concerned that the aesthetics of existence risks an atomized politics of introversion and privileges an undialectical and disengaged theory of the self (1992: 157). Others argue that Foucault makes it clear that the care of the self is ‘not a turn inside one’s self” (Gordon 1999: 180), because it ‘is inextricably tied to the theme of the proper way of life’ (Davidson 1994: 133).

This proper way of life however is stylised on the basis of “critiques of instrumental reason”, implying that, Foucault ‘retains no form of rationality, apart from aesthetic rationality’ (McNay 1992: 166). Both Jeffreys (2003: 115) and Taylor (2003: 260) make a distinction between “a way of life” as a permanent critique of our historical era and a “style of life”
understood as an aesthetics of existence. This is meant to be transformative by recognizing, identifying and clarifying the limits that constrain them, not merely rejecting these, but aiming to critically transform these limits. According to Foucault, it is through transgressing limits that one seeks ‘to give new impetus…to the undefined work of freedom’ (Taylor 2003: 267).

Davidson concludes:

> Ethical problems were not resolved by producing a list of required, permitted and forbidden actions, but were centered around one’s attitude to oneself, and so to others and the world – one’s style of living (1994: 133).

Davidson says that the context of a “style of life” is required to make sense of the care of the self, entailing that ‘we must widen our vision to include the style of life that gives form and direction to the self’s relation to itself’ (1994: 134).

It is only,

> … because care of one’s self assumes that freedom is the condition of possibility of being human, and not human will, can it coherently stress the idea of improving one’s self and transcending one’s own limits (Gordon 1999: 190).

Several authors argue that Foucault’s later work can only be understood, if freedom is understood as a condition of possibility of being human and not as a human property as such (Gordon 1999; King 2001; Allen 2002). Foucault is thought to share this understanding with Arendt, and it is allegedly based on a Heideggerian notion of Dasein. Dasein in this context means the being of a person in the world. Dasein can never be fully defined or captured by factuality. Also, Dasein is thrown into the world, into an existing situation which already has concrete possibilities, so the possibilities that Heidegger is referring to ‘come with limitations’ (Gordon 1999: 192). The practices of the self that Foucault asks us to pay attention to are not ones that the individual invents. This means that Foucault’s

> … subject has gained agency, yet at the same time it is always situated within a web of constraints, and therefore cannot be conceived as an entity autonomous of power relations and background practices (Gordon 1999: 193).

In his later work Foucault’s subject is no longer identical with what power produces and a passive artefact. The subject is now understood as never fully determined. Foucault has refigured ‘ethics around a non-essentialist conception of identity, and around a reworking of
the enlightenment concept of autonomy’, according to McNay (1992: 84). It is this “non-essentialist conception of identity” that I specifically explore in chapter five of this study, when exploring the notion of target groups, identity and equity policy practices.

A key shift in thinking that Foucault proposes for the work of undefined freedom is to ask ‘how and why certain things (behaviour, phenomena, processes) become a problem’ (2003: 171, italics in the original). This does not deny the reality of phenomena, because as Foucault says:

> On the contrary, I have tried to show that it was precisely some real existent in the world which was the target of social regulation at a given moment. The question I raise is this one: how and why were very different things in the world gathered together, characterized, analysed, and treated as, for example, “mental illness”? What are the elements which are relevant for a given “problematization”?… there is a relation between the thing which is problematized and the process of problematization. The problematization is an “answer” to a concrete situation which is real (Foucault 2003b: 172).

I elaborate on this kind of approach in relation to how poverty is characterized, analysed and treated in chapter four.

**Insurrection of subjugated knowledge**

To explore the notion of problematisation and the undefined work of freedom further, I turn to Pease’s (2002) proposal that re-thinking critical empowerment social work practice requires the insurrection of subjugated knowledge. Pease argued that ‘empowerment can be understood as producing alternative power saturated knowledge rather than seeking to seize or take power’ (2002: 141). As such ‘[p]olitical struggle can thus be conceptualised as the struggle between different knowledges’ (Pease, 2002: 141). According to Pease, Foucault suggests that knowledge and power are inseparable from one another. For Hartman (1992), it follows that:

> … then we must recognize the link between empowerment of oppressed people and the development and distribution of knowledge (cited in Pease 2002: 141).
CHAPTER TWO – FOUCAULT ON POWER RELATIONS, POLITICS AND FREEDOM

Pease suggests, again drawing on Hartman, that to challenge dominant discourses, we must be open to local knowledge and narratives of “marginalized people” (Pease 2002: 142). This calls for ‘[s]ocial workers and consumers to work together in the construction of alternative forms of knowledge’ (Leonard 1994, cited in Pease 2002: 142). In a sense, Pease is taking up Foucault’s challenge of creating new subjectivities through the exploration of styles of living, which are presumably based on the subjugated knowledges of “marginalized” people.

To illustrate how critical social workers could undertake this kind of empowerment practice, Pease selected the example of:

… the Dulwich Centre, a family therapy agency committed to social justice principles…[being asked to provide] counselling to Aboriginal people whose relatives died in police custody (2002: 143).

Pease notes that:

Friends and relatives of people who died in custody reported disappointment and frustration in their efforts to get access to the relevant information… [and about how] official discourses treat the deaths of people in custody as ‘non controversial’ (2002: 143).

The focus of the work by the Dulwich Centre was on ‘Aboriginal knowledges about ways of responding to grief and pain [which] have been dishonoured and disqualified by white people’ (Pease 2002: 143). Given this problematization, the process that was instigated by the Dulwich Centre aimed to identify the effects of these injustices.

These effects included: guilt and shame, anger, self-hate, a sense of powerlessness, the spirits not being at rest, fear and depression, fear of genocide, loss of Aboriginal identity and destruction of Aboriginal culture (Pease 2002: 143).

The focus of the intervention

… was to find out from Aboriginal people about their strengths and knowledges that have enabled them to survive in the face of overwhelming injustice and to make these strengths more widely available to the whole Aboriginal community (Pease 2002: 143).

This process was the answer to the question the Dulwich Centre counsellors presumably asked themselves: ‘How could they do this [counselling] in a way that did not disqualify Aboriginal knowledge?’ (Pease 2002: 143).
In this instance, it is knowledge about personal and perhaps group survival that is being called on, not knowledge about the deaths in custody and the surrounding power relations. Usefully, Foucault, in one of his posthumously published series of lectures entitled ‘Society Must Be Defended (20003) outlines two kinds of subjugated knowledge. He states:

… when I say “subjugated knowledges”, I mean two things. On the one hand, I am referring to historical contexts that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematisations… it really was the appearance of historical contents… Subjugated knowledges are, the blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using obviously enough, the tools of scholarship (Foucault 2003: 7).

The tools of scholarship in relation to deaths in Custody have been used to indeed challenge the official discourse that treats these deaths as “non controversial”. Political processes such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), despite the lack of actions on the findings, still indicated the problems with

… negligence on the part of police, ongoing police harassment, lack of availability of information about the deaths of relatives of the deceased and lack of notice taken by authorities of Aboriginal evidence (Pease 2002: 143).

However, it is not this kind of buried knowledge that is the focus of the insurrection of subjugated knowledge of indigenous people, in the example that Pease provides, but rather subjugated knowledge relates to:

… encouraging service users to tell their stories of how they have survived and how they have overcome difficult situations (Pease 2002: 142).

This process undertaken by the Dulwich Centre appears to be based on the other way that Foucault thinks about subjugated knowledge:

… I am also referring to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as non conceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity (Foucault 2003: 7).

As Pease states, ‘Aboriginal knowledges about ways of responding to grief and pain have been dishounoured and disqualified by white people’ (2002: 143). This particular
problematization focuses the helping professionals’ intervention with Aboriginal people on their disqualified knowledges.

Pease describes the Dulwich Centre’s process in the following way:

Aboriginal people identified the ability to tell their own stories and hear about other people’s stories as being important to their lives. Remembering groups were set up to allow people to remember publicly the things they wanted to remember about the people they lost. Members of the counselling team also formed an audience to Aboriginal people’s stories and then reflected upon what they had heard. A number of Aboriginal people said that hearing their own stories reflected back enabled them to see themselves differently and to reclaim a pride in who they were. It allowed them to recognize the remarkable strength they had demonstrated in surviving in the face of so much injustice (2002: 144, my italics).

The account Pease offers is quite telling in respect to the earlier discussion in relation to Healy’s example of the anti-violence project with the young women, where the “clients” are positioned as confessional subjects telling the truth about themselves. According to Foucault, this telling the truth of one self suggests the modern exercise of power. The modern exercise of power requires people to tell the truth about themselves and also locates power with those who listen. In Pease’s example feeding back the stories meant in some instances that people “reclaimed pride in who they were”. It is exactly these kinds of processes that Foucault’s early and middle work indicates are a form of pastoral power and a form of disciplinary power, which fails to encourage people to “refuse who” they are made to be by modern power relations.

Listening to the stories of so–called “marginal people” needs to go beyond confessional technology to explore resistance to ongoing injustices. For critical social workers to explore and support resistance of those experiencing ongoing injustice requires “practicing criticism”, according to Jeffreys (2003: 140). This means that the social worker would:

… explore and support client resistance to those forces and forms of subjectivization which threaten the status and freedom of the individual, which refuse or undermine the client’s right to be different, and which present subjectivity as natural or unchanging and as uninfluenced by political and economic factors (Jeffreys 2003: 140).
This requires the recognition, identification and clarification of how norms enable and constrain freedom and to engage the enabling and constraining aspects of these norms to critically transform them with others.

Conclusion

What the body of Foucault’s work offers to critical social workers when analysing current power relations is firstly an insistence on analysing power relations in historically specific ways. Because of the way Foucault, at times, presents his analysis of power, some authors interpret Foucault’s discussion of disciplinary power for instance, not as one account of an historical inquiry into penal reforms, but as a ‘general paradigm of social power’ (McNay 1994: 100). It is perhaps of more use to critical social workers to read Foucault’s historically specific analyses of power relations as showing us ways to go about analysing current practices of power. Foucault calls on us to be “specific intellectuals” who analyse how various practices of power are maintained and sustained (Jeffreys 2003).

Secondly Foucault’s historically specific exploration of bio-power, disciplinary power, pastoral power and governmentality effectively alert critical social workers to not take for granted the constitution of subject positions, nor various political rationales for acting in particular ways. I concur with Fook (2002) and Healy (2000) that Foucault offers suitable tools for challenging current critical social work empowerment practices. Foucault assists us to disrupt taken for granted notions of humanism, liberation and the conflation of powerlessness with “stigmatised” populations. However the conflation of power and domination cannot be disentangled using only Foucault’s middle and early work, because Foucault did not conceive of power as “power over” until his later work.

Despite this Foucault’s early and middle work is useful for showing us the significance of examining how power operates to historically constitute subjects. Foucault encourages critical social workers to ask the following three questions:

… how are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? And, how are we are constituted as moral subjects of our own actions? (1978: 7).
Foucault in his later work proposes that we can practice freedom through analysing these constitutive effects of power and by fashioning other forms of truth and new subjectivities. Foucault promotes a permanent critique of the current way of life and indicates that his approach is an ‘historico-critical attitude [that] must also be an experimental one’ (1978: 6).

Foucault states:

I mean that this work done at the limits of ourselves must, on the one hand, open up a realm of historical inquiry and, on the other, put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take (Foucault 1978: 6).

According to McNay, Foucault does not explain how ‘subjects have another perspective on the same historical and social processes?’ (1992: 153). Understanding our selves as made up of multiple selves with plural and possible conflicting interests is perhaps a starting point for fashioning new subjectivities. As Haber states:

… this ever-present possibility of the other (whether in actual others or in ourselves) guarantees the possibility of a rich understanding of ourselves and our relation to others, and also points at a mechanism for explaining why it is possible to resist hegemonic power regimes (1995: 2).

Haber’s valuing of this ever-present possibility of the other as a way of resisting hegemonic power regimes has some similarities to Hannah Arendt’s notion of plurality and natality. This is one of the many reasons why I turn to Arendt in the next chapter of this study to explore the notion of power as ‘acting in concert’. Arendt (1958) attempts to rescue “the political” from “the social” in order to create and sustain a space of politics. Given that Foucault mainly conflates power and politics, turning to Arendt, a prominent political theorist who sought to revalue political action and freedom, makes sense. Arendt starts with human agency when thinking about power and this may add much to critical social worker’s capacity to think better about power relations and empowerment.
Chapter Three
Arendt on power, political action and freedom

I want neither to rule nor to be ruled (Herodotus, Book III: 80–82).

Far from being a challenge to politics, plurality is what makes politics both necessary and possible (Levinson 2000: 90).

… in Greek as well as Roman antiquity, freedom was an exclusively political concept (Arendt 1961: 157).

Hannah Arendt was one of the most striking, original and significant political theorists of the twentieth century. Hannah Arendt is rightly treated as a major political thinker (Canovan 1992; Disch 1994; Villa 1996; Levinson 2000; Walsh 2002). She did much to reinstate some of the central preoccupations of the great western tradition of political theory. She added significant concepts to the political lexicon “plurality”, “natality” and “publicness”. Her treatment of core ideas like “politics” itself and “freedom” are distinctive (Beiner 1982; Disch 1994; Villa 1996). Given my assessment of some of the central omissions and problems in critical social work theory and practice which began with a concern about the conception of politics they start with, it seems almost self-evident that the work of Arendt may bear on those problems. In this chapter, I explore and argue for the salience of Arendt’s treatment of power, political action and freedom to critical social workers and their attempts to develop a theory and practice of empowerment. I draw on Arendt’s understanding of political action because it suggests that people can achieve freedom through the capacity to “act in concert” (Villa 1996). Several authors have used Arendt’s work to complement Foucault in his treatment of power (Gordon 1999, Edwards 1999, King 2001, Allen 2002). As I showed, Foucault’s early and middle work tends to conflate politics and power leaving human agency as an underdeveloped concept. Whereas in Arendt’s theorising power is always associated with a social agent. Power is understood as the capacity of people to “act in concert” and to create something new. In other words, Arendt starts with human agency when she explores, investigates and elaborates on power, political action and freedom.
My interest in Arendt is not a quixotic whim: Foucault and Arendt share a number of significant concerns. Both are critics of tendencies like valuing of conformity found in modern mass societies. Both develop a kind of aesthetic model as the basis for ethical and political judgments. Both are concerned to show how power operates, and both analyse the relation between power, agency and subjectivity (Allen 2002). Finally both pay attention to the particular, concrete, unique and lived phenomena of human life, when considering how social control operates and how freedom may be enacted.

This is not to deny that there are important differences between Arendt’s and Foucault’s approaches to understanding how power operates in modern societies (Gordon 1999; Edwards 1999; King 2001; Allen 2002). One of the most obvious differences between Foucault and Arendt is how they conceive of “power”. While both thinkers treat power as a relational matter and not as a property that can be possessed or employed, Arendt defines it as the capacity of people to “act in concert”, while Foucault defines it as a relation among multiple forces. For Arendt, power is a manifestation of freedom; for Foucault power is represented in mechanisms that constrain, repress, shape and constitute individuals. Arendt argues that, “the social” has taken over “the political”, while Foucault argues that, “the political” has taken over “the social” (Allen 2002). This is not just a semantic debate, but points to central differences between Arendt’s and Foucault’s understanding of “the political” and “the social”, differences which I will explore in this chapter.

I will explore Arendt’s thinking about power, political action and freedom in this chapter, via The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951, 1958) which set the agenda for Arendt’s later political thought (Canovan 1992). I draw on Arendt’s (1958) analysis of labor, work and action as possible models for political action in The Human Condition and her account of freedom and authority in On Revolution (Arendt 1963). I explore Arendt’s theorising of revolutions and the notion of political action and freedom in her account of the French and American revolutions and her eight exercises in political thought in Between Past and Present (1961).

**Totalitarianism**

In her Origins of Totalitarianism (1951) Arendt sets out to explain how a totalitarian politics emerged in the twentieth century. Totalitarianism, according to Arendt, ‘changes men into something subhuman, creatures without the capacity for action or choice’ (Canovan 1992: 78).
Totalitarianism is an exercise in total domination. It does not invoke political processes so much as use violence to produce non-political consequences like mass murder or large-scale state terrorism.

According to Arendt the totalitarian project means that people are ‘deprived of individuality and of freedom’ (Arendt 1951: 428). Arendt argues that, human beings have such great resources that they ‘can only be fully dominated when [they] become(s) a specimen of the animal species man’ (Arendt 1951: 428). Arendt argues that the concentration camps operated as experiments in reducing human beings to animals. This process began when the inmates were stripped of

... juridical personality as bearers of rights and put outside the law... [M]oral responsibility was undermined by the anonymity of the system that made martyrdom impossible, and by arrangements that implicated the victims in the killings (Canovan 1992: 59).

All that then ‘remained of humanity was sheer individuality, and that too was systematically destroyed by bestial treatment’ (Canovan 1992: 60). In the end, what was left of the person was no longer recognisably human so much as a kind of animal residium reduced ‘to ‘bundles of reactions’ without spontaneity’ (Canovan 1992: 60).

If we reflect further on the defining features of totalitarianism Arendt argues that total domination was used for the purpose of making reality conform to their ideology, ‘for the sake of complete consistency’ (1951: 432). Arendt uses the word ideology ‘in a special sense that is much more narrow than its ordinary usage’. She uses it to mean ‘the logical consistency with which it purports to explain the past and the future’ (Canovan 1992: 26). Arendt argues that totalitarian propaganda offered a deterministic view of the world and of history, linking the past and the future, in a way that made the present inevitable, and as such promoted a single prescription for the one way of life.

Arendt’s account of the logic of totalitarianism shows how it passed judgement on “inferior races,” requires sacrifices of the “parts” of the population for the sake of the “whole” population. Again, this kind of logic pre-empt or attempts to pre-determine how people relate to themselves and others and attempts to determine “who” is and can share in the common world. As Arendt notes ironically ‘[f]rom a totalitarian point of view, the fact that men are born and die can be only regarded as an annoying interference with higher forces’ (Arendt 1951: 466).
At the heart of Arendt’s account of totalitarianism is an emphasis on a:

… drive toward unlimited expansion of power, not as a means to any human purpose, but as a self-perpetuating momentum to which totalitarians were prepared to sacrifice themselves and everyone else (Canovan 1992: 29).

This is one of the surprising aspects of Arendt’s (1951) analysis of totalitarianism, the stress on the selflessness of the many people involved. Arendt (1951) suggests that out of their own sense of expendability people responded to the ideology presented to them as inevitable, natural, explaining both the past and future, with the effect of removing people from their own experiences at great cost to themselves and others. A strong combination of activism, irresponsibility and selflessness resulted, according to Arendt (1951).

According to Arendt (1951) even totalitarianism’s propaganda did not address people’s interests or benefits. Rather it presented the supposed insight into the “inevitable forces of history”, a form of complete determinism. It allowed an escape from the incomprehensibility of reality into fiction, while the propaganda presented a “lying world of consistency”. In this way, people left behind the normal world and its assumptions and ‘[f]act and reality had become merely things that could be changed’ (Canovan 1992).

In short Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism shows the suppression of political action. Arendt (1951) effectively illustrates that where there is violence there is little space left for politics. According to Arendt, ‘power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent’ (1969: 56). Violence can destroy power and in consequence destroys all legitimate power. For Arendt, power is the essence of government not violence, as power is a function of human relations. Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism also shows the suppression of individuality and of freedom. For Arendt, political action is incredibly important as it maintains the capacity for human distinctiveness and for freedom.

After her work on totalitarianism, Arendt wanted to develop her critique of Marxism but came to see that her earlier work had failed to address a central question: what defines political activity? Arguably her greatest work, The Human Condition (1958) offers both a critique of Marxism and a novel account of political action which relies on a difficult distinction she claimed to see between “labour” and “work”. By emphasising the uniquely defining features of political action as vita activa Arendt made an indelible contribution to our understanding of political action.
Arendt on political action

At the heart of Arendt’s political theory is a fully explicated account of political action conceived as free action that requires, if politics is to flower, a way of existing that is based on being together that is in process, or in becoming (Fagan 2001: 5). This view depends in turn on some basic distinction Arendt drew between labour and work.

Arendt (1958) says that human labour is natural, cyclical, arduous, necessary, fertile (in the sense of reproduction and also producing a surplus) and private (Canovan 1992: 123-124). Arendt argued that the modern expansion of labour would not lead to liberation, rather according to Arendt it led ‘only to the degradation of man to an animal the *animal laborans*’ (Canovan 1992: 126). It is at this level of *animal laborans*, that human beings may be understood as the same, driven by biological needs compelled to be part of the cycle of life and death, tied to natural cycles of birth and death and therefore not distinctively human or individual. Labour is characterised by Arendt as ‘commanded by necessity, the human being as labourer is the equivalent of the slave’ (Yar 2001: 4).

Certainly labour is necessary for the maintenance of life but its efforts are quickly consumed and thus need perpetual renewal to sustain life. Arendt claims that this labour to sustain biological life belongs to the private sphere and its emergence on the public scene has the effect of ‘destroying the properly political by subordinating the public realm of human freedom to the concerns of mere animal necessity’ (Yar 2001: 4). Arendt argues that “the social” which comprises the human condition of labour is a long way from people being able to rise to their potential as political beings. For Arendt (1958) “labour” is contrary to freedom and to whatever is distinctly human. If labour reveals the natural and animal restraints, it is action like ‘[s]peech and action [which] reveal [humanity’s] unique distinctiveness’ (Arendt 1958: 176). It is through these distinguishing activities that ‘human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men’ (Arendt 1958: 176, italics in the original).

For Arendt, political action means the disclosure of “who” somebody is in contradistinction to “what” somebody is. This self-disclosure through speech and action often reveals a “who” that is clear and unmistakable to others and yet remains hidden from the person himself or herself. In this sense, political action is often self-surprising (Arendt 1958: 179). Further, it implies a relation of the self to the self that is not subjugated to mass society or normalization.
Rather it is a relation as Foucault argued which makes it possible to relate to one’s self as free.

According to Arendt,

… work means making things, solid objects which are meant to last, to be used rather than consumed and to contribute to the world, the durable human artifice that provides men with a home upon the earth (Canovan 1992: 128).

Fabricating lifts human beings to the status and ‘dignity of homo faber’ (Canovan 1992: 128). But inherent in making things is violence as natural materials are altered, used or destroyed to create something man-made, solid and enduring. In making things man is master of the whole earth. What worries Arendt is

… because homo faber is so used to thinking in instrumental terms of ends and means, he has a fatal tendency to turn the same kind of philistine thinking on the objects of the world themselves, and to regard them, too, merely as means to further ends (Canovan 1992: 129, my italics).

Arendt argues that the:

… process of making is itself entirely determined by the categories of means and ends…. In the process of making, … the end is beyond doubt: it has come when an entirely new thing with enough durability to remain in the world as an independent entity has been added to the human artifice… To have a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end is the mark of fabrication, which through this characteristic alone distinguishes itself from all other human activities (1958: 143-144).

For Arendt, work too cannot provide a basis for politics, as human beings are not to be treated as means to an end. According to Arendt, Marx tried to base politics upon a re-valued concept of material life that confused work and labour and ‘its implications turned out to be totalitarian’ (Canovan 1992: 72). Because:

… work is a matter of transforming material in order to make something: domination, violence and the sacrifice of the means to the end are inherent in the activity of fabrication. When this model is applied to politics, which is concerned with dealings between plural persons, it is other people who become the material to be dealt with violently and sacrificed to the end that is to be achieved (Canovan 1992: 73).

When social workers claim that ‘defining, shaping or altering the personal attributes of
individuals’ (O’Connor, Wilson and Setterlund 2004) are social work practices, it not only identifies social work as an ethical-political practice but in Arendt’s terms it highlights social work as potentially or actually anti-political. Orlie (1997) points out that it is inevitable to trespass and inflict “ordinary” evil on others as we make our way in the world. What this means for Orlie (1997) is that critical social workers need to identify their role in the operations of modern power and to seek the limits of our selves and of political rationalities when thinking about how to “work” with people; for if working with people is understood as a means to an end the possibility of violence and domination may be accentuated.

Arendt’s understanding of political action is a singularly striking and challenging one. Arendt argues that the Platonic splitting of action into “thinking” and “doing” misrepresents the character of action. According to Villa, Arendt relies on Aristotle for the ‘development of her own theory of action’ (1996: 18) even as she argues against Aristotle. Arendt’s project involves renewing and recovering ‘elements of the Western tradition of political theory in order to better overcome that tradition’ (Villa 1996: 4).

For Arendt, action lies outside the relational category of means and ends. In this sense Arendt is aiming to rescue the notion of acting from the “instrumentalisation of the world”, which treats utility as the sole criterion of value. Villa (1996) argues that treating utility as the sole criterion of value is in effect meaningless. Arendt states:

… in the fact that while only fabrication with its instrumentality is capable of building a world, this same world becomes worthless as the employed material, a mere means for further ends, if the standards which governed its coming into being are permitted to rule it after its establishment (1958: 156).

The problem is not instrumentality itself, but the use of means to achieve an end generalised so that ‘usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standard for life and the world of men’ (Arendt 1958: 157). As Hansen explains:

… [f]rom Arendt’s perspective, the modern state provides a powerful testament to the suppression of ‘for the sake of’ by ‘in order to’, the reduction of meaning to utility (1993: 53).

In re-thinking “action” Arendt wants to find a certain way of being in the world which values speech and action as defining of the “unique distinctiveness” of human beings (1958: 176). The point Arendt makes about acting and speaking is that it reveals
… actively their unique personal identities … This disclosure of “who” in contradistinction to “what” somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and short-comings … is implicit in everything somebody says and does’ (1958: 179).

According to Arendt,

… [t]his revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them - that is, in sheer human togetherness (1958: 180).

Arendt says action is only possible in the public realm in the sense of being with others. It is only people who are allowed a public self that can risk this self-disclosure. Arendt names both those doing good who need to remain anonymous and criminals, who are beyond the pale of society, as not being able to disclose a self. Both are marginal political figures because one is for the good of men and one is against all men (1958: 180). Action, in this sense, is neither for or against humanity but arises between people acting together with others.

According to Arendt, “action”

… always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries (1958: 190).

This means that “action” is risky, as it is inherently boundless. Arendt also credits action with an inherent unpredictability (1958: 191), as the full meaning of action can reveal itself only when it has ended (Arendt 1958: 192). Arendt argues that it is these attributes of action, ‘its futility, boundlessness, and uncertainty of outcome’ that meant ‘Plato and Aristotle elevated lawmaking and city-building to the highest rank in political life’ as ‘a remedy to the frailty of human affairs’ captured in Arendt’s use of the term “action” (1958: 195). Action as it unfolds is not within the control of individuals who initiate action in speech and deed. There are risks and responsibilities for acting citizens, as ‘we can neither fully predict nor control the events we set in motion’ (Levinson 2000: 12).

As a model for politics “action” is preferable to labour and work, as “action”, despite its risks, captures the frailty of human affairs, its unpredictability and its uncontrollability, while respecting the interconnectedness of action and the human capacity to act in concert. Action ‘is never possible in isolation’ accordingt to Arendt (1958: 188). Power is actualised when word and deed have not parted company, when words are not empty and deeds are not brutal (Arendt 1958). Words and deeds and not violence allow equality and distinction to flower and can establish new ways of relating and create new realities (Arendt 1958: 200). Conceptually
splitting “thinking” and “doing” has created situations where the interdependence of action is no longer recognised and politics has become a relation of rule rather than a relation of freedom. Arendt says that:

… [u]nderlying all three types of human activities – labor, work and action- is an ontological understanding of humans as both free and having the propensity to act (Gordon 1999: 203).

Arendt’s distinctive understanding of freedom and political action is grounded in her treatment of three key ideas namely “plurality”, “natality” and “publicness”.

Plurality

Plurality is a distinctive category which Arendt added to the political lexicon (Disch 1994). It is the plurality of men in an authentic public realm which creates a space for ‘reality to appear in its many-sidedness’ (Canovan 1992: 117). Firstly, it means that ‘men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world (Arendt 1958: 7). On this most basic level, the fact that men exist on this earth together acknowledges the sheer multiplicity of human beings. Plurality also refers to diversity because Arendt says,

…we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live (1958: 8).

This idea is crucial for untying some of the knots that identity politics have landed critical social work theorists in.

According to Disch, plurality in defining a fact of human existence also means that ‘the possibility of community is never simply given or essential to human beings but must, rather, be built by speech and action’ (1994: 32). Community, in this sense, is an event, a being-in-common, a happening as it comes (Fagan 2001: 2-3). Finally ‘plurality names the web of interconnection, the “web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together”’ (Arendt 1958: 184, cited in Disch 1994: 32). As Arendt says ‘the experience of plurality is an experience of both equality and of distinction; we are all human, and we are all separate individuals’ (Canovan 1992: 206).

In this way, Arendt seeks to maintain the distinction between commonality and communality. Recall Healy’s claim for example that the foundation for political action with the young
women was built on,

… a foundation of collective understanding…that emphasized the shared knowledge that derived from their experiences as young mothers and survivors of violence (2000: 108).

Recall also Healy’s (2000) consternation that the critical approach foreclosed on difference between and within the participants. The idea of ‘communality, a way of “being-with” a world of things as they happen’ (Fagan 2001: 3) offers a potent basis for critical social workers’ thinking about the difference between commonality and communality. Collective understanding does not need to be based on similar experiences or on a common identity, such as a “victim of violence” or “teenage mother”. Arendt’s concept of plurality makes possible a sense of communality as being-with, which is not necessarily based on particular identities or similar experiences, but on sameness in difference. In this way, the complexity, contradictions and common aspects of experiences can be elaborated, rather than subsumed into one collective understanding that excludes aspects of each participant’s experience.

Given that critical social workers have taken-for-granted the conflation of identity and power when formulating a politics of liberations, the loss of a common identity as a basis for political action has worried several authors, like Leonard (1997). Yet according to Arendt, plurality is what makes politics both necessary and possible. Arendt’s starting point in relation to identity and politics is thus plurality, both as a human condition and as a political achievement.

For Arendt, politics is essential for the protection of plurality while the exercise of power is dependent on the human condition of plurality (Gordon 1999: 204). Arendt refers to the human condition of plurality as a fact of human existence, as well ‘she acknowledges its more tentative status as a political condition’ to be achieved (Levinson 2000: 92). Levinson says:

As a human condition, plurality is a given, but as a condition of politics, plurality is in the paradoxical position of making politics possible at the same time as politics is its own condition of possibility (2000: 92).

This is because it is only through political interaction that the “common world” is created out of the multiplicity of opinions and perspectives (Levinson 2000: 90).

Natality is further distinctive category which Arendt added to the political lexicon (Disch 1994, 32-35). Arendt says that natality is ‘the capacity of beginning something new, that is, of acting’ (1958: 9). Politically speaking natality is the reminder that we came into a pre-existing
The decisive trait of the human condition is not that men are mortal, but that they are being born; birth, rather than death, is the decisive factor in all political organization which must ever stand ready to receive new beginners into a communal pattern which is more permanent than each of them (1954, cited in Disch 1994: 32).

Natality is regarded as a “second birth” in which “[w]ith word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world” (Arendt 1958: 176). Arendt states:

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance…its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative (1958: 177).

Arendt describes this human condition of natality as:

The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something new comes into the world (1958: 178).

Arendt’s notion of natality suggests that humans can transcend the man-made structures and create something new as human ‘being always maintains a difference - that individuals cannot be reduced to the human condition or to the power structures in which they reside’ (Gordon 1999: 206). It is this element as Gordon (1999) argues which makes it possible to sustain a conception of human agency within a Foucaultian ‘imaginary of ubiquitous power because the human condition of natality and plurality ontologically precede Foucault’s power’ (1999: 207).

Arendt links the human capacity for creating something new and unexpected with the human condition of plurality.

If action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, if it is the actualisation of the human condition of natality, then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualisation of the human condition of plurality, that is of living as a distinct and unique being among equals (Arendt 1958: 178).

The relation between equality and sameness that is apparently common, especially in liberal
imaginaries (Fook 2002), is disturbed by Arendt’s concepts of plurality and natality. By conceiving of plurality and natality as part of the human condition and as ontologically preceding power relations, it means also that freedom is possible. These categories take on a special quality because of their role in the public world.

Publicity and the common world

‘Publicity depends on natality, which initiates the process of discussion, and on plurality, which gives it a space in which to occur’ (Disch 1994: 34). This space Arendt calls variously the “interspace”, “in between” or “inter-est, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together (1958: 182, cited in Disch 1994: 35). Arendt thinks it is vital that people express opinions from their own perspective to make available the common world to each other. Arendt was forceful in her view that opinion rather than truth counts and is ‘the stuff of political life’ (Villa 1996: 94). Arendt understood opinion not as:

... the expression of subjective bias or arbitrariness, rather, it signifies the politically essential fact that “the world opens up differently to every man, according to his position in it”. It is precisely the variations implicit in the “it appears to me” that underlies the presencing of the common world (Villa 1996: 94).

According to Arendt, the “common world” or the world of public humans is created amidst the multiplicity of opinions and perspectives (Levinson 2000: 90).

Arendt insists that interests are not private bargaining chips defined with reference to individual goals and traded competitively on the political “market”. In contrast to the communitarian ideal, the “inter-est” is not a common cause that in some way expresses the authentic being of disparate participants and harmonizes their wills. What Arendt called an “in-between” does suggest a commonality. At the same time, her insistence on argumentation suggests that commonality does not mean concord. Conversations are not started with the expectation of consensus. Rather, the public realm is an

... area in which there are many voices and where the announcement of what each ‘deems truth’ both links and separates men, establishing in fact those distances between men which together comprise the world (Arendt 1978: 30).

For Arendt, the common world is ‘the entire pragmatic web of relationships in which human
beings are caught up, the total interplay between people, things, and relationships’ (Biskowski 1993: 879). As such the world is both the formal condition for political action and the object of political action. It is something held in common by plural subjects, something that both relates and separates individuals from each other, ‘the way a table separates and relates the individuals who gather around it’ (Arendt 1958: 22). In this way,

[the] world provides action with context, meaning, a space to appear, and the possibility of remembrance, as well as a common point of reference and orientation (Biskowski 1993: 881).

The common world, or Arendt’s concept of “publicity” means everything that ‘can be seen or heard by everybody’ (1958: 50).

This emphasis on the reality of the world being ‘guaranteed by the presence of others’ (1958: 199) carries echoes of her work on totalitarianism. Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism points to the importance of a public realm since this is what totalitarianism destroys. It is the “common world” that guarantees the reality of the world to each of us, through the distinctive revelation of “who” we are, while totalitarianism destroys all individuality and demands a single voice on issues, effectively destroying the capacity to understand and recognise the world as a common world. The “common world” makes what is happening in the world and between us the focus of political action.

Political action

We can now begin to see how to bring together the concepts identified above to illuminate Arendt’s distinctive understanding of political action. Arendt was seriously concerned that there had been a major turn away from politics in favour of society over the last century. She wanted to bring us back to politics (Arendt 1963; Canovan 1974: 2; Benhabib 1993: xxvi).

Bernstein states that,

Arendt’s chief intellectual concern became the attempt to recover what is distinctive about the vita activa, and especially the highest form of human activity - what she calls action (praxis). To her this was not just an intellectual problem but the most vital issue of modern times. She felt that professional thinkers from Plato on had tended to distort the
nature of action and politics, and that in the modern world a catastrophic reversal within
the *vita activa* had taken place, resulting in the victory of a fabricating and labouring

Arendt attempted to rethink politics by taking into account human plurality in ways that
‘recognises politics as something that happens in the space *between* plural men’ (Canovan
1992: 207). Canovan identifies this interest of Arendt’s about “what happens in the space
*between* plural individuals” as a kind of new republicanism, in which Arendt combined the
classical tradition of ancient Roman republicanism with modern philosophical influences such
as existentialism. Canovan claims that:

Republicanism always had opposed the idea that power belonged to a ruler, and always
talked about politics as ‘the public thing’ that belonged to all citizens (1992: 208).

Politics is whatever happens between plural men in a public space. This changes the way
concepts like power and freedom can be understood within this “public thing”. Power is
understood

… not [as] something an individual can possess on his own…Instead it is something that
‘springs up in between men’ when they act together (Canovan 1999: 208).

Like Foucault, Arendt rejects any notion of “sovereignty” as the “single locus of power” that
Ife (1997) warns critical social workers against, or as the ‘ultimate authority that has the last
word’ (Canovan 1999: 211). Rather, power is to be understood as the fruit of cooperation
rather than of command since there is no mastery over human affairs. Arendt’s ‘conception of
the political, queries, contests and transfigures the necessities of governance…She seeks to
differentiate politics and ruling’ (Orlie 1997: 77). For Arendt, ‘ruling is not equivalent to
politics but rather evinces the sovereign mentality that would govern politics out of existence’
(Orlie 1997: 77). This relation to a sovereign mentality also relates to the notion of the
sovereign self as in the idea of self-mastery. As Levinson says:

The trouble with the idea of self-mastery that follows from the principle of domination is
that it simply cannot be sustained in the condition of plurality (2000: 102).

It is not surprising that Levinson suggests that we need to re-think ‘subjectivity in light of the
particular dynamic of political action’ proposed by Arendt (2000: 5).
Political subjectivity

Levinson argues that Arendt rethinks conventional notions of political action especially because ‘political agency as Arendt understands it, requires political subjects to relinquish autonomy’ which Levinson notes is ‘a disconcerting ethic’ (2000: 96).

This is not to say that we relinquish autonomy completely. To do so would simply be to enslave oneself to the opinions and perspectives of others. Instead one engages with the voices of others, acting in part to learn about oneself, in part to dispel the perceptions others have of one, and in part to see if one can learn to be differently. This is why the governing ideals of self-mastery - integrity, self-sufficiency and self-rule - can neither sustain action nor survive action’s unpredictable effects (Levinson 2000: 103).

Levinson says that ‘[p]olitical subjectivity differs from moral subjectivity in that it is not based on the notion of a sovereign self’ (2000: 5). This stands in contrast to most critical social work empowerment texts which emphasise personal mastery and self-empowerment as pre-conditions in empowering others (Adams 1996). There is a long history to social work’s commitment to the sovereign self and to the notion of the social worker as hero (Adams 1996; Healy 2000). In social work liberal values inform the priority given to ideas like self-discipline and integrity of the self. Putting self-mastery and integrity of the self above a concern for the common or shared world troubled Arendt, who claimed that:

In the centre of moral considerations of human conduct stands the self; in the center of political considerations of conduct stands the world (Arendt 1972: 62, cited in Levinson 2000: 5).

In this way, Arendt challenges critical social workers’ assumptions about the relationship between politics and morality, where self-mastery and integrity of the self tend to be considered launching points for empowerment practices. For Arendt, political action is anchored in a shared world and as such political action has a “worldly” character dependent on and requiring interaction with others (Villa 1996: 34). Although Arendt valued thoughtfulness and consideration when bringing various perspectives into the public space her focus was not on self-mastery per se. Arendt’s politics was centrally about the exchange of opinion or inter-subjective judgement. As Levinson puts it, for Arendt

…[j]udgement [was] not primarily concerned with the self but with the recognition that we share the world with others who see and experience things differently than we do (2000: 117).
The emphasis and starting point from Arendt’s perspective is not the self, but the self inter-subjectively engaged in the care of the world.

Like their more traditional liberal progenitors today’s critical social workers also emphasise the status of the worker as a lone hero who leads the disadvantaged to fight for their rights or to gain political wins from governments (Healy 2000). Arendt’s concept of the hero found in Homer’s *Iliad*, did not have to have heroic qualities, but was ‘a name given to each freeman who participated in the Trojan enterprise and about whom a story could be told’ (1958: 186). The notion of courage that we tend to attribute to heroes is:

… in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one’s self into the world and begin a story of one’s own… showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one’s self (Arendt 1958: 186).

Instead of attributing great deeds to “solidary heroes”, she emphasises that political achievements are by plural men acting in concert (Canovan 1992: 222). Thus:

Because we are plural, action in politics is not a matter of lonely heroes but of interaction between peers; because we are plural, even the most charismatic leader cannot do more than lead what is essentially a joint enterprise; because we are plural, human beings are at their most glorious not when their individuality is lost… but when they are revealing their unique identities on the public stage (Canovan 1992: 205).

Arendt’s starting point is to acknowledge the common world by caring for it and doing this by sustaining it through political action. This way we gain a sometimes self-surprising insight into “who” we are becoming, while the focus is on the care of the world. This is the key distinction to be drawn in relation to Foucault’s critique of confessional technologies. According to Foucault, confessional technologies require telling the truth of oneself, often in line with the truth(s) of the social sciences, whereas Arendt’s promotion of revelatory speech is focused not on the truth of oneself, or on the truths of one’s inner self, but on the care of the world. In caring for the world a distinctive self is revealed in and through political speech and action in relation to the common world (Arendt 1958, 1963).

Let me recall Pease’s (2002) example in the previous chapter of this study of the process of working with Aboriginal people, who had lost loved ones as a consequence of being jailed. That project focused on ‘Aboriginal knowledges about ways of responding to grief and pain [which] have been dishonoured and disqualified by white people’ (Pease 2002: 143). This project focused on the truth of one’s self, as it related to an Aboriginal identity. In Foucault’s
terms, this was a form of pastoral power, as the project needed subjects to ‘reveal their innermost secrets’ (Foucault 1982: 214) in order to take care of their happiness and well being. As Pease indicated, the Aboriginal people involved were asked to identify the effects of the many injustices suffered. According to Pease, Aboriginal people identified the following effects:

… guilt and shame, anger, self-hate, a sense of powerlessness, the spirits not being at rest, fear and depression, fear of genocide, loss of Aboriginal identity and destruction of Aboriginal culture (2002: 143).

These fears need to be respected. However Arendt would say that the revelation of these feelings and fears does not necessarily lead to engagement in political action to address the on-going injustices suffered, because the process does not emphasise the political or promote political action. According to Villa,

From Arendt’s point of view, the self that precedes action, the biological and psychological self, is an essentially dispersed, fragmented, and plural self; it is a self whose lack of appearance deprives it of both unity and reality (1996: 90).

Someone’s identity as a political actor is coextensive with, rather than prior to, their action. Critical social workers tend to rely on a “structural” analysis to determine someone’s identity due to observable characteristics like gender, race, visible disabilities, age or other factors like poverty, sexuality, madness or illness and presuppose these groups have common interests based on their characteristics. This structural analysis limits political action and leaves intact the constitution of such identities. As Orlie notes,

Signs of status mark what one is and place one in a position to exercise power, but they do not prescribe political action. What we are conditions but does not (or at least need not) determine who we are (1997:151).

Arendt’s call to revelatory speech is not based on revealing one’s innermost secrets, nor is it based on the characteristics of a political or social identity. Rather revelatory speech is focused on care of the world and on deciding how to share the common world. I am making a distinction between what Arendt considers to be self-revelatory speech in focusing on the care of the world, through political action with others, and Foucault’s reading of current modern power relations. According to Foucault, modern power relations insist that people tell the truth of themselves as foundational subjects, to reveal their innermost secrets and to do so in ways that can increase the effectiveness of pastoral power. Focusing on the care of the world
means engaging with the injustices that confront say Aboriginal people, in the Dulwich Centre example, rather than just focusing on the meaning and effects of these injustices. For Arendt the social and private is ‘marked by an attitude of narrow self-interest, while the political is characterized by an attitude of public or common interest’ (Allen 1999: 111). Arendt’s arguments about power, political and freedom require us to rethink what it means to speak or act politically, according to Hansen (1993).

Thinking politically with Arendt, in relation to Pease’s example of the Dulwich Centre process, means addressing the problems of

… negligence on the part of police, ongoing police harassment, lack of availability of information about the deaths of relatives of the deceased and lack of notice taken by authorities of Aboriginal evidence (Pease 2002: 143).

To address these problems requires processes that speak to and about the common world and “inter-est”. Politically thinking about and engaging with these issues is not limited to participants on the basis of their political identity. Although Arendt allows some role for identity in political life:

… it is possible to resist in terms of the identity that is under attack without being a member of the group whose identity is under attack (Allen 1999: 112, italics in original).

Identity categories are:

… neither incontrovertible fact nor pure fiction; it is a political fact; as a fact undeniable, and to attempt to deny it is to blind oneself to political realities, but as political it is changeable. One changes it by resisting, but one can resist only in terms of the political fact of an identity under attack (Allen 1999: 112).

Solidarity can be based on a community of action. It is after all a modality of power (Allen 1999: 112). One need not “be” an Aboriginal person to join in a collective effort to resist Aboriginal subordination. This conception avoids the problem of the model of solidarity based on an exclusionary and repressive conception of Aboriginal people’s shared “essence” or “lived experience” of oppression. Collective political movements can be ‘held together not by a shared identity, but by the shared commitment of distinct individuals to work together for the attainment of a common goal’ (Allen 1999: 112).

Power, in relation to solidarity, then is based on ‘those who pledge to work together to fight relations of subordination’ (Allen 1999: 113). Power understood as acting in concert is based
on a ‘shared commitment, a promise, … not an exclusionary unity that is presumed in advance’ (Allen 1999: 113). For Arendt, an

… answer to the problem of collective self-determination in a plural society is this conception of public spaces that exist around common interests that are relative to a particular situation. But the terms of this situation are not given in advance, and neither are its members designated in advance (Disch 1994: 39).

Allen adds that:

According to Arendt, when individuals bind themselves together by means of promises and engage in concerted action, they become powerful (1999: 113).

Arendt is clear that any notion of power as “acting in concert” means that “power” is

… never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together (Arendt 1969: 44, cited in Allen 1999: 113).

Most critical social work “interventions” are based on definitions of a situation in advance (Healy 2000), and often also on created ‘service user category groupings so that services can be administered appropriately’ as Fook (2002: 51) puts it. Arendt wanted to distinguish clearly between the participation in public affairs and administration or management of things in the public interest (1963: 278). For instance, Arendt distinguished between the political man who is:

… supposed to know how to deal with men in a field of human relations, whose principle is freedom, and the other (the administrator, who) must know how to manage things and people in a sphere of life whose principle is necessity (Arendt 1963: 278),

According to Arendt, it is very seldom that these aspects are found in the same individual. Critical social workers in seeking to empower others are often confronted with the difficult task of trying to combine political thinking, the principle of freedom with management based on “necessity” through processes of administration.

Disch argues that Arendt strongly resisted such a compromise:

… it is by means of disagreeing about the meaning of an event or problem that people talk themselves into a common situation. What they have in common is not something inside them. Instead, commonality is potentially “in” a situation, depending on how that situation is defined (1994: 39).
Arendt argues that the potential for achieving commonality is realised if, in exchanging the “innumerable perspectives and aspects” in which the situation appears to each of them, people then manage to articulate these aspects into an interpretation that renders it a problem compelling enough to inspire their cooperative action. For Arendt, politics is not a relation of rule or command, but the practice of collaborative and co-operative effort.

If we take seriously Arendt’s point about how people “talk themselves into a common situation through disagreement” then we can rethink Fook’s suggestions about how to undertake a critical and postmodern empowerment process. Recall Fook’s advice that critical social workers aim to:

… redefine and reconceptualise the power relations and structures in non-oppositional terms, allowing for differences between the different players involved, including yourself
(Fook 2002: 54, italics in original).

If the goal is to arrive at thinking about power relations and structures in non-oppositional terms, this seems to pre-emptively determine the position people should take, rather than allowing people to talk “themselves into a common situation” through dispute, disagreements and considering “innumerable perspectives and aspects”. Fook promotes ‘allowing for differences between different players involved, including yourself’ (2002: 54). Arendt wants a commonality based not on discovering how alike “we” are, but on ‘learning how each of us sees differently’ (Disch 1994: 40), a capacity which helps to define the distinctiveness of politics which is comfortable with politics. “Allowance” for difference seems not to engage differences as centrally and as actively as Arendt’s learning about each other and coming to terms with how we each understand the common world seems to imply. For Arendt:

… the articulation of a public space involves committing to an action while acknowledging the possibility of ongoing differences among the participants and providing for the possibility of continuing public criticism (Disch 1994: 40).

Differences between people seem to have a much stronger and valued presence in Arendt’s formulation. Arendt’s position is informed by her emphasis on plurality and natality in human interaction. These key concepts appear to add something qualitatively different and valuable to Fook’s empowerment steps.

Fook is far more hesitant about the need for ongoing dialogue than Arendt, evidenced by Fook’s claim that
You may need to develop a process of dialogue and communication so that different parties can come to understand how each experiences empowerment or disempowerment (2002: 54, my italics).

Arendt always thought it essential that people engage in dialogue, as opinion is inter-subjectively derived and political action requires interconnection and collaboration with others. Empowerment, according to Arendt, cannot occur without acting in public with others in the midst of plurality, as it is through acting in public with others in the midst of plurality that oppressive forms of relation might be altered (Gordon 1999). This is where Arendt’s distinctive approach to the idea of freedom becomes important.

Freedom

Arendt argues that because of the hostility towards politics by philosophers going back as far as Plato, the notion of freedom has been displaced from the political. Prior to this displacement of freedom, ‘freedom was an exclusively political concept, indeed the quintessence of the city-state and citizenship’ (Arendt 1961: 157). Arendt blames philosophers for ‘obfuscating the political nature of freedom’ (Beiner 1984: 350). Philosophers changed the meaning of freedom displacing it from its rightful place as a political concept. Freedom was of paramount importance for the practice of politics in ancient Greece, as well as ancient Rome. Freedom is a political concept and its practice is associated with being a citizen, her exemplar being the Athenian polis. An Athenian citizen was:

… exempted from the cares and concerns of domestic life, … freed from the necessities of the life process, in order to devote one’s full energies to deliberation upon the common good… And only in company with others could freedom be attained (Beiner 1984: 350, italics in original).

Freedom was always understood by Arendt, ‘as something that appears in the interaction of plural beings’ (Canovan 1992: 211). Like Foucault, Arendt argues that liberation is not the same thing as freedom. Canovan describes this distinction as follows:

Liberation from the constraints of bodily necessity and of other men is therefore an essential precondition for freedom, but only the first step on the road: freedom itself is something else again (1992: 212).

Someone who is ruled by someone else or is in dire poverty is not free. For Arendt political
freedom is a matter of participation in public affairs. It is far more than civil liberties, rights and access to a fair trial since she regards these as essentially “private” affairs. Individual citizens are to look after ‘their own res republica’ (Canovan 1999: 212, italics in original). It is in On Revolution (1963) that Arendt identifies freedom as a worldly reality which she says distinguishes it from liberation. ‘The confusion of freedom and liberation is for Arendt the expression of the social in revolutionary upheavals’ (Hansen 1993: 174). The

… displacement of freedom from its original home in the world of human affairs coincides with the emergence of Christianity, which intensifies even further the process of world alienation. Freedom in its political sense is now subordinated to the quest for the individual soul for transmundane salvation (Beiner 1984: 351).

Beiner (1984: 351) says that ‘[T]hese anti-political traditions contribute ultimately to the concept of freedom associated with modern liberalism’. Critical social work has tended to understand freedom within the liberal tradition, which considers freedom in

… terms of preserving and fostering individuality – the autonomy, self-determination, and unchecked activity of the free individual (Beiner 1984: 349).

Arendt was always anxious about the way the philosophical tradition had shifted

… the very idea of freedom such as it is given in human experience by transposing it from its original field, the realm of politics and human affairs in general, to an inward domain, the will, where it would be open to self-inspection (1961: 145.)

For Arendt freedom was the expression of political thought and speech: ‘it is the collective achievement of speaking and interacting agents’ (Beiner 1984: 349). In Arendt’s essays entitled, Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political thought (1961), she argues that:

… inwardness as a place of absolute freedom within one’s own self was discovered in late antiquity by those who had no place of their own in the world and hence lacked a worldly condition which, from early antiquity to almost the middle of the nineteenth century was unanimously held to be a prerequisite for freedom (1961: 147).

Locating freedom inwardly means that one can be a slave in the world and yet still consider oneself free. Arendt claims that we ‘first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves’ (1961: 148). Arendt claims that the ‘entire modern age has separated freedom and politics’ (1961: 148). Arendt says the
‘raison d’être of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action’ (1961: 146). Arendt argues that:

Men are free - as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom - as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same (1961: 153).

Freedom is thus linked to natality because Arendt conceived of freedom

… not as an inner human disposition but as a character of human existence in the world
… man is free because he is a beginning and was so created after the universe had already come into existence…. Because he is a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same (1961: 167).

In this way Arendt shared with Foucault a notion of freedom which understands it not as a possession of individuals, but as the very condition of being human.

Arendt certainly does not ‘equate freedom with free will’ (Villa 1996: 62). For her, ‘the will is an anti-political faculty (Villa 1996: 61) because it is individualistic and biased against plurality. For this reason Arendt argues:

… freedom as inherent in action is perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli’s concept of virtu, the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of fortuna (1961: 153).

To capture the sense of freedom in action, Arendt suggests that the metaphors best describing this are performative. The accomplishment of freedom is like ‘flute playing, dancing, healing, and seafaring’ (Arendt 1961: 153). This metaphor reinforces her point that political action is public and needs an audience. It cannot occur in isolation. Political action is not instrumental by seeking a determined outcome. Rather, it is about freedom, the kind of political freedom which ‘is something disclosed in the togetherness of men in a condition of human plurality’ (Beiner 1984: 354, italics in original). What is disclosed are principles like ‘honour or glory, love of equality or virtue, distinction or excellence…but also fear or distrust or hatred’ (Arendt 1961: 152).

As Arendt insisted:

Principles do not operate from within the self as motives do … but inspire, as it were, from without; and they are much too general to prescribe particular goals, although every particular aim can be judged in the light of its principle once the act has been started. For, unlike judgement of the intellect which precedes action, and unlike the command of the
will which initiates it, the inspiring principle becomes fully manifest only in the preforming act itself…. In distinction from its goal, the principle of action can be repeated time and again, it is inexhaustible, and in distinction from its motive, the validity of a principle is universal, it is not bound to any particular persons or any particular group. However, the manifestation of principles comes about only through action, they are manifest in the world as long as action lasts but no longer (1978: 152).

Disch argues that it is only through,

The speeches that people make in the attempt to cast a problem, event, or question as an “inter-est” and the actions they make in response to it reveal their principles… a principle cannot be possessed by or attributed to anyone. Principles are revealed indirectly by what we say and do, not defined by what we say about them or claim to do in their name. Principles are the intangible “in-between” that sustains Arendtian solidarity (Disch 1994: 38).

Biskowski draws out one implication for critical social work, when he says Arendt argued that a concern with social questions was better inspired by principles rather than sentiment (1993: 883). In her analysis of the French Revolution, Arendt argued that sentiment can have very bad consequences:

‘Robespierre and his associates began to glorify suffering and they set out to ‘emancipate the people not qua prospective citizens but qua malheureux’ (Arendt 1963: 111, italics in the original).

For all of Robespierre’s famous expression of pity for the poor, his pity for the poor turned into:

… the boundlessness of an emotion that seemed to respond only too well to the boundless suffering of the multitude in their sheer overwhelming numbers. By the same token he lost the capacity to establish and hold fast to rapport with persons in their singularity; … drowned all specific considerations, the considerations of friendship no less than the considerations of statecraft and principle (Arendt 1963: 90).

This kind of abstracted compassion always worried Arendt, because

[a]s a rule, it is not compassion which sets out to change worldly conditions in order to ease human suffering, but if it does, it will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of persuasion, negotiation and compromise, which are the processes of law and politics (1963: 82).
Arendt insisted that real compassion was an intimate experience belonging to the private sphere. Like violence compassion is affectively mute, in that:

…[i]t can never be established discursively… Arendt notes a close affinity between absolute goodness, so closely associated with compassion, and absolute evil… Because neither absolute good nor absolute evil can ‘speak’, each can meet the other only with violence (Hansen 1993: 179).

Arendt’s reputation for being a hard case rested on her observation that ‘[g]oodness leads to the disintegration of the public realm because it is ‘incompatible with taking responsibility for the public world’ (Canovan 1991: 182, cited in Levinson 2000: 98). For her action was always risky, unpredictable and uncontrollable. Good people tend not to like to take the risk of action because there is no guarantee that their actions will do good. They fear unintentionally being caught out in wrong-doing. To participate in political action according to Arendt means one must “learn not to be good”.

This may seem like an outrageous claim. Yet it ought to be observed that it did not mean that Arendt was in favour of being bad. Orlie (1997) argues that it is inevitable that people trespass against others and commit ordinary evil in making their way through the world or in making a home in the world. This does not cover deliberate evil doing or extra-ordinary evil, but it is an inherent aspect of political action that there are no guarantees as to the outcomes. In this sense, to act is to ‘relinquish mastery over oneself and the world’ (Levinson 2000: 100). The idea of self-mastery that follows from the principle of domination and rulership ‘cannot be sustained in the condition of plurality’ (Levinson 2000: 102). Levinson further states ‘the governing ideals of self-mastery – integrity, self-sufficiency and self-rule- can neither sustain action nor survive action’s unpredictable effects’ (2000: 103).

Arendt insists on the ‘antipolitical, unworldly quality of the moral life’ (Villa 1996: 56). Arendt understands the focus of politics is the world and this demands certain virtues, whereas the focus of morality and conscience is upon the self and this focus can miss the importance of preventing harm to others. Levinson spells out the problems of conflating morality and politics in modern life, by reminding us that the

… magnitude of the moral collapse [just in this century] is illustrated not simply in the many examples of deliberate cruelty toward others, but in the failure of so many “good people” to intervene in these instances of political wrongdoing (2000: 67).
An emphasis on being good and doing good based on absolutist morality leads to a ‘withdrawal from the world … [and] only the dogmatic absolutist truly believes that the end justifies the means’ (Villa 1996: 58). Politics demands a different ethic to the private sphere and ‘[g]oodness… as a consistent way of life, is not only impossible within the confines of the public realm, it is even destructive of it’, according to Arendt (cited in Villa 1996: 56).

Genuine solidarity between people cannot be built on compassion or love in the political realm. None of the passions located in the human heart are properly to be put on public display. ‘[T]he fusion of the private and the public in the social in the modern world’ has meant that:

> Freedom and power have parted company, and the fateful equating of power with violence, of the political with government, and of government with a necessary evil has begun (Arendt 1963, cited in Hansen 1993: 181).

In *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt painted a very harsh portrait of Robespierre, the leader of the French Revolution who became the very

> … model of the selfless revolutionary, who came to judge himself and others by the extent to which they acted against their own interests and their own wills (Hansen 1993: 179).

Given her understanding of the problem of selflessness in relation to totalitarianism, this denial of individuality, and of relations to others in their plurality and distinctiveness is for Arendt the hallmark of the anti-political.

Yet it would be wrong to assume from Arendt’s comments that she is indifferent to the plight of the poor or to the effects of poverty on people. Rather she wanted to distinguish between “social” questions and “the political”. The political sphere always meant “freedom” and the importance of participating in public affairs. The “social” question is about distribution of resources. The political is about being involved in ‘shaping and determining the very conditions of one’s life through activity at the political level’ (Beiner 1984: 368).

Empowerment practice in critical social work reflects a political notion when it recommends strategies like client group participation in decision-making. Critical empowerment social work practice is meant to include clients in activities that shape and determine clients’ lives (Gutierrez et al. 1998, Allan 2003: 62). Because Arendt did not think equality as the condition of sameness, she claimed that in practice, participation means that ‘the artificial public space
shared by citizens of a republic does not have to be based on or coincide with any natural community of race, ethnicity or religion’ (Canovan 1992: 244). This stands in contrast to:

[s]tructural approaches to empowerment, however, have demanded the empowerment of groups such as women, Aboriginal people, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and so on (Ife 1997: 136).

**Equality**

According to Fook (2002), critical social workers in reflecting on empowerment practices have effectively privileged the principle of “sameness”, instead of a “love of equality” and “distinctiveness”. On the principle and practice of equality, Arendt argues that:

> Our political life rests on the assumption that we can produce equality through organization, because man can act in and change and build a common world, together with his equals and only with his equals (1951: 301).

Yet Arendt saw clearly that an interest in equality tends to also create homogeneity because...

> … too obvious differences reminds us of the limitations of human activity –which are identical with the limitations of human equality (1951: 301).

Arendt suggest that the “alien” is a frightening symbol of the fact of difference as such, of individuality as such and, as some of the obvious differences are not within people’s capacity to change, people’s response to these limitations is a ‘distinct tendency to destroy’ (1951: 301). In this sense, ‘[h]uman equality is not a datum but a project, something to be established, if at all, only by political means’ suggests Canovan (1992: 240, italics in original).

Arendt was forceful in her account of the problems attendant on trying to establish equality by political means. In the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt was concerned that:

> … the Rights of Man were proclaimed to be “inalienable,” irreducible to and undeducible from other rights or laws, no authority was invoked for their establishment; Man himself was their source as well as their ultimate goal (Arendt 1951: 291).

The problem Arendt identifies with the
… declaration of inalienable human rights was that it reckoned with an “abstract” human being who seemed to exist nowhere, for even savages lived in some form of social order (1951: 291).

Without a political community to found the law and build the required institutions, these rights are problematic. Who can enforce them, who can protect abuses of these rights? Arendt reflected on the problem of the large number of stateless people without a home or political community, after World War II. What this situation revealed about the idea of inalienable human rights was that:

… the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them (Arendt 1951 : 292).

Separating human rights from citizenship rights left stateless people, according to Arendt, deprived

… of the right to action … the right to opinion … the right to belong to some kind of organized community … the loss, in other words, of some of the most essential characteristics of human life (1951: 296-297).

Arendt compares this condition of statelessness to

… the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human… It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man (1951: 297-300).

This point is highly significant in relation to critical social work, given for example Ife’s suggestion that:

… a common vision of humanity as the core of social work practice therefore requires a vision of universal human rights (Ife 1997: 123).

Ife proposes that:

Needs are the way that rights are translated into the local context, and they become the contextualised statement of rights for particular people in particular circumstances (1997: 122).

This was not Arendt’s view. She indicated that “necessity” was not a good basis for human rights. She thought political action between plural people in public was far more likely to
protect and promote citizenship rights of participation and opinion. Arendt was critical of “will-based, anti-pluralist universalism” because it “is fundamentally instrumental” and treats … [p]olitics [a]s a mere means… [because] if morality is conceived in a priori terms, then the importance of a space for deliberative politics - a politics of exchange of opinion and “incessant discourse” – is radically devalued (Villa 1996: 65, italics in the original).

Arendt argues that, ‘[o]nly the political life, the life of action and speech, is free; only the political life is human’ (Villa 1996:28). Arendt argued that this revaluation of politics and the political would pave the way to a ‘new appreciation of human plurality and the world of appearances in which it finds expression’ (Villa 1996:17). ‘Genuine political action,’ according to Arendt, ‘is nothing other than a certain kind of talk, a variety of conversation about public matters’ (Villa 1996:31).

This is for Arendt ‘the task of power: power “keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearances between acting and speaking men, in existence” (Honig 1993: 117). ‘Our freedom is manifest in how we enact principle’ according to Orlie (1997: 192). The principle of “necessity” Arendt suggests, is not a principle that values the public realm and political action enough to ensure freedom, that most precious of political qualities and principles.

Arendt early acquired from Kant,

…an absolute dichotomy between freedom and necessity … [and construes] political action as the only possible means of transcending the necessity of the life process, and the automatic dictates of nature (Beiner 1984: 361).

In her (1963) analysis and comparison of the American and French Revolution for example Arendt argued that it was ‘when the poor, driven by the needs of their bodies, burst on to the scene of the French Revolution’, that the definitive political virtue of freedom was lost in ‘what we have come to call the social question and what we may better and more simply call the existence of poverty’ (Arendt 1963: 54). Arendt made the point that the French revolution failed because it did not establish an on-going political space where citizens could deliberate, make decisions and co-ordinate action. The political space and opportunity for freedom was, according to Arendt, subordinated to ‘matters of managing welfare (the ‘social question’)’ reducing political institutions to administering the distribution of goods and services, matters that belonged properly, in Arendt’s mind, to the household or the private sphere (1963: 55).

What Arendt highlighted was that “poverty” distracted the French Revolution into ‘missing
their “historical moment” and ‘the revolution changed direction from freedom to the happiness of the people’ (Walsh 2003: 10). For Arendt, revolution must be ‘about freedom, action and the public realm, and thus the possibilities of citizenship’ (Hansen 1993: 170). The private sphere was understood by Arendt as constituted by labour, and located typically in the household, where the biological necessities of life are taken care of repeatedly and cyclically, through the endless repetition of birth and decay, and in this sense is indifferent to the individuality of each person (Canovan 1992: 106). For humans to be plural and distinguished as individuals they require a public realm.

Only the human world can provide the stable setting within which human beings can reliably appear as distinct individuals: only the world which they share can hold those individuals together while keeping them distinct (Canovan 1992: 106).

Human beings, according to Arendt are ‘unlikely to be fully human unless they inhabit a man-made world as well as living on the natural earth’ (Canovan 1992: 107).

The idea of the public realm as shared by human beings in the plural was an important idea for Arendt. She was reflecting on the problems of her time, a new form of government in totalitarianism, which she revealed as creating a fictitious world. The public realm, which is more than the world and much more fragile than the world, ‘is a place of discourse and action’ where very importantly ‘reality discloses itself’ (Canovan 1992: 111). It is the plurality of men in an authentic public realm that creates a space for ‘reality to appear in its manysidedness’ (Canovan 1992: 117). For Arendt,

[r]he polis was not simply an administrative space but an agonistic space in which citizens engaged in verbal battles in their struggle to be recognized as the most persuasive, the most intelligent, the most courageous or the most generous citizen (Levinson 2000: 87).

The polis, according to Arendt,

…is not the city-state in its physical location: it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be (1958: 198).

In contrast “society” ‘is a ‘pseudo-public realm, a distortion of authentic public life characterised by a combination of conformity and egocentricity’ (Canovan 1992: 117). Arendt was always concerned that the realms of “the social” and “the political” were not made
distinct and that by carelessly interchanging these two terms politics was disregarded. Indeed politics was often considered ‘nothing but a function of society’ (Walsh 2003: 6) in the liberal imaginary.

Conclusion

Arendt’s thinking about politics highlighted the frailty of human affairs. Political action endlessly confronts the boundlessness and unpredictability which free public action invariably generates. Instead of trying to gain mastery over human political affairs, Arendt suggested that we need to revalue the political as a form of acting in concert with others based on disagreements and on-going differences. Power, according to Arendt is a function of human relations and the opposite of violence or force which can only destroy and never create legitimate power. This means that where there is violence there is little space for politics. Empowerment in this context of thinking with Arendt clearly means to think and act politically in concert with others.

Arendt’s political theorising brings important insights to critical social work and those who advocate for an empowerment project. One crucial insight is to not predetermine “who” can be involved in political action based on political or social identities. Arendt does not regard political identities as the origin or the basis for political action. When political identities are not a necessary basis for political action it means that anyone can engage in political action by acting in concert with others. Political solidarity is reaffirmed as something that can occur without reliance on specific political identities. Arendt challenges critical social workers to think about empowerment not based on identity categories like gender, age, low socio-economic status, disability or race. Also anyone can engage in concert with others to defend attacks on various political identities to stop harm to people on the basis of their identities and attributed traits.

Thinking politically with Arendt completely disrupts a number of assumptions and practices by critical social workers. Critical social workers engage in distinctly unpolitical activities when they try to determine that a situation needs to be addressed, determine the designated members to be involved in solving the problem situation and establish the goals to be achieved, mostly prior to any discussion with the pre-determined “fitting” subjects of empowerment. Arendt would think of this mode of practice as anti-political. Arendt
encourages critical social workers to think politically about acting in concert with others.

For Arendt, plurality is both a human condition and a political achievement. Arendt’s understanding of plurality can assist critical social workers with the problems they have identified with the social concept of equality, where equality is understood as treating everyone the same. Treating everyone the same created difficulties for the critical social work empowerment project because differences are not valued and some people are silenced (Fook 2002; Healy 2000). Politically equality means that each of us through speech and action is capable of distinction. Equality is something achieved with others through political action. Equality is something to be achieved together rather than being understood as pre-given datum or fact. Critical social workers are challenged to rethink equality as a political concept and a political achievement by Arendt.

Arendt worried that the focus on necessity and the aggrandizement of the life process was distracting us from a notion of freedom as attained through and while acting politically in concert with others. Arendt’s focus is on the world and on how we relate to each other in caring about the world and on the inter-ests between us. When critical social workers understand freedom as an “inner freedom” or as self-determination, it distracts us from understanding freedom as something achieved through acting in concert with others. Politics is radically altered when freedom is understood and valued as that most precious of political qualities and principles.

In the next chapter, I explore a well-known and well-regarded early Australian critical social work empowerment practice example to re-view the way power, politics and freedom were understood. I will draw on both Arendt’s and Foucault’s theorising of power, political action and freedom to think about what critical social work empowerment practice was about in the early 1970s. I also want to identify what Arendt’s and Foucault’s ideas can offer critical social workers when they re-think and reformulate empowerment practice.
Chapter Four
Empowering the poor

The issue of power transformation is raised when the relations between the governed and the governors are challenged, rather than contesting who should be governors (Miller and Rein, cited in Benn 1981: 251).

… in the prosperous United States … the problem of poverty could be resolved without significant political or economic restructuring; it called for rehabilitative programs to bring the poor into the social and economic mainstream (O’Connor 2001: 122).

Introduction

It now seems timely to re-visit the Family Centre Project conducted by the Australian Brotherhood of St Laurence in 1972 to test the ideas about power, politics and freedom as explored with Foucault’s and Arendt’s theorising over the last few chapters of this thesis. I selected the Family Centre Project because it is hailed by Ife (1997) as an exemplary critical social work empowerment project in Australia. The Project is said to translate the notion of “empowerment” into critical social work practice (Ife 1997: 149). The Family Centre Project aimed to devise ‘an innovative and radical approach to attacking poverty’ (Liffman 1978: 11, my italics). This Project continues to excite attention in many Australian social welfare courses because as Fook and Morley indicate the Family Centre Project ‘represented a major early empowerment project’ (2005: 69). The Family Centre Project was considered an experiment in radically dealing with poverty and several researchers were employed to document the Project’s progress. Fortunately this means that various documents and evaluative accounts of the Project are available (Liffman 1975, 1978; Benn 1981; Williams 1981; Wiseman 1978; Gilley 1990). These accounts record what people thought they were “doing” with the project and as such articulate social work empowerment practice in relation to “the poor”. I draw mainly on Liffman’s (1975, 1978) and Benn’s (1981) accounts of the Project to explore how power, politics, participation and “the poor” were conceptualised and what social work “empowerment” practices were used within the Project. I aim to bring Foucault and Arendt’s thinking in relation to power, politics and identity into dialogue with how the Project was thought about to begin to explore what both Arendt’s and Foucault’s
theorising can contribute to social workers’ current re-thinking of empowerment practice.

In this chapter I draw often on Michael Liffman’s (1978) account of the Family Centre Project entitled *Power for the Poor*. Liffman was employed to research the Family Centre Project by the Brotherhood of St Laurence. For Wiseman, Liffman’s account is notable at the descriptive level, ‘providing evidence of the dynamics involved in organizing “the poor” into a community capable of making its own decisions and running its own activities’ (1978: 158). I also draw on Concetta Benn’s account entitled *Attacking Poverty through participation – a Community Approach* (1981). Both accounts are useful for exploring the conceptualisation of the Project’s ideas on power, politics, participation and identity. The Family Centre Project is identified professionally with social work through Concetta Benn because Benn, according to Liffman, was ‘a leading Melbourne social worker’, [and] Concetta Benn, officially took up the position of co-ordinator of the new [Family Centre] project’ in 1972 (1978: 27). The Family Centre Project’s organisational location within the Social Work Services and the Youth and Children’s Services section of the Brotherhood of St Laurence also identifies it with social work.

Both Liffman (1978) and Benn (1981) present the Family Centre Project chronologically in their accounts. Each author describes the first year of the Project as mainly about “innovation and experiment”. The second year is characterised as the “consolidation of the project” and the third year as “the politicisation of the Family Centre project”. Each author emphasised different aspects of the project and Liffman’s (1978) account starts with how the Project was related to sociological theories about poverty and its causes. Liffman (1978) positions the social workers understanding of the Family Centre Project as not blaming the poor for being poor but as looking towards structural change to find solutions to poverty. Benn’s (1981) account focuses more on the historical events within the Brotherhood of St Laurence and its organisational culture and highlights the connections to the United States’ “War on Poverty”. It is worthwhile to explore in some detail how both Liffman’s (1978) and Benn’s (1981) accounts deal with the notions of power, poverty, participation and politics. I hope to show what Benn’s (1981) and Liffman’s (1978) accounts reflect about critical empowerment social work thinking at that time in relation to key concepts of power, politics and identity.
Introducing the family centre project

The aim of the Family Centre Project according to the publicity material used by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (from now on called the Brotherhood) was ‘to set up an innovative and experimental anti-poverty programme designed to test new ways of assisting poor families’ (Liffman 1978: 11). Prior to this innovation the Brotherhood ran a drop in centre where people could present for financial aid. The social work service used an individual casework approach to poverty, with financial aid as a tool. One of the expressed frustrations for Brotherhood staff was the very exacting and unrewarding nature of this casework, which

… consisted either of handing out small amounts of money that both client and worker knew could not possibly cover the multitudinous needs of the family, or spending hours working with the family with infinitesimal rewards in terms of improved functioning and little change to the social or economic condition of the family. The only real gains were that workers often enabled individual and family functioning and learnt a great deal about poor families (Liffman 1978:30).

The relationship between people needing money and needing casework was questioned by social workers at the Brotherhood (Peterson 1965 cited in Benn 1981: 28). In 1969 social workers were questioning the official policy of the intensive casework as the answer to poverty and also suggested that there was choice between ‘spreading resources thinly over a wider population in need or alternatively developing intensive work with a more stringently selected smaller client population’ (Stevenson 1969, cited in Benn 1981: 18). It was a very difficult move for the Brotherhood to decide to focus its resources on a small group of poor families when its credo was to ‘help all in need’ (Benn 1981: 28). However in 1971 the Brotherhood developed a proposal for the family centre project that,

… planned to provide substantial resources, including 20 members of staff, to 60 selected poor families to enable them to improve their own social and economic conditions (Benn 1981:1).

There was research evidence available from an American public assistance agency that intensive casework had no appreciable effect (Benn 1981: 28). The dissatisfaction with the casework approach to dealing with poverty was reinforced though exposure to sociological knowledge in social work courses which were producing new graduates that were concerned about the functioning of society and its institutions. There was a concern with social change
and an interest in using community development and social action approaches based on some of the material on the ‘War on Poverty’ coming out of America (Benn 1981: 28).

The notion of consumer participations in service delivery was an idea that was according to Benn very slowly accepted by the Brotherhood but was the guiding principle for the new Family Centre Project’s approach to working with the poor (Benn 1981: 37). Benn (1981:2) claimed that:

… the social problem of poverty reflected the fundamental power relations in society, that is, that the poor were powerless by virtue of their exclusion from the decision-making processes in society (my italics).

For this reason, power was to be transferred from the workers to the poor families within the Family Centre Project. However, Benn indicated that this was difficult for social workers to conceptualise. According to Benn, this

… concept of power and its distribution was not a new idea, having received a great deal of currency from sociologists and political scientists in the American War on Poverty (Benn 1981:82)

These ideas were however new to social work and tended not to fit the kind of social work education that had been offered previously which concentrated on the casework method and on individual rather then societal change (de Jon 1972, cited in Benn 1981:93). Further, as O’Connor claims,

Despite their (Community Action sociologists/social scientists) belief in the value and importance of “indigenous” participation, community action theorists had not been specific about how it was to be achieved (2001: 133).

This ‘vagueness and ambivalence about its purpose… and community action’s underlying view of the poor’ contributed to difficulties with resident participation in the United States demonstration projects (O’Connor 2001: 133). A similar vagueness about to how to go about empowering the poor and a deep ambivalence about political action seems to have also impacted on the Family Centre Project in several ways that I will explore further using Foucault’s and Arendt’s theorising.

At the beginning of the Project Benn presented the four-pronged idea of power (1981, Liffman 1978). The schema, devised by Benn, ‘identified four types of “power” to which it claimed all people are entitled, and to which the poor have only limited access. These types of
power were described as “power over decision-making”, “power over resources”, “power over relationships” and “power over information” (Liffman 1987: 30-31). This schema was apparently enthusiastically received and accepted by staff and became ‘part of the language of the Project serving as a pivot around which its development proceeded’ (Benn 1981: 82). This conceptual schema provided a way to approach the broader task of transferring power to the poor within the project.

The Family Centre operated out of a large house in Fitzroy an inner suburb of Melbourne and provided considerable resources to the sixty selected families. These resources included use of a large multi-purpose building, free medical assessments, camps and recreational programs for adults and children and in the end eighteen staff (Williams 1981; Gilley 1995). In the first two years of the Project:

… a major effort was made within the limited resources of the Family Centre Project to improve the conditions of the families, outside existing policies and provisions, by paying families’ Housing Commission arrears and through the Family Centre’s own pre-school programme (Liffman 1978: 145).

The most common understanding by the families of what the project was about was that it was a ‘type of club to which certain families would belong and where there would be activities for the whole family’ (Benn 1981: 100). Some of these activities included sewing, cooking and sports. The cooking and camping program were considered the most successful in producing cohesion and cooperation between family members (Benn 1981).

It was assumed that in order for poor families to be involved in the Project they needed to be relieved of constantly having to struggle to make ends meet. The Project thus provided a guaranteed minimum income supplement to these sixty selected poor families (Liffman 1978; Benn 1981). Benn reports that in the late 1960s there were articles about guaranteed minimum income schemes in social work journals and the Canadian Special Senate Committee on Poverty Report (1972) (1981: 91). These articles and reports offered views about a guaranteed minimum income as everyone’s right and considered it a strategy for dealing with poverty systematically and/or structurally.

The guaranteed minimum income supplement was considered a significant break from the earlier income augmentation by the Brotherhood, which in the past was distributed over a huge number of families, in an irregular and discretionary manner by individual social workers (Benn 1981). According to Benn the guaranteed income proposal ‘was based on
some of Professor Henderson’s poverty study findings and was composed of subsidies for rent and for large families’ (1981: 74). According to Liffman (1978: 36) this decision by the Brotherhood to accept an income supplement scheme as an essential component of the Project meant that ‘the agency was proclaiming its belief in the structural and financial basis of poverty and in the right of the poor to self-determination’.

One of the conclusions Benn asserts the staff arrived at was that ‘the casework relationship was not a balanced human relationship, based on equality and equal power’ (1981: 138). Benn devised the “developmental approach” for the Family Centre Project (1981:104). The developmental approach shifted the responsibility for what change was to occur to the family itself. Each family was to devise its own developmental plan and name and record its aspirations and goals on their open case file held at the Family Centre. The workers in the Project were ‘to provide the families with resources and skills so that they could change their own social and economic condition’ (Benn 1981:107). The open file would be used as a co-ordination mechanism, as various workers assisted the family work towards its goals. These processes were considered to be significant improvements on traditional casework as families were to set their own agenda and workers were there to assist the families to achieve their own aspirations.

The Project accounts indicate that staff sought to alter the relationship between the participant families and the social workers from one where the professionalism of the worker predominated to one where the families chose which workers to relate to. Family Centre workers were no longer going to be caseworkers. Rather they were to be consultants or resource workers to the families on issues such as housing and employment, with the aim of transferring their knowledge about these issues to the families so that they could assist themselves. According to Benn (1981) the Project attempted to disrupt taken-for-granted social work practices with “the poor” by indicating the serious limitations of casework and specifically the psychoanalytic approach to so-called poor families.

The families were to be involved in decision-making through participating in the committee of management for the Project. The idea or goal, in the last year of the Project especially, was that power would be handed over to the families completely and that professional staff would withdraw from the Project at the end of its three years duration (Benn 1981). In the final year the Family Centre Project was to transform into a self-help organisation (Action Resource Centre) “for the poor by the poor”. The expectation was that by giving “power to the poor”
within the Project:

… those in poverty would be able to change both themselves and society, learn to handle the welfare system and act in a collective way to provide mutual support and social change (Wiseman 1978: 158).

This brief overview of the Family Centre Project reflects its innovative and daring break with many accepted ideas in social work with the so called poor. My task now is to explore this Project’s accounts in relation to Foucault’s and Arendt’s theorising to see what insights their work bring to the notion of poverty, politics, identity and participation, insights that might guide critical social workers thinking about current social work practices.

Poverty

According to Liffman (1978), explanations of the causes of poverty tend to take two forms: the “cultural” model and the “situational” model. The “cultural” model of poverty argues that poverty is a way of life that is based on group values, is self-perpetuating and is passed on from generation to generation. The “cultural” model of poverty implies that even if poor people are provided with income, this will not be sufficient to ‘throw off the general syndrome of poverty’ (Liffman 1978:17). On the basis of these assumptions help for the poor should be ‘directed at their value structures and at strengthening their personalities’ (Liffman 1987:17). Hence a casework approach to helping the poor in social work fits with the “cultural” model of poverty as it focuses on strengthening poor people’s personalities and values. The “situational” model of poverty understands the poor as victims of an unjust society and the best approach to dealing with poverty is thus making changes to the unjust structures and institutions in society. The Family Centre took the position that ‘poverty was not due to personal characteristics but due to the lack of money and resources which are provided by an adequate income’ (Benn 1981: 74) and this represented an advance on thinking about poverty for each of these authors (Liffman 1978; Benn 1981).

Wiseman is critical of Liffman’s (1978) account for not providing ‘the historical context and cultural meaning of poverty’ (1978:157). For Wiseman, this means that ‘Liffman’s account floats in an ideological void’ (1978:157). Indeed, Wiseman questions ‘why action for the poor by the poor should emerge in this particular period?’(1978: 156). This is the kind of question that emerges from Foucault’s approach to historicising social problems. Foucault’s approach directs critical social workers to explore the way a problem like “poverty” is broadly
historically formulated. It is significant to note the historical context of the Family Centre Project in the early 1970s in Australia. Several demonstration projects to overcome poverty were commissioned in the United States during the 1950 and 1960’s (O’Connor 2001), as well as in Britain (Alcock 1993: 243). These experiments and their conception of the poor and the new research technologies and practices are not discussed in Liffman’s (1978) account of the Project’s constitution of poverty.

Foucault’s approach requires that social workers aim to understand the historical context of what they do. Questions like: ‘why action for the poor by the poor should emerge in this particular period?’ are significant to critical social workers in understanding what is framing their practice (Wiseman 1978: 156.) ‘How is it that poverty came to be understood as a problem which could be resolved through social experimentation’? is another question in this vein that sheds light on the kinds of formulations of problems and solutions evident in the Family Centre Project. These are the kinds of questions according to Foucault that critical social workers may find useful when thinking about what they are “doing”.

A governmental review of how poverty was understood at the time of the Project may be helpful when thinking about empowerment practices. The “cultural” model of poverty was evident also in the 1960s “re-discovery of poverty” amongst affluence in most western countries. This rediscovery of poverty was promulgated in Harrington’s (1963) *The Other America* (a best-seller). In Australia it was John Stubb’s (1966) book, *The Hidden People* and in the United Kingdom, Abel Smith and Townsend’s (1965) *The Poor and the Poorest* and later, Coates and Silburn’s (1970) *Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen*. In Australia between 1966 and 1970 came the release of reports on poverty, undertaken by Professor Ronald Henderson and his newly established Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at Melbourne University, which according to Hollingworth represented the ‘first serious research into the problems of poverty ever done in this country’ (1975: 2). However, what these accounts offered was a notion that the poor were a ‘self-contained, culturally deprived group’ (O’Connor 2001: 100) within an otherwise prosperous society, ignoring that the “affluent society” in reality:

…was riddled with structural inequalities that made the experience of prosperity selective and that of poverty more concentrated among people – the elderly, racial minorities, women heading households, and low-skilled laborers in “depressed areas of the economy-all of whom, as one report put it, affluence had “left behind” (O’Connor 2001: 100).
The call for a “vast social movement” to “empower the poor” is attributed by O’Connor (2001) to Michael Harrington in the United States, in his best selling *The Other America* (1963). In Australia, a similar kind of momentum was understood to be building, according to Hollingworth (1975), who indicates a series of events that called for solving the problem of poverty in scientific ways. For instance, in 1969 a national conference on poverty sponsored by the Australian Institute of Political Science, brought together Professor David Donnison from the London School of Economics, social workers and academics, plus the then newly appointed Minister for Social Services, W.C. Wentworth. Apparently, the conference aroused great interest and the proceedings were published as *Poverty in Australia* (Hollingworth 1975: 2). The momentum was building to attack poverty in new scientific ways. Hollingworth, as one of the directors at the Brotherhood of St Laurence, was partly instrumental in gaining support for the Family Centre Project poverty alleviation demonstration proposal.

However, the conception of the poor that Harrington contributed to Oscar Lewis’s “culture of poverty” idea is that ‘[t]he poor in America were like an “underdeveloped nation”’ (O’Connor 2001: 121), meaning that:

... [t]hey are a different kind of people. They think and feel differently; they look upon a different America than the middle class look upon (Harrington 1962, cited in O’Connor 2001: 122).

Indeed, Lewis distilled an ever growing inventory of “traits” that poor people supposedly possess and described them as essential features of a ‘way of life, remarkably stable and persistent, passed down from generation to generation along family lines’ (O’Connor 2001: 117). The question of whether “the poor” are a “different kind of people” has occupied the minds of many involved in research on poverty, according to O’Connor (2001). This question focuses attention on *what is different about the poor* within an affluent society rather than on how economic, social and political arrangements continue to create inequalities of opportunity and access to resources.

The idea that the poor are somehow “different” was something the Brotherhood of St Laurence grappled with in its own research on “the poor”. Indeed the question, ‘are the poor different’? was directly researched by the Brotherhood. However the conception of “the poor” as incompetent and as “different” was challenged by reports like the one written by Judith O’Neil and Rosemary Nairn for the Brotherhood entitled *The Have Nots – A study of 150 Low Income Families* (1972). This report looked in detail at the circumstances of 150 families who
were Brotherhood clients and asked some fundamental questions about whether these families were:

… suffering from a complex tangle of psychological and emotional difficulties or was the main problem, and the source of other problems, their lack of money? (Liffman 1978:29).

It is interesting to note that “difference” implied incompetence or deficits on the part of so-called poor people.

According to Benn (1981), a search for a “culture of poverty” was initially built into the original Family Centre Project proposal, which stated that there was:

… need for more information about the families and sought through research to build up a detailed qualitative picture … of … the cultural patterns and attitudes of these families. In turn this would determine whether we can talk about a ‘culture of poverty’ (Hollingworth 1971, cited in Benn 1981:80).

However, at the time, Family Centre staff were apparently reading a United States book by Charles Valentine called *Culture and Poverty* (1968, cited in Benn 1981) that argued that the cultural views of the poor may be much the same as middle class values and that they are merely modified in practice because of situational stresses. According to Benn, it did not take long for the Family Centre workers to become aware that:

… searching for a ‘culture of poverty’ not only located the causes of poverty in the personalities of the poor, but also prohibited a more radical approach to poverty (1981: 81).

According to Benn, the beliefs of the Family Centre Project were that:

… the causes of poverty lay in the institutional structure of society, and not in the inadequacies of poor people. It was still believed that the main objective of the new Project should be the redistribution of the resources of the community through institutional change brought about by the radical reform of existing institutions … [and] could contribute to radical change and the substantial alteration of society (1981: 203).

The Family Centre Project accounts identified poverty as primarily caused by a lack of money. This problematisation of poverty as a “not enough money problem”, according to Walters, from a biopolitical perspective means the ‘strategy of governing poverty’ [then
CHAPTER FOUR – EMPOWERING THE POOR

becomes]… “giving people money” ’ (1994: 279). The Family Centre Project provided a
guaranteed income supplement to the sixty families and alleviated much hardship (Liffman
1975). However, theoretically poverty is being treated as a narrow “economic” problem.
According to Foucault, the way the “economic” functions in modern societies can have
effects social workers may need to consider when thinking about poverty in narrow
“economic” terms. Because a narrow economic conception of poverty can allow the
containment, deflecting and closing off of the troubling questions about how power relations,
the impacts of capitalism, colonial settlement, dispossession, racism and slavery would
account for why people are poor, and how the broader power relations in society help to
perpetuate poverty.

Liffman’s (1978) account stresses that the Family Centre Project staff considered that the
definition of poverty as a lack of income represented an advance on blaming the poor for
being poor. Foucault’s theorising makes the point that the “economic” in modern power
relations provides a key reason for the acquisition of knowledge of the populace and also
operates as a medium of pastoral power by requiring information about each individual’s
economic and personal situation. This point alerts social workers to reflect on how despite the
claim that the “situational” model of poverty represents a shift away from pathologising the
poor, a narrow “economic” definition of poverty still focused the social work intervention on
the poor themselves. Even though the Family Centre Project considered the “situational”
model of poverty to be a more progressive approach to understanding poverty, in practice the
Family Centre Project still focused on collecting information about the poor families’ income,
housing and employment attainments. The “situational” model of poverty continued to require
the detailed study of “the poor” rather than a study of structural inequalities in society.

The Family Centre Project was regarded as a demonstration project because according to
Benn, who quoted Martin Rein (1970: 138) the definition of a demonstration project is as
follows:

A small program, funded for a definite period of time (its counterpart in industry is
usually called a “pilot project”). It has specific objectives and approaches which are
subjected to critical scrutiny; it serves a select area and population with the fervent hope
that the lessons it learns and “demonstrates” through the rigours of scientific research,
will somehow lead to large-scale adoption and major shifts in the aims, styles, resources,
and effectiveness of major social service organization and programs (1981: 7).

119
Benn defines the Family Centre Project as a demonstration project based on these characteristics. What Foucault’s governmentality theorising adds to this understanding of the project is the question: ‘How is at this point in history that we consider it possible, practicable to deal with poverty as a social experiment?’ ‘What new technologies of self does it require of family members and social workers?’

**Poverty experiments**

In the United States the “War on Poverty” in the early 1960s used a Community Action model of experiments and

> … treated low-income neighbourhoods as laboratories for research-based reforms, and as vehicles not only for linking social science with official policy but also for garnering expert and “indigenous” cooperation in achieving community goals (O’Connor 2001: 124).

The community action programs methodology used in the United States to deal with poverty was imitated in Britain. According to Alcock, anti-poverty strategies in Britain were significantly influenced by the United States’ “War on Poverty”. Britain imitated its initiatives on a smaller scale (1993: 243). In Britain twelve projects were run called the Community Development Projects (CDP).

The CDPs were something of an experiment in the utilisation of government funding for community-based action, and although they were limited in scope and number, they received a great deal of attention from academics and politicians (Alcock 1993: 244).

According to O’Connor (2001) this conception relates to the new technological research industry’s capacity in the United States for micro-simulation modelling which supposedly would assist in estimating “program benefits and costs”. The hope in the United States in the 1950 and 1960s was that the problem of poverty could be resolved ‘without significant political or economic restructuring’ (O’Connor 2001: 122). Although the community action program methodology was underdeveloped and untried in the United States, it was hoped that solving the problem of poverty was possible through new social experiments which aimed to engage the “indigenous poor” to empower themselves (O’Connor 2001). In the “War on Poverty” context, “indigenous” referred to poor people who were residents in low-income neighbourhoods. The Family Centre Project also used this terminology of the “indigenous” to
speak about family members who became employed in the Family Centre. These family members were referred to as “indigenous workers” in Benn’s (1981) account.

The Community Action programs in the United States and Britain were auspiced by governments and were testing policy makers, economists and social scientists’ propositions about how to best to deal with poverty. Indeed, O’Connor identifies these experiments as “antidemocratic” and as ‘social engineering imposed from above’ (2001: 103). Ironically an “antidemocratic” process of working with “the poor” imposed from above was understood as “empowering the poor” by activating the poor to act on their on behalf. The relation between research on poverty and newly developed research techniques and political action was not explicitly teased out in the two accounts of the Family Centre Project (Liffman 1978; Benn 1981). Foucault’s genealogical approach to analysing where we draw our ideas from and what effect they are likely to have directs critical social workers to reflect on how the Family Centre Project was framed and to pay attention to the assumptions inherent in these ideas that may foreclose on the likelihood of the Project achieving an empowering outcome for ‘the poor’. According to O’Connor:

… community action’s experimental idealism – its belief that change could be achieved in a scientific process of planning, experimentation, assessment, and knowledge application - was itself being challenged by the incompatibilities between the scientific objectives of research and the political demands upon action (2001: 136).

The belief that scientific approaches to poverty would solve the problem without major restructuring of society and a redistribution of wealth are evident in O’Connor’s account of the United States poverty experiments. In the Brotherhood there was considerable hope expressed for the notion that:

… finally poverty was officially registered in the annals of the nation as a problem which needed careful investigation and action (Hollingworth 1975: 4).

Hollingworth thought that this recognition of “poverty” as a social, technical and perhaps even a scientific problem would be:

… sufficient to prove the point that national policies can be changed and that government can be made to act in response to an expressed concern for minority groups within the nation (1975: 4–5).

Clearly the hope expressed by Hollingworth and others that investigating poverty technically
and scientifically would lead to reforms by sympathetic political parties has not come to fruition. Jamrozik (2001:112) recently claimed that:

… unfortunately, there is [still] no evidence that the findings of increasing poverty in Australia (Saunders 1994) lead to government measures designed to reduce, let alone eliminate, poverty.

Instead of focusing on structural inequalities in society Benn’s account of the Family Centre Project reviewed the Brotherhood’s social work practices with poor people and developed a strong critique of casework as an unequal and unfair relationship. This focus echoes the strong critique of casework was also evident in the 1950s and 1960s Community Action Programs in United States. The Community Action programs, although undeveloped as a form of practice,

… set themselves quite apart from and in strong opposition to social work practice, setting their sights instead on a concept of “systems reform” that would make individual casework obsolete (O’Connor 2001: 125).

Benn strongly opposed individual casework in her account of the Family Centre Project. In following Benn’s account I will show how Foucault governmentality theorising is useful in stimulating critical social workers to re-engage with the current case management discourses and the production of fitting subjects for empowerment practice.

Blameworthy cases

The Family Centre Project in attempted to move away from blaming individuals and their families for being poor wanted to treat the families in an empowering way. One of the key social work practices, according to Benn, the staff of the Brotherhood:

… began to question [was] the whole idea of casework as the answer to poverty. Whichever way it was viewed, casework, by its very nature identified the person’s problems as lying within the person, and not within the society in which he lived. The general view among the staff appeared to be that intensive casework with an individual poor family did not make an inadequate pension more adequate (1978: 30).

In her account of the Family Centre Project Benn (1981) offers a scathing account of casework practices and its inadequacy in relieving poverty. Benn shows the inadequacy of
casework by presenting her analysis of the Brotherhood’s casework dealings with the Ellis family. According to Benn, the casework record of the Ellis family ‘drew a depressing picture of a large family both economically depressed and socially incompetent and disadvantaged’ (1981: 49). Benn (1981) highlights that in 1957, after two years of intensive social casework and 193 home visits, little change was made in the Ellis family’s circumstances. The diagnostic statement made by the social worker in the one hundred closely typed pages of case record suggests that:

… they [the family] create difficulties for themselves.... The intellectual and emotional defects of the parents render them unable to respond and they evade every effort to guide or help them (Benn 1981: 53).

These comments indicate that the worker blamed the family and held them responsible for their problems. The conclusion Benn (1981) draws is that casework is a method of working that inherently blamed individuals and as such has to be altered and more empowering practices used when working with the families in the Project.

Foucault’s early and middle work suggests that particular kinds of individuals and families are portrayed through specific techniques and practices. In the analysis of the Ellis case study file the practices of casework and home visiting are said to describe individuals and families ‘who will not, perhaps by nature cannot, conform to the norm’ (Simons 1995: 31-31). In this way, the family, especially each parent is not simply judged as having a below adequate income, but is considered:

… a member of a subspecies whose [inadequate income] can be explained as part of his being, his character, and his upbringing’ (Foucault 1975, cited in Simons 1995: 32).

The case of the Ellis Family confirms that they were understood through the casework model to belong to a subspecies, a category called “the poor”, a group potentially significantly “different” from the mainstream of society and by implication personally deficient.

The case notes showed this family as unable to conform to the norm, despite all efforts to guide or help them. Even though the problems of the family were not solved, according to Foucault’s early and middle work, the “case” still functioned as a successful social work case because their demonstrated lack of conformity proved that this family belonged outside the norm and required help. As Solas (1996) put it, for empowerment to have any purchase, firstly, a disempowered and thus a “fitting subject” for empowerment has to be constituted.
Secondly, this process functions to position the worker as someone who can offer guidance to the client as someone who is empowered to help.

For Foucault, it is a problem that each family member is surveilled, observed and judged in relation to ‘his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements’ (1977: 304). The professional gaze was focused on the Ellis family’s behaviour during home visits. Foucault understands these home visits as an exercise of normalising power. Foucault argues that ‘these are practices for producing docile yet productive bodies who have internalised the gaze of authority’ (Simons 1995: 19). Any failure to internalise the gaze of authority leads to an intensification of this gaze, as 193 home visits to the Ellis family over two years attest.

Benn’s (1981) critique of casework is focused more on how casework blames the family and less on how casework techniques and practices produce an understanding of “the poor” as objects of particular kinds of knowledge. This means that other methods of inquiry into the participant families’ lives, which continued this professional gaze, were not noticed as a continuation of what Foucault understood as normalising power. For instance, according to Benn:

… [i]nformation about the basic economic circumstances of each of the Project families and their economic needs as they saw them was collected over the three months before the commencement of the Project (1981: 80).

In this way the processes or techniques for understanding poverty in the Family Centre Project still focused on “the poor”. Both Foucault and Arendt consider practices and their effects to be more indicative of power relations than the intentions behind the practices. So even though the workers may not be blaming the poor for being poor, in practice the poor are still the focus of the poverty research and as such remain “objects of study”. Foucault’s theorising can alert social workers to how their practices continue to impose normalising power relations even while their aim is to equalise power relations.

Benn devised the “developmental approach” for the Family Centre Project (1981:104). The developmental approach shifted the responsibility for what change was to occur to the family itself. Each family was to devise its own developmental plan and name and record its aspirations and goals on their open case file held at the Family Centre. The workers in the Project were ‘to provide the families with resources and skills so that they could change their own social and economic condition’ (Benn 1981:107). The open file would be used as a co-
ordination mechanism, as various workers assisted the family work towards its goals. These processes were considered to be significant improvements on traditional casework as families set their own agenda and workers were there to assist clients achieve their own aspirations. However this “developmental approach” was imposed on both the workers and the families (Benn 1981).

The poor family members’ aspirations and goals were also understood as arising from the families in an unmediated way. This fails to grasp the point Cruikshank (1994) makes that people’s aspirations and goals are influenced and mediated by power relations. Foucault again alerts critical social workers to the effects of normalising power in using pastoral processes like the developmental plan. Benn (1981) indicates that some families were non-compliant in developing their “developmental plan” and given that it was an imposed task the non-compliance may well be a form of resistance to professional power on the part of some families. The developmental plan aimed to empower the poor to gain control over their lives. However this process still required and relied on poor people revealing their aspirations and to speak the “truth” of themselves as Foucault might put it. Foucault found modern powers relentless request to tell “the truth” of our selves problematic because modern power requires in-depth knowledge of each and everyone to regulate and discipline action towards society’s norms.

The Family Centre Project was interested in the poor families’ aspirations. Even though the Family Centre Project eschewed the “cultural” model of poverty it still highlighted data that was collected from the families, prior to the project that stated:

… the pattern of living of the families were dictated by a lack of money and resources, and their attitudes were very similar to those of the majority of Australians towards, for instance, owning their own home and obtaining a good education for their children (Benn 1981: 80-81).

This finding echoes Valentine’s work (1968) and stresses that the cultural views of the poor may be much the same as middle class values merely modified in practice because of situational stresses. Basically, this finding is saying that, the poor are not “different” from the middle class in their aspirations. This finding was also echoed in the United States, where situationalists, like Gans (1970) insisted that:
… the majority of lower-class families did accept mainstream, middle-class values even as they adopted more relaxed or unconventional behavioural norms (O’Connor 2001: 199).

This points to the possibility that the Family Centre Project in attempting to show that “the poor” were not “different” just short of money might be encouraging an assimilationist stance. The poor are not “different” as they have the same aspirations as the middle class mainstream population. This echoes the point Fook (2002) made in relation to empowerment being about reducing inequality. Interestingly, Fook indicates that:

… what equality means is often unclear or oversimplified. Often it is assumed that equality = sameness. Therefore the process of empowerment necessarily means that all people and groups become the same (2002: 59-50, italics in the original).

In this sense the argument that the poor are not “different” lends itself to the Family Centre Project, ‘embracing assimilation to the existing social and economic order as its ultimate goal for the poor’ (O’Connor 2001: 132-133).

Indeed, O’Connor attributes to the United States demonstration projects a ‘basically amelioristic, culturally assimilative vision of reform’ (2001: 127). Arendt was concerned about assimilation because it tends to threaten and to limit human plurality, natality and freedom. Both Foucault and Arendt are concerned about conformity to mass society and the limits it imposes on diverse forms of living. Both Foucault’s and Arendt’s theorising requires critical social workers to think about the normalising aspects of their approach to various problems. Payne (1997) suggests in discussing empowerment social work practice that it tends to reinforce conformity to mass society. One of the strategies of empowerment is to make various marginal groups acceptable to society (Payne 1997). One of the tasks social workers’ undertake in empowerment practice, according to Payne (1997), is preparing “powerful” decision makers for hearing powerless peoples’ claims for fairness in a more sympathetic manner.

One claim made to the Brotherhood executive to increase the fairness and effectiveness of working with the poor families in the Family Centre project involved a guaranteed minimum income scheme. The “situational” model of poverty, according to Liffman (1978) as well as some articles and reports expressing the view that a guaranteed minimum income is everyone’s right (Benn 1981) are said to have prepared the ground for trialling a guaranteed minimum income strategy by the Family Centre Project.
Guaranteed minimum income scheme

The guaranteed minimum income supplement was considered a significant break from the earlier income augmentation by the Brotherhood, which in the past was distributed over a huge number of families, in an irregular and discretionary manner by individual social workers (Benn 1981). The Family Centre Project saw itself as trialling a guaranteed minimum income supplement for poor families. The decision may not have come easily, as to pay:

\[ \ldots \text{significant amounts of money to poor families unconditionally brought into disquietingly sharp focus the question of the right of poor families to such support and their competence in using it (Liffman 1978: 36).} \]

At the time of the Project the Department of Social Security was also ‘showing interest in guaranteed income schemes’ (Benn 1981: 75). Indeed, based on a submission by the Brotherhood, the Department of Social Security funded an additional research officer to study the impact of the guaranteed income supplement on poor families. According to Benn,

\[ \text{Fortunately, the income supplement experiment coincided with the professed interest of the new Labor Government (1972/1975) in a guaranteed income scheme and consequently the Family Centre Project attracted a subsidy from the Department of Social Security for the financial years 1973/1974 ($30,000) and 1974/1975 ($38,000) (1981: 92).} \]

In the late 1960s and early 1970s four federally funded experiments in New Jersey, in the United States, aimed

\[ \ldots \text{to demonstrate the efficacy of what for many, and especially economists, was an idea whose time had come: a federal minimum income guarantee (O’Connor 2001: 219).} \]

This United States project was to be:

\[ \ldots \text{the most ambitious federal attempt at controlled social experimentation to date, and in that sense a test of a powerful new policy analytic tool … in 1966 … it would emphasize cash rather than services, it would work through the tax rather than the social welfare system, and it would not intervene directly in the market … could be used to supplement income from work (O’Connor 2001: 219, my italics).} \]

O’Connor’s points highlight that dealing with poverty through a federal minimum income guarantee was only considered feasible if it did not intervene directly in the market and did not disturb the current economic and political arrangements.
The Family Centre Project related to its trial of a guaranteed minimum income supplement at times as of it were testing a ‘universal basic income available to all permanent residents of a country’ regardless of their contribution to the state (Tomlinson 2005: 211). However the link between a guaranteed minimum income supplement within the Family Centre Project to sixty families to a more fully realised universal basic income scheme is not spelt out by Benn (1981) or Liffman (1978).

The allocation of the minimum income scheme was based on assessments of the family in relation to two elements:

… a ‘minimum need subsidy’ based on the prevailing minimum wage and child endowment levels, adjusted for the number of parents, the number of children, the type of accommodation and the work situation of the parents. The second element was a ‘rental subsidy’ based on the idea that ‘no family should pay more than a quarter of its subsidised income on rent (Liffman 1978: 52).

The workers at the Family Centre Project developed a formula to determine the levels of payment to the families. In practice the guaranteed minimum income was not based on some universal right, but on a calculation of need relying partly on Henderson’s poverty line research.

A chart was developed by Family Centre staff for use by participant families to assess their own family’s entitlements. This way of doing things suggests that the families were more in control of their lives and thus more empowered. Foucault’s work on governmentality alerts critical social workers to the point that when self-governance is within the limits predetermined by the social worker’s development of a formula this may not be experienced as empowering to those allowed to use the chart to assess themselves. Using Foucault’s theorising on governmentality, the families were encouraged to regulate themselves in relation to the predetermined decisions about their needs. Henderson’s poverty line research in one sense is used to tell “the truth” about the families’ needs and their entitlements are still based on being and belonging to a sub-species called “the poor”. It is not a universal basic income based on right, despite the rhetoric around this initiative because it is determined on the basis of need. The chart is a mechanism that continues to invite the poor to tell a particular truth about themselves to be eligible for the supplement.

Benn is aware that:
… [w]hilst the income supplement proposal did not give the families the power to decide how the money resources of the Project would be allocated, it took such power away from the staff, and freed the families from the pressing anxieties of ‘making ends meet’ allowing them to profit from other Project activities, such as social action, which might eventually give them further power over resources (1981:79).

Benn does not recognise that this method of developing the entitlement for the income supplement reinforces the power relations between workers and families. The process because it is now once removed from the social workers’ individual discretion is considered by Benn to not represent a continuation of an unequal power relation. Yet the families are invited to assess themselves within the framework devised by the workers based on scientific research. Rose (1999) calls this governance at a distance. The families are invited to regulate themselves and present their needs to be eligible within the worker’s framework.

In Benn’s (1981) and Liffman’s (1978) accounts the income supplement is presented as a background support for increasing family members’ potential to participate in gaining more power over resources, relationships, information and decision-making in the rest of the Project or outside it. What Foucault adds to this analysis of the income supplement is how it functions as a potential mechanism of power, as a potential factor in people’s consent, as a mechanism of governmentality as it gathers information on each individual family’s circumstances and awards income on the basis of this knowledge.

For Foucault, this double entry of the population as a field of knowledge and target of government marks the crossing of the ‘threshold of modernity’ in the ‘West’, and the beginning of an ‘era of governmentality’ (Dean 1991: 33).

Some of the comments from family participants that Gilley (1990) quotes on the impact of the income supplement, reflects how people self-regulated to comply with expectations that may or may not even have been explicitly made. For instance, this quote is from a former family member:

… and it would be coming up to the day they’d be getting some more money, so if they [FCP] had an outing, they would go. So they’d know when they went in on the day of the money handouts, they’d been out following up what the Brotherhood wanted (Gilley 1990: 26).

Foucault’s theorising about power highlights that a strategy like the guaranteed income supplement can function governmentally and can function to regulate the conduct of the poor
through their self-regulation.

A sound social security system in a welfare state like Australia can provide this type of financial support. However much was made of the notion that this supplementary payment was provided on the basis of a right rather than on the basis of charity (Liffman 1978). The guaranteed income supplement was presented as an entitlement and a right in the Project (Liffman 1978). Williams, a so-called “indigenous” researcher for the Action Resource Centre (ARC), the self-help organization that grew out of the Family Centre, states ‘[t]hat the Family Centre Project provided the income supplement to the families as a right’ (1981). Yet both Dean (1991) and Arendt (1951) would question this representation in the sense that the income supplement involved was a

… very limited and specific forms of provision for highly circumscribed social categories and [as such] can in no way be construed as universal human rights (Dean 1991: 104).

As Arendt (1959, 1963) points out, rights are usually granted in the context of a political community rather than being universal in nature and as such are negotiated at and for a given time and place.

However, the guaranteed minimum income part of the Family Centre Project, according to Wiseman was:

… [a]rguably the most radical feature of the project … which endeavoured to ensure that all the families had access to an income well above the “poverty line” (1978: 159).

It was incredibly important that these families accessed an income above Henderson’s “poverty line”. However, as Liffman indicates in his assessment of the Project, the Henderson poverty line was ‘very austere’:

The income levels used in the Project’s income supplement scheme, although calculated somewhat differently, approximated these amounts, so that, even while their incomes remained slightly above those levels, the thirty families should still be regarded as at least ‘rather poor’ (1978: 120).

Yet despite the low amount of income provided to the families through the guaranteed minimum income supplement it was considered too expensive by the Brotherhood Executive. After the first two years of the Family Centre Project the Brotherhood executive made it clear that the funding would not continue for the guaranteed minimum income supplement.
Essentially the guaranteed income scheme was abandoned on ‘cost/benefit grounds, because the cost of the development of one third of the 62 families was too great’ (Benn 1981: 175). The technology of cost/benefit analysis was part of the scientific experimentation on poverty in the ‘War on poverty’ in the United States. Liffman (1978) and Benn (1981) did not challenge the Brotherhood’s cost/benefit analysis of the guaranteed income scheme. Although both authors claim that the outcomes for the one third of participants were remarkable and surprisingly good for a welfare project working with “the poor”. O’Connor suggested in relation to the United States poverty research industry that through highly technical micro-simulations in the mid-1970s researchers:

… managed to endow the inherently political act of cost/benefit analysis with an aura of impartiality that non-experts were ill-prepared to challenge (2001: 231).

To understand a cost/benefit analysis as a political act requires an examination of the relation between “Truth” and power, according to Foucault’s theorising. This is certainly a cue to critical social workers confronted with cost/benefit analyses presented as scientific or politically neutral acts to understand what is happening as a political act that may reinforce power relations that are unequal. Benn also indicated that the guaranteed minimum income was ‘very costly and its administration difficult’ (1981: 74-75).

Some of the family members wrote a submission to the Brotherhood about continuing the guaranteed income supplement. The response from the Executive Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence was that they:

… had never guaranteed the income supplement for more than three years and that the families understood this (Benn 1981: 196).

This confirms Arendt’s (1951) point about how “rights” are “negotiated” within specific political communities and it also highlights that the family members did not directly engage in this negotiation. Rather, the Executive Director of the Brotherhood wrote to the family members to suggest various ways in which the Family Centre Project, as an autonomous body, might find the funds to continue the income supplement. He also suggested that ‘jobs for the poor’ might be a desirable alternative to income supplement’ (Benn 1981: 196).
CHAPTER FOUR – EMPOWERING THE POOR

Jobs for the poor

At the time the guaranteed income supplement was stopped during the third and final phase of the Family Centre Project, twelve family members were employed in the Centre. According to Benn (1981) this employment may have taken the steam out of resistance to the discontinuation of the guaranteed income supplement payment. Benn wonders,

How much conflict would have been engendered in the Project if the indigenous workers program had not been introduced, at the same time the income supplement was terminated? (1981: 242).

An overall decline in the number of families using the income supplement may also have taken the sting out of the discontinuation of the “guaranteed income” supplement. Broader societal changes, such as the Federal Labor government making significant increases in ‘the pension and benefit rates’ also had an impact (Benn 1981: 207). Wiseman also considers that:

… the improved living conditions of the families at the end of the three year period, although that was largely limited to the women… may have had as much to do with the external political factors (i.e. the Labor government) as with the Centre (1978: 158).

Liffman supports this view by stating that the most significant factor:

… in lifting families income over the subsidy threshold was the increase in pension levels arising out of the automatic cost-of–living adjustment that was awarded late in 1975 (1978: 120).

This reinforces the importance of governments in ensuring:

… income security - both in terms of adequacy and regularity of income - is an absolute necessary if not a completely sufficient condition of effective assistance to poor families (Liffman 1978: 121).

It is this understanding of the importance of governments in providing effective assistance to poor families that was lost in the United States “War on Poverty” and its emphasis on activating “the poor” to do it for themselves. According to O’Connor, the “War on Poverty” tended to not:
… focus on poverty as a structural or systemic problem but on individuals and groups in poverty: on self-help and access to opportunity rather than “passive acceptance of handouts” (2001: 156).

The overall approach in the United States to poverty was a ‘formula for expanding prosperity and employment without resort to structural economic change’ (O’Connor 2001: 157). Towards the end of the Family Centre Project this is the position of the Brotherhood executive when it proposes “jobs for the poor” as a desirable alternative to income supplementation. This call for “jobs for the poor” detracts from changing the system to redress structural inequalities and shuns the notion of a universal basic income for restructuring society.

The direct and visible structural causes of poverty that Liffman outlines in relation to the inadequacy ‘of the pension paid to a fatherless family’ (Liffman 1978: 153) raises some issues about how the Family Centre Project ‘avoid[ed] defining poverty as a problem of inequality’ (O’Connor 2001: 154). When poverty is narrowly defined as low income rather than as related to inequality, it avoids amongst other structural issues the explicit examination of gender subordination and racial discrimination. To explore inequality in relation to poverty, the composition of the family members in the Project, in relation to gender, race and age may be worth exploring here.

Composition of the families

The families were selected into the Family Centre Project on the basis that they ‘were real ‘multi-deficit’ families – that is families facing a range of problems or types of disadvantage’ (Liffman 1978: 38). The fifty-three families selected in 1972, included:

… 78 adults (23 men and 53 women) and 151 children…[t]wenty-eight single parent, female-headed families, generally deserted wives or unmarried mothers…Almost all the families were Australian-born and a handful were of Aboriginal descent (Liffman 1978: 39).

An additional eight families were added later to make a total of sixty families. Benn describes that there was an alteration of selection criteria which:

… attempted to redress age, sex, and marital status imbalances in the original group. Most of the new eight families were intact two-parent families which contained a potential
male worker and adolescent children. The original selection was *heavily biased* towards one-parent, female-headed families with very young children (1981: 101, my italics).

The reasons for redressing this age sex and marital status are not directly indicated in either Liffman (1978) or Benn’s (1981) account. Benn (1981) does not entertain the possibility that the so-called “bias” in the first selection process might be a reflection of how structural inequalities impact differentially on various groups in society. Liffman does address some of these issues in his discussion of structural inequalities and the composition of families in the Family Centre Project in *Boots and Bootstraps* (1975).

The high representation of female-headed sole parent families in the first selection process suggests as O’Connor (2001) has argued that female-headed households, especially those not counted as widows, were among those most likely to be impacted by poverty. Also, institutionalised racism and race discrimination is likely to have a structural impact on poverty. However, there was not much discussion of the family members’ gender, race or age composition in the Project accounts. This may be because this kind of analysis was linked to the “culture of poverty” view that was causing major consternation in the United States at the time (O’Connor 2001).

It seems that when Moynihan (1965), whom Liffman identifies as belonging in the “cultural” view of poverty camp (1978: 23), problematised race, unemployment, single-parent families and dependency on welfare as elements of “a self-perpetuating pathology” it caused a “revolt” by civil rights groups, because of the implications for Black families (O’Connor 2001: 200-207). According to O’Connor,

… several commentators saw the report as the basis for a “new racism”, couched in scientific logic and designed to distract attention from the structural nature of poverty and institutionalised racism (2001: 207).

As O’Connor suggests:

> Poverty researchers did not entirely abandon the issues of race, family instability, and illegitimacy in response to the Moynihan Report, as some have suggested, but they did begin to approach them from the safer distance of quantitative data and… treated race and class as demographic variables rather than as either cultural or political economic facts (2001: 210).

It is interesting to note that race and gender were treated very minimally in Benn’s (1981)
account of the Family Centre Project. For Liffman,

... external factors that tend to impose poverty on the individual can be clearly observed.

The circumstances of old age, chronic illness, unemployment or migrant or Aboriginal status allow little scope for personal factors, such as ‘will-power’, ‘thrift’, or ‘resourcefulness’ (1978: 152).

These structural inequities, according to Liffman (1978) relate to attributing the cause of poverty to external factors, rather than personal characteristics. Both Foucault and Arendt’s theorising on power relations alert critical social workers to the notion that “the poor”, “single mother”, “unmarried mothers”, “potential male worker” or “breadwinner” are political identities constituted through power relations. These identities are not to be taken for granted but are to be understood as resulting from power relations and as such are opened to political action. However, power relations were primarily understood within a modernist frame in Benn’s (1981) and Liffman’s (1978) accounts. Most of the analysis of power was focused within the Family Centre Project itself, rather than in relation to a broader historical context. I argued in Chapter One of this thesis that a focus on power within social work projects is too limited. Both Foucault and Arendt encourage social workers to begin their exploration of power within projects while also attempting to understand the historical and political context of the Project. I turn now to how Benn (1981) and Liffman (1978) conceptualised power within the Project.

The four-pronged idea of power

At the beginning of the Project Benn presented the four-pronged idea of power (1981, Liffman 1978). The schema, devised by Benn, ‘identified four types of “power” to which it claimed all people are entitled, and to which the poor have only limited access. These types of power were described as “power over decision-making”, “power over resources”, “power over relationships” and “power over information” (Liffman 1987: 30-31). This schema was apparently enthusiastically received and accepted by staff and became ‘part of the language of the Project serving as a pivot around which its development proceeded’ (Benn 1981: 82). Presumably, what the schema provided was a way to approach the broader task of transferring power to the poor within the project.

According to Wiseman, ‘[t]here are unanswered questions in the “four power” scheme’
For example, can power be “given” and was anything required in return (Wiseman 1978: 159)?

How much is this new “power” dependent on the Brotherhood or on external political and economic factors?… Was it limited to status conflict within the centre or did it challenge wider cultural and economic systems? (Wiseman 1978: 159).

Fook’s critique of modernist conceptions of power springs to mind here (see Chapter One of this study), where the notion of transferring power requires a conception of power as a commodity, ‘as a material entity which can be traded or given away’ (2002: 48). Fook further indicates that this conception of power means:

… that empowerment is always at the expense of one group or person towards another. If a worker empowers or gives some of their power to a service user, by definition the worker becomes disempowered (2002: 48, italics in original).

This kind of conception of power means an inevitable power struggle between those that fear to lose their power and those who seek to gain it (Solas 1996). Both Benn’s (1981) and Liffman’s (1978) account of the Project refer several times to a power struggle between workers and families, between the so-called “powerful” and “powerless”. Often the accounts by Liffman (1978) and Benn (1981) emphasised the view that the workers were reluctant to give up their power, or the situation was described as a power grab by the “activist” families. It is in Williams’ (1981) and Gilley’s (1990) follow-up accounts that the conflict between family members is also discussed. Interestingly, Gilley comments that other projects that tried to replicate the Family Centre Project came unstuck due to conflict between members, and he is concerned that both Liffman’s (1978) and Benn’s (1981) accounts do not give any indication of this struggle between participants. I consider, like Healy (2000) that Foucault’s explanation of how power operates is useful in analysing the power relations within the Family Centre Project and between members. Because, according to Foucault,

Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power (1980:98).

In a sense, the portrayal of “the poor” as “powerless” and the social workers as “powerful” in Benn (1981) and Liffman’s (1978) accounts establishes a binary opposition within the Project. Fook critiques binary oppositions in relation to empowerment, because:
One of the problems for service users is that if they are characterised as members of the powerless group, and the divide between the two groups is insurmountable, then the process of becoming powerful can seem unachievable (2002: 49).

It is mentioned several times by both Liffman (1978) and Benn (1981: 108) that the families were not convinced that the staff members were really intending to transfer power to them. For instance, Benn, in a short paper to staff of the Project states that the families do not believe that ‘we are trying to do this’ (transfer power to the families) (1981: 108).

However, the very conception of power that Benn (1981) proposes reinforced the notion of a “powerful” and a “powerless” group. Strategies, like the following one put forward by Benn (1981) tend to reinforce the establishment of two separate groups, one comprising staff (plus volunteers) and the other comprising family members. Benn insisted:

… that the staff should form a cohesive group or team which would demonstrate to the families the virtues of co-operation and mutual support and assist them also to become a cohesive group (1981:96).

Once separate and cohesive groups are established within a specific setting where power is understood as conflated with domination, power relations tend to operate to produce unequal identities. Once such relations are established the chances of collaboration and cooperation are far less likely according to the group work literature (Johnson and Johnson 1997; Tyson 1998). Arendt’s notion of the “sheer humanness of togetherness” as a basis for “acting in concert” is potentially negated when a binary opposition is presumed to exist.

The formation of a cohesive staff team included:

Regular planning meetings were held, at which the co-ordinator and the staff participated in enthusiastic brain-storming sessions. It was at these early meetings that the habit of participation was firmly established for all staff, including support workers (volunteers) (Liffman 1978: 33).

However participation did not extend to including the families in the staff brain-storming sessions around the problems and decisions about how the Project could proceed. Yet, the experience of the willingness of workers to:

… discuss basic issues openly, to refer to both personal feelings and fundamental goals, and to reconsider decisions and methods, contributed to an intellectual freedom that was at times quite remarkable (Liffman 1978: 60, my italics).
Although there was some consultation early on with the families in the Project, Benn considered that the families needed to be a cohesive group before they could make decisions regarding the Project. Yet some of the “War on Poverty” literature emphasised in relation to “indigenous” participation, the importance of ‘beginning with a cooperative effort to identify problems and arrive at consensus on goals’ (O'Connor 2001: 134). As the Family members were not involved in the decisions about identifying the problem(s) or the goals of the Project they could only consent to participate in the Project.

From Foucault’s perspective the question is raised; why would the families consent to participate? When Gilley (1990) conducted his follow up study of the Family Centre Project, three of the respondents stated that the income support supplement enticed people to the Centre. One such comment was: ‘the family income supplement was a bait. People behaved themselves because of the money’ (Gilley 1990: 26). Certainly, the income supplement was highly significant to all the families that received it (Williams 1981; Gilley 1990). The income supplement, though understood as highly significant to the families, was not discussed in terms of power relations by either Liffman (1978) or Benn (1981), not even in terms of its influence on families to give consent to participate in the Project.

Foucault’s theorising of power also directs our attention to the times when the families withdrew their consent from the project and according to Benn,

… one of the favourite ways for family members to indicate their dissatisfaction with the staff and or the Project was to remove their open files from the Centre! (1981: 130).

There was another example in Benn’s (1981) and Liffman’s account of the families either actually or symbolically withdrawing consent in reaction to the closure of the Centre over the summer after the first year of operation. As Liffman states:

… staff decided that the Centre would close from Christmas until early February, (Notably, families did not share in this decision, and in fact were clearly disappointed by it) (1978: 81).

Benn indicates that:

This decision was made purely for staffing reasons, without thought by any staff member, including the Co-ordinator, of the implications of the family members (1981: 150).

The closure of the Centre was particularly badly received by the families and stalled, not surprisingly, the commitment of family members on the decision-making committee. The
impact on the Project of this closure was quite dramatic. Families withdrew from the committee for some time and were only slowly cajoled back into attending by the Co-ordinator writing letters pleading the families’ importance to the Project. It is these kinds of unwitting decisions, which took into account primarily the needs of staff that reinforced the division between the two groups and their relative decision making power. The openness and recognition of this kind of thoughtlessness by both Benn (1981) and Liffman (1978), is a laudable part of their re-telling of this Project. Foucault’s theorising about power relations alerts critical social workers to identify and focus on the dynamics of consent and withdrawal of consent as significant aspects of power relations.

Power and identity

Foucault’s later theorising alerts us to exploring new subjectivities in relation to the undefined work of freedom despite the constraints of power relations. As such the new roles that emerged for family members within the Project, such as “the activists” who according to Benn, ‘were a group of family members which attempted to forge a new role for themselves in the Project’ (1981: 145) are interesting to explore.

A core group of families had emerged that was beginning to identify with the Family Centre Project and to take up the opportunities it was offering. These particular families formed a cohesive group and were building their involvement in the Project into their pattern of living (Liffman 1978: 74).

Some of these family members attended the Centre every day and some contributed work similar to that contributed by those in paid positions on a regular basis. Unfortunately, there is not much more information on these “activists” in Benn’s (1981) and Liffman’s (1978) accounts. There is only a brief indication given of the gender of these activist families, in Liffman’s comment that in the final year the men were no longer more strongly represented among the “activists” than women (1978: 115). Apparently, a ‘number of women emerged as strong figures during the year, especially in staff positions’ (Liffman 1978: 115), eleven of the thirteen “indigenous worker” positions were held by women in the final year.

Instead it is the new roles of “indigenous worker” that is focused on by Benn,

The ‘American anti-poverty program literature contained many references to indigenous workers working in participatory community action organisations (1981: 241, my italics)

There was much discussion in the literature at the time about “indigenous workers”.
Employment of “indigenous workers” was often criticised as co-option (Benn 1981: 242).

“Indigenous workers” were described as acting as a “bridge” or mediator between the agency and the poor community. However, Berman and Haug argue that this bridging function of “indigenous” workers was short-lived as ‘they soon became contaminated by the status and power of their positions and lost identity with their own community’ (cited in Benn 1981: 243, my italics). However, a loss of identity was considered unimportant as long as the indigenous workers remained true to their cause. This reflects Foucault’s earlier point that notions of identity and the individual’s relation to their own self have become indispensable to modern political power.

According to Benn, the literature argued the value of “indigenous workers” was that:

… they were more in touch with and more sensitive to the life-styles of poor people, understood their value system, identified their needs more adequately, and consequently produced more innovative solutions to their problems. Some authors claimed that co-operation between ‘like and like’ was one of the values of low-income groups and that poor people were thus more accessible to indigenous workers (1981: 243).

These claims tend towards a kind of identity politics which locates experience as the origins of politics. This closes off the potential to critique that experience, which as Scott (1992), from a post-structural perspective indicated, requires a theoretical framework to give that experience sense. To claim that experience is the origin of politics also inhibits political dialogue and the building of coalitions.

According to Benn, some of the “indigenous workers” were tempted by virtue of their employed status to lose their identity,

… but the self-awareness teaching of the professional staff made them aware that they must continually look into themselves for the effects of such changes, that to lose their identity was not necessarily desirable (1981: 244, my italics).

This disapproval of losing their “poor” identify was reinforced through there being no career ladder in the Project. All “indigenous workers” were employed at the same level and at the same rate of pay, according to Benn (1981: 145). Given Foucault’s point, in his early and middle work that power relations define individuals and their identities, these attempts to discourage people from altering their identity by “continually looking into themselves” are an example of how modern power constitutes identities and the “truth” of those identities.
Foucault shows that this may be oppressive and can deny people’s autonomy, multiple identities and new subjectivities. One of the effects of demanding that poor people mobilise themselves around “being poor” is that it denies other identities, for example being a single parent, mother, and/or Aboriginal person as also being a basis for political action. However, more importantly both Arendt and Foucault theorise that identity is not a basis for political action, although a political identity under attack may require defending in ways that do not foreclose or generalise that politically constituted identity. The Family Centre Project in effect continued to impose a “poor” identity on the family members through some of its practices.

Transferring power

In order to convince staff to transfer their power to the family members, Benn very provocatively pointed out that:

At the moment we use various participatory methods to help the families to feel relevant to the Project and perhaps to ‘kid’ them that they really have the power over the decisions that we make. We manipulate them, we use tokenism, we use partnership techniques, we treat them for problems, we neglect their feelings and wishes, we placate them.

We do all these things because we are not yet ready to give up the power of decision making in the Centre and the families can’t believe we are trying to do this and anyway do not yet have the knowledge to assume this power. At the moment we maintain our control by virtue of our knowledge and skill instead of handing over control by teaching the families what we know (1981: 108, my italics).

Benn concludes this short paper with the point that handing over power to the families does not make her ‘subservient to the families in any way’ nor does it reduce her own power in making decisions that affect her own life (1981:109). Yet the idea of transferring or giving over power to someone else, within a conception of power as a commodity, an entity, can indicate, as Fook states that ‘[i]f a worker empowers or gives some of their power to a service user, by definition the worker becomes disempowered’ (2002: 48).

Benn quotes a volunteer, Tom, who wrote to Benn stating that:

… concepts such as ‘the families taking over’ or the ‘voluntaries taking over Friday night’ produced a power oriented situation which was creating divisions between the three groups (1981: 108).
Tom is making the point Stewart (2001) makes about the conception of power as “power over” having certain theoretical limitations, since the very conception of power as “power over” sets up power struggles. Power is conflated with domination in the four schema of power in the Family Centre Project and this conception is reinforced by referring to the process as giving the poor families “power over resources”, “power over decision making”, “power over relationships” and “power over information”. According to Stewart (2001), a conception of power as domination, as “power over” is limited in that it forecloses on conceptions of “power to” and “power with”. “Power over”, according to Solas (1996), can only lead to a power struggle, as no one is prepared to give up power if they have just struggled to gain it. And, as Healy (2000) indicates, this can also relate to social workers who may for the first time feel they have gained access to formal power through a newly attained professional status.

In response to Tom’s comments, Benn states that:

I realised that the assumption underlying Tom’s thoughts was that the project was essentially participatory, that staff, volunteers and families would all equally participate in the project; working together, learning together, making decisions together, controlling the project together, and if we are to be logical sharing our lives together (1981: 108).

However, Benn continues:

My idea of the goal of the project is that the families will eventually assume full control of the Centre in all its aspects and that the staff and voluntaries will simply become resource personnel for the families (1981: 108).

When Benn articulates her goal for the project it highlights what Arendt means by a process being anti-political. According to Arendt, when a goal has been pre-determined, any following discussion is basically not political, as the decision about “what”, “how” and “who” has already been framed. All action that follows is then usually informed by instrumentality rather than a regard for political freedom and political action (Villa 1996). The very conception of the power schema indicates an anti-political stance.

A conception of power as “power to” may be more appropriate for promoting empowering relations. A conception of power as “power to” can indicate the gaining of new capacities and skills, even though Foucault, in his early and middle work, worries about the intensification of power relations in those circumstances. According to Arendt, however, it is
theoretically possible to increase “power to” without simultaneously increasing “power over” (Stewart 2001). Furthermore “power with” has the potential to promote collaboration and relative equality and to recognise plurality. This accords with Arendt’s notion of “acting in concert”. However “acting in concert” requires different relationships which at least promote a space as free as possible of coercion and which sets about developing circumstances where everyone has the right to action, the right to opinion and the right to engage fully in political decisions. This requires a level of comfort with politics and political action, as Arendt understands that term, by critical social workers. The next question is: how was “participation” thought about in the Family Centre Project?

Conceptions of participation

Participation related to both families’ involvement in running the day-to-day activities of the centre and more importantly, according to Liffman (1978) and Benn (1981), during the last politicisation phase of the Project to “power over decision making”. I will predominantly focus on the latter so-called political aspect of the Project, after some brief comments on how the team approach impacted on the relationship between staff and family members.

Despite seeking to alter the relationship between workers and clients, Benn (1981) stated that it took a long time for the staff to dispense with casework in the Project. One of the conclusions Benn asserts the staff arrived at was that ‘the casework relationship was not a balanced human relationship, based on equality and equal power’ (1981: 138). The new approach was to work in two ways. Firstly, the developmental plan of the family was to be used as a basis for the staff on a co-operative basis to assist families to meet their own goals. Secondly, the team was used to operate the Centre’s activities. Daily teams of staff and volunteers were arranged and ‘[s]lowly, family members were added to these teams through the pressure of the families themselves’ (Benn 1981: 141). According to Benn,

The practical results of this approach were most convincing. The Project soon had a family member who could, for example keep a budget better than most staff members, and others who could competently organise social functions and help other family members in times of crisis (1981: 141).

Still some family members remained non-participants. According to Benn this meant that,
… staff were faced with the inescapable fact that some people wanted to, or were able to, participate by virtue of their particular personalities, and some did not (1981: 248).

However, for unemployed men participation in the Family Centre Project was considered a problem. According to Liffman,

Quite early in the Project’s development it had become clear that the rewarding and congenial involvement in the Project which some men found (backed by the economic support of the income supplement scheme) competed – sometimes very favourably - with conventional employment for the men’s commitment, and in a few cases actually deterred them from seeking outside employment (1978: 122).

This was taken to mean that the Project ‘was weakening their effectiveness as breadwinners’ (Liffman 1978: 122). ‘Three of the men whose employment was ‘good’ were in fact employed within the Project’ (Liffman 1978: 123). The issue of their work ethic was considered a problem because they preferred Family Centre work above the kind of work available to them in the labour market. When work conditions ‘are so grim as to offer none of the rewards’ such as ‘companionship, self-worth, fulfilment, purpose’ (Liffman 1978: 149) then the money incentive becomes critical, but many of the jobs available to unskilled men were of low pay as well. As Liffman stated:

… the bleak prospects facing unskilled men in the industrial workforce. Tedium, discomfort, danger, economic insecurity… explain the poor employment records of marginal workers far better than insensitive and judgemental notions of bludging, laziness, or irresponsibility (1978: 150).

The work undertaken by the men at the Family Centre, both paid and unpaid illustrated that men will work if ‘given acceptable opportunities and rewards’ (Liffman 1978: 50).

Preparation for participation

The Family Centre staff, in discussing how to approach “participation” of family members in decision making processes, identified that there was a gap in the knowledge and experience of family members in formal committee processes. The staff devised strategies to fill this gap in the family members’ knowledge and experience. Note that family members were absent from these discussions. The notion of “participation” in decision-making was also confined to family members participating on the Project’s management committee. According to Benn, these strategies were grouped together under the concept of “preparation for participation”
rather than “education for participation” because the latter phrase would treat the family members as if they were school children (1981: 139).

According to Liffman, there were apparently ‘two distinct and sometimes contradictory conceptions held by staff members as to its [the management committee’s] purpose’ (1978: 66). One conception was that, the committee was:

… a *real mechanism* in the achievement of the sharing, or even transfer, of power between staff and families, and thus the effective participation of families in decision-making in the Centre (Liffman 1978: 66).

And

… the other was, that the committee should provide the Centre’s members with the opportunity to learn from experience the techniques of rational group decision-making, discussion and representation, to improve their skills and confidence, and to develop an understanding of the issues involved in the operation of the Family Centre Project (Liffman 1978: 66).

Some decisions by staff, like keeping committee membership of family members to a three monthly term (for the first year of operation) was in Liffman’s view an educative idea because it increased the number of people who could learn about committee membership (Liffman 1978).

In Foucault’s terms though, the families were considered by staff to require, “correct training”, which can be read as a further disciplinary technology that social workers use to assess ‘their [the families] potentialities, their level or their value’ (Foucault 1977: 181). The family members by accepting that a major way to achieve “power over decision making” within the Project was participation on the management committee were incorporated into the Project rather than encouraged to ‘develop alternative perspectives or strategies’ (Wiseman 1978: 160). Processes of “correct training” are far more likely to lead to compliance and incorporation than to political action, especially in the specific sense that Arendt means that term. Limiting “power over decision-making” predominantly to the formal committee structure of the Family Centre part of the Brotherhood both enabled and delimited family members’ say.

According to Liffman,
CHAPTER FOUR – EMPOWERING THE POOR

... on several occasions during the year families complained that staff were excluding families from real participation and were not sincere in the intention to allow them to take over the Project (1978: 87).

Liffman claims that these complaints reflected ‘the staff’s commitment to the transfer of power from themselves to the families, but at a rate judged by staff to be appropriate’ (1978: 87, my italics).

The notion of the families having power over decision making meant, according to Benn’s goal, the removal of all professional staff from the management committee. Accordingly, Liffman claims:

Now it seemed that the transfer was complete. With no professional staff on the Council and the Council the sole decision making body, a genuinely participatory structure had been created (1978: 116).

However, immediately after the successful vote removing the professional staff, ‘another motion was put (by a ‘notorious maverick within the activist lobby’) that ‘all family member staff (family members employed by the project) should be removed from Council ’ (Liffman 1978: 116). Although this motion had much to recommend it in relation to preventing the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of employed family members,

... the new leadership could not see it. No sooner had the oppressed freed themselves of their oppressors, than they themselves were being cast as the new oppressors! (Liffman 1978: 116).

This comment by Liffman (1978) echoes Foucault’s early and middle work where he argued that when one system of domination is overcome ‘it can only be replaced by another system of domination’ (Simons 1995: 6). This again reinforces the notion that power was conflated with domination in the Family Centre Project.

However, just because there were no staff or family workers on the committee did not mean that the system of domination was overcome because,

Final decisions about which family members would speak at community meetings, which family members would give evidence at various commissions of enquiry, and when families would take over the Projects, still rested with the staff and were based on the information... gathered from the families (Benn 1981: 132–133).

This means that pastoral power as Foucault outlines it continued on in the Family Centre
Project despite the aim of empowering the family members. To alter, disrupt or change this, Foucault in his later work proposes an agonal space for contesting oppressive relations and proposes establishing systems with minimal coercion, to allow a play of on-going agonal processes, or what Arendt calls “incessant discourse” about the world. Orlie (1997) suggests that a key indicator for shifting power relations is evident when some of the discussion is about everyone’s imbrication and collusion with power relations and the discussion moves away from who should govern, to the relationship between participants.

Arendt’s concept of political action and the power to act in concert indicates that it is relations between people that require attention in social work practice. These relationships are not to be based on assumptions about specific political identities or sameness. These relationships are to be built on the different perspectives of the same problem, as it is through on-going disagreements that it may be possible for participants to arrive at a commitment to act together. Arendt’s theorising encourages an approach to the Project that involves all participants in incessantly discussing the relationships between them, to constantly interrogate social inequality and the effects on various groups, to place ‘poverty’ in the centre as a problem to be learnt about, to identify issues to be addressed in concert and through building alliances with other groups.

The Family Centre Project could have encouraged and facilitated everyone’s engagement in decision-making far more. In many ways the Project foreclosed on politics in that it predetermined what should happen and how people should relate to themselves and others. The Project’s conceptualisation of politics tended to understand politics as formal decision making processes within the Project itself and as interacting with external welfare agencies or through social action lobbying the state for changes. Arendt’s notion of politics is so much broader as she values the capacity of all people for distinctiveness and of deliberating and debating issues to the point of arriving at a commitment to concerted action in a public arena together. The funneling of the political into formal processes like the committee of management structures and the formal decision making processes tended towards instrumentalism in the Family Centre Project. Even the plan to train family members to be able to use the committee of management to make decisions tended towards an ends-means mentality and thus confused the political process with relations of rule.

The possibility of ‘being together that is in process or in becoming’ appears to have happened only occasionally between some of the workers as a group and perhaps between the family
activists and thus separately from each other. The unpredictability of political action and the risks as identified by Arendt were in a sense avoided by the social workers in the Project. To embrace political actions risks unpredictability and means valuing freedom above order and control. Critical social worker when valuing the capacity of each of us for distinctive speech and action in public spaces means focusing on facilitating such possible debates and deliberation. In a sense a different starting point for the Project could have been to break with the predetermined notions of ‘the poor’ and to allow a sheer togetherness where people could disclose “who” they were rather than being understood as “what’ they were made to be. If politics is something that happens in the space between plural people and power is about cooperation rather than command, and ‘acting in concert’ is based on commitments arrived at through dispute and argumentation, this kind of approach to politics may have the potential to transform power relations.

**The politicisation phase**

It became apparent towards the end of the first three years of the Project that twenty out of the sixty selected families had really made changes in their economic and social lives (Liffman 1978; Benn 1981). The changes these twenty families made to their situation were a good outcome for a welfare programme, according to Benn (1981). However the Project was not going to continue to get funding from the Brotherhood at the same level. Benn was asked to propose what should happen over the next year with the Project. Initially, Benn (1981) was disappointed that the Brotherhood Board required a proposal within such a short timeframe, which did not allow for the participation of the families in the proposal’s development. This indicates how separate the Project was from the Brotherhood’s organisation. Family members were not part of the formal decision-making processes within the Brotherhood itself. This is despite the fact that the original goal was to involve:

…low income people in the decision making processes of the institutions that governed their lives, [so] they would be able to change those institutions to improve their own social and economic conditions (1981: 2)

Perhaps the Brotherhood did not see itself as an institution that governed low income people’s lives and as such did not consider that its own institution should be open to decision making by low income people.
What Benn (1981) proposed was a transition to an autonomous Project that focused on the political goals of the original Project proposal. This kind of proposal, Gilley (1990) suggested successfully shifts the problems of participation in decision making away from the Brotherhood agency. Withdrawal of professionals from this “indigenous” Project is required to establish a self-help organisation “run by the poor for the poor”. Benn concludes that:

> In a sense the families allowed the plan to be imposed on them, probably because their previous experience had shown them they could trust the Co-ordinator to plan in their best interest (1981: 183).

This, of course, is a totally anti-political way to think, according to Arendt, especially at the starting point of what was described as the politicisation phase of the project. Planning in someone else’s best interest is anti-political and can lead to violations of trust by social workers in relation to their clients, sometimes with dire consequences, as indicated for example, in a recent collection of essays on that topic, by Bessant, Hil & Watts (2005).

**By the poor for the poor**

According to Benn, the Project originally had expected that family members would engage in ‘collective action to fulfill the needs of all low-income people’ (1981: 132). To shift the family members’ concern to all low-income people was difficult, and Benn (1981) refers to some of the same difficulties in the United States with other poverty action groups. Benn (1981) indicated that the provision of resources to meet concrete needs did not lead to the “required result” of engaging low-income people to take collective political action. Benn asked how the Project could get the families to ‘move from a personal interest in their own needs to a position of concern for all low-income people’ (1981:132). Both Foucault and Arendt consider the expectation that people who supposedly share particular experiences and interests, like having a low income, provides a basis for voluntarily joining together to create a political lobby as imposing a liberal imaginary. In contrast Foucault suggests that politics create interests and constitute particular identities such as “the poor”. In a sense, Benn (1981) is imposing a liberal conception of politics on “the poor” family members by requiring them to act collectively for the needs of all low-income people.

According to Alcock (1993), the issue of campaigning by the poor, as opposed to for the poor is controversial. According to Holman (1978) poverty campaigns should concentrate on
“letting the poor speak” on the basis that:

Only those who experience poverty can know what it is like, and tell it like it is… and the nature of the reforms should be determined… by those who know through experience what they need (Holman 1978, cited in Alcock 1993: 210).

However, Alcock indicates that:

… poor people do not find it easy to engage in organised political activity, and organised political groups have not found it easy to involve poor people (1993: 211).

There are costs to participation, like membership fees, transport, time and energy. Also, when poverty is tied to identity it means having to identify as poor and this is problematic on a number of levels and importantly, it tends to responsibilise the poor to initiate change. Moreover, for Alcock,

The notion of self-help, helping the poor to help themselves was closely linked to pathological explanations of the causes of a transmitted culture of poverty (1993: 242).

Yet Benn concluded that the family members

… had to become partisans of the poor and teach them activist methods which would help them achieve change (1981: 178).

It is Benn (1981) who is setting the goals for the family members and as Arendt indicates this is antipolitical. What Benn set in place was largely an instrumental rather than a political process.

Conclusion

Both Arendt and Foucault in their political enquiries historicise events and ask why we think about a problem in a certain way at a particular time and place. The above brief exploration of how “poverty” was thought about as amenable to a kind of scientific experimentation through community action shows how important it is to open these ideas to critical review. The focus on making “the poor” responsible for helping other poor people through activating them to advocate on their own behalf seemed a reasonable empowerment approach to take. However when this approach to “empowering of the poor” is opened to review it becomes clear that such an approach is not self-evidently empowering. Foucault’s theorising shows that even though we believe some practices are better and more progressive, in reality they may
continue reproducing and reinforcing structural inequalities. Foucault by focusing on practices and their effects, rather than on intentions, can assist critical social workers to analyse the reproduction of power relations in ways that may lead to transformative change.

Both Arendt and Foucault understand the political as constituting interests and identities and as such the politically attributed “poor” identity of the family members may need to be disrupted, challenged and new political relations established. Arendt and Foucault do not deny poverty exists but rather that they are indicating how relations of domination and oppression are (re)producing the identities of “the poor”. Arendt’s and Foucault’s theorising disrupts assumptions about a unified collective experience of poverty and an authentic voice of the poor. Critical social workers may wish to pause and ponder how to approach the issue of poverty without moving into modern power’s insistence on the authentic inner truth of “the poor” as the foundation and origin of political interests and action.

In the following chapter, I apply Arendt’s and Foucault’s insights on power, politics and freedom to a higher education policy, the ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy and its implementation by a social worker within an Australian higher education institution. I explore what critical social work empowerment practice was about in that context. The ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) equity policy aimed to empower those groups in society who were under-represented in their participation in higher education. One of the aims was to insure those sub-populations, such as low socio-economic status (SES) groups, women in non-traditional areas, rural and isolated students, students with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-English speaking background people (NESB) against the risk of poverty. How power, politics and freedom were conceived in this policy’s empowerment effort is the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter Five
Higher education equity policy empowering “the disadvantaged”? 

There is not much equity there and precious little empowerment
(Summers 2004:7).

… the academy is slow to change in terms of equity whereas it has been rapidly
transformed in relation to new managerialism and neo-liberalism
(Morley 2003: 20).

In this chapter I explore the Australian Federal Labor Government’s ‘Fair Chance for All’
(1990) Higher Education equity policy. This Equity Policy aimed to increase the participation
rate of “disadvantaged groups” in higher education. This Equity Policy initiative would not
usually be associated with critical social work however I believed it to have a similar
commitment to social justice. Critical social workers are encouraged to engage in policy-
making and in linking policy and practice to achieve social change (Ife 1997). In the 1990’s
women with social work qualifications were employed in equal opportunity positions with
various Australian government departments (Sawer 1990). I took up the role of equity
practitioner to implement equal employment opportunity and equity policy within a Victorian
higher education institution. The equity practitioner position had a major role to play in
implementing the ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy. I was and am interested in finding
ways to increase the participation rate of “disadvantaged” groups in higher education. I
believed the equity practitioner role was ‘orientated towards the transformation of processes
and structures that perpetuate domination and exploitation’ (Leonard 1994: 47, cited in Healy
2000: 3). This type of policy work by social workers is often hidden (Healy 2000: 146;
Yeatman 1998: 2) and as such little reference is made to it in social work texts or in relation
to critical social work empowerment practice. Reflecting on this type of empowerment
practice here recognises the ‘diversities of critical social work practices’ (Healy 2000: 146).
This example helps us to further explore what critical social work empowerment practice is
about, as social workers aim to work towards social justice outcomes by working within
organisations aiming to transform power relations and eliminating structures of domination,
exploitation and discrimination.

Critical social workers are encouraged to work in so called mainstream organisations like education institutions to achieve social justice for disadvantaged groups through facilitating structural changes using policies and processes as means to achieve this end. The ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy suggested that Higher education institutions needed to change their policies, processes and practices to stop excluding disadvantaged people who were under-represented in Higher Education. There appeared to be a strong correlation between this equity policy and critical social workers desire to transform structures and organisational policies, processes and practices to eliminate discrimination on the basis of race, sex, ability and low social economic and locational disadvantage. A number of social work trained people were employed in the equity education area in Australia presumably attracted by its strong social justice rhetoric. Yeatman (1998) describes this kind of work as a policy activism which again relates well to critical social workers orientation towards transforming power relations that perpetuate exclusion and discriminatory practices. Similar claims about empowerment in the critical social work literature and the field of equity education are made and this case example is thus a useful study to explore.

I thought the role of the equity practitioner was about transforming processes that left some people under represented in higher education. This notion clashed with the day-to-day activities of the job which left me wondering what I was actually “doing” and how to go about changing things for “disadvantaged” groups. By this I do not mean that I was unaware of strategies to increase the participation of “disadvantaged” groups in higher education, or of the relevant support services that can facilitate such participation. Rather it raised questions for me about what it means for critical social work practice to be ‘oriented towards the transformation of processes and structures that perpetuate domination and exploitation’ (Leonard 1994, cited in Healy 2000: 3) in this situation. This question became more refined by three comments colleagues made to me about the equity practitioner role. These comments were:

“Your job title is very political”.

“Some see your role like that of a policeman”.

“Your job seems very managerialist”.

These three comments triggered questions about the equity practitioner role and its context
and also about what I was attempting to “do”. These comments focused my thinking on what does “political” mean in relation to my job? What understanding of power identifies my role as that of a “policeman”? I did not wish to be seen as having a policing role. This created some dissonance for me in how the role was attributed characteristics that I personally did not wish to have attributed to me. The last comment challenged me to think about what does managerialism mean? I am grateful for these three comments as they stimulated my inquiry into what “power”, “politics” and “managerialism” meant in the context of the higher education equity policy implementation within one Victorian higher education institution.

I have used the process of this study to re-think “power”, “politics” and “identity” in relation to the equity practitioner role I left over ten years ago. I aim to bring Arendt’s and Foucault’s theorising about power, politics and freedom into this analysis. I analysed the ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy (sometimes referred to as the Equity Policy in this chapter) and related documents, especially the Dawkins (1987) higher education reform documents and related policy documents to gain insights into how participation in education was constituted as a “social problem” and how participation in education is considered to address problems of poverty (OECD 2005; Australian Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2004). I drew on various research texts exploring higher education policies and practices and their treatment of equity and quality, especially Marginson’s (1993), Marginson’s and Considine’s (2000) analysis in Australia and Morley’s (1995, 1996, 2000) accounts of the changes in higher education in the United Kingdom, the review of the ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy by the Higher Education Council (1995) and Martin’s (1995) review for the Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET). Martin’s review attempted to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Equity Policy’s implementation within higher education institutions nationally. Conference papers by planning officers in universities like Clarke (1997) and by equity practitioners or advocates like Ramsey (1994, 1998) and Luke (1993) provided insightful observations of the Equity Policy’s framing, carriage and effectiveness within higher education institutions. Papers by activists who take up advocacy for specific target populations, such as people with disabilities (Carling- Burzacott 2005) were important for my re-thinking of power, politics and identity in relation to the Equity Policy.

The issues of power relations and identity are central to this Equity Policy. Some of the equity practitioners in the higher education sector thought of themselves as performing a similar role to that of “femocrats” in other government departments. I draw on some of the Australian


A Fair chance for all

The Australian Labor Government’s ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy proposed that various disadvantaged groups in Australia were under represented in their access to and participation in higher education, and consequently were denied the opportunity of making a full contribution to the life of their community. These groups were identified specifically as: people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women in particular non-traditional areas of study, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people with disabilities and people from rural and isolated areas (DEET 1990: 2). The denial of participation in higher education was considered to have serious consequences for these groups as shown by a recent Australian report on poverty which concludes that:

There is clear evidence that improving educational attainment protects against the risk of poverty with the risk of poverty for those with a university qualification being less than half that of those with no post-secondary qualifications (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2004: 151, my italics).

Morely (1999) makes the point that internationally, in economic and community development
work, links are specifically drawn between education, empowerment and various population groups, such as women and indigenous peoples, especially within the Commonwealth where the legacy of colonialism and imperialism is reflected in the distribution and access to resources. This connection between education, empowerment and various population groups, especially in developing countries, for me resonates with elements of the “culture of poverty” notion, explored in the previous chapter of this study. The “culture of poverty” concept focuses on specific sub-populations who are identified as “different” or “outside” of society’s institutions and are somehow to be encouraged to take up opportunities within mainstream institutions.

The Australian Higher Education Council represented the equity issue in the following terms. It:

… identified educational disadvantage in terms of under-representation of various groups in society. Under-representation in higher education is also frequently taken to reflect broader inequities in society and, indeed, to contribute to them, and therefore forms a stimulus for social action to address these inequalities (Higher Education Council 1995: 7).

The overall objective set by the then Australian Labor Government was a commitment to change the ‘balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole’ (DEET 1990: 2). The then Federal Minister for Employment Education and Training (DEET), John Dawkins, introduced the ‘Fair Chance for All’ policy as a social justice policy:

All Australians have the right to access the services and benefits our society offers and to contribute to our social, cultural and industrial endeavours. This Government is committed to the achievement of a fairer and more just society, and is working towards the removal of the barriers which prevent people from many groups in our society from participating fully in the life of our community (1990: iii).

The ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy was to promote a fairer society. Clarke (1997) claims that the social justice flavour of the Equity Policy was picked up by equity practitioners because of the Equity Policy’s focus on rights, on justice, on a fairer society, and the notion that this Policy was about underrepresented groups gaining the opportunity to participate ‘fully in the life of our community’ (Dawkins 1990: iii). This was my understanding of the policy and my rationale for the policy-making and programme development that I was
involved with over the first five years of Equity Policy’s implementation in Australian higher education institutions.

In reflecting on the Equity Policy I can now identify two features which worked to prevent it from achieving empowerment. Its top-down nature delimited plurality, natality, political action and freedom in the sense that Arendt means it. The way the Equity Policy was imposed on higher education institutions promoted an instrumental policy making processes at both federal and local institutional levels. The second feature, which I initially struggled to identify and characterise, was that the Policy imposed managerialism and neo-liberal governance upon higher education institutions when addressing equity (Beeson and Firth 1998). In retrospect, this seems obvious.

Foucault suggests that we need to reflect broadly on power relations and when I take his advise I find that several of the Policy’s aspects and thus the equity practitioner role in relation to it are highly “political”, in his terms. The Equity Policy from a critical social work perspective is attempting to alter power relations to address inequality. Yet the Policy’s top-down conception of power, its economic rationalist framework and its managerialist techniques tended to reinforce current power relations within higher education institutions and in Australian society.

Top-down policy

Since the mid-1970s the Australian Commonwealth government has become increasingly responsible for higher education funding and policy. In 1989 the Dawkins reforms of higher education introduced among other significant changes (like the major expansion of student places, changes to funding arrangements, abolition of the binary divide between universities and other higher education institutions) a new program to increase equity, called the ‘Fair Chance For All’(1990) Policy. The Policy had five components:

… an overall objective; clarification of the commonwealth responsibility; the objectives, targets and strategies for each identified disadvantaged group; the requirements of institutions to develop plans that reflected institutional circumstances and arrangements for monitoring institutional performance (Wright 2000: 2-3).

These five components pre-determined the situation to be addressed. The Policy set the objectives and determined the people to be involved (the target populations) and broadly the
“accountability” methods higher education institutions were to use. The ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy was a “top down” policy in this sense. There was encouragement for higher education institutions to particularise their plans to the specific needs of its region(s), but the five components directed much of the equity practitioners’ work towards complying with requirements laid down by the then Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET 1990).

The requirements for institutions to develop equity plans to a large extent directed the work of the equity practitioners towards finding, collating and representing statistical information about student populations and the institutions’ so-called “catchments”, “footprints” or “regions” to calculate rates of representation by various target groups. This exercise was a most inexact science. The exercise often involved finding and relying on dubious secondary data from a variety of sources. It involved using “data” gathered in very different ways and simply combining this “data” to prepare “statistics” for reporting and measurement. I found that much time was spent on debating where the boundaries of the region were and how to count target populations. Would we be counting someone twice because they fit more than one disadvantaged category? The five components of the equity policy encouraged higher education institutions to respond instrumentally to this policy. The imposition of this policy on higher education institutions set up a relation of command rather than of cooperation between the federal government and higher education institutions. Arendt offers a challenge to this way of ordering relationships because ruling tends to govern politics out of existence. As equity practitioner I was involved in ruling relations of command while hoping to invoke power relations of cooperation and collaboration. Arendt’s attempt to distinguish between politics and ruling has provided fruitful ideas for my rethinking of politics and power relations in this context.

Marginson (2004: 63) characterises the Australian higher education sector as a whole involves both devolution and central control simultaneously. Morley (2003: 48) says that ‘[r]egulating is achieved by deregulation and centralization by decentralization’ a paradoxical situation. In higher education Marginson claims:

... neo-liberal government rests on self-managing institutions and individuals, in which

free agents are empowered to act on their own behalf but are ‘steered from a distance’ by


The free agent being empowered to act on their own behalf within pre-determined policy
norms and rules is clearly not free using Arendt’s or Foucault’s understanding of freedom. Someone who is ruled by someone else is not free. The notion of freedom Marginson highlights neo-liberal governments promote not only limits the agent to act within pre-determined norms and rules but implies freedom is a property of the agent. Yet Arendt argued freedom is only achieved through acting with others. Freedom is not a property of agents. Freedom exists only during the process of acting together according to Arendt (1961). The principle of freedom is most important in any attempt to transform power relations, however how freedom is understood matters. Arendt’s concept of freedom opens up a very different understanding of freedom from the neo-liberal version of freedom. Her understanding of freedom emphasises a politics that is not based on ruling or on command, but on power as arising when people “act in concert”.

The ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990: 7) equity policy statement indicates the ‘inequities caused by significant barriers to the full participation of disadvantaged groups’. The Equity policy states that:

People from disadvantaged groups form a large and diverse pool of under-used resources. They should be encouraged into higher education and contribute their skills to developing a more highly skilled and efficient workforce (DEET 1990: 7, my italics).

This claim expresses a concern for the

… utilisation of human beings as valued resources of the state, their end is not the positive enhancement of the life of individuals but the augmentation of the national estate (Dean 1991: 34).

Foucault’s analysis of modern power relations of bio-power and governmentality seems relevant here. The Equity Policy emphasised that the population as a whole needed to meet the State’s needs. The policy then names specific sub-populations and identifies these groups as under-performing by not contributing fully to the economy. This aspect of the Equity Policy alerts social workers to explore how mechanisms of bio-power and governmentality may be operating in this setting Clarke states that ‘Government rhetoric at the time managed to bring together notions of ‘a fair and just society’ with the economic imperative of creating a ‘clever country’’ (1997: 2-3). This is a key concern for those seeking to empower as these mechanisms promote conformity to society’s norms and impose one specific way of life as the way of life.
‘A Fair Chance for All’ (1990) showed the normative stance the then federal Labor government took in relation to creating a fairer society. The disadvantaged were to be brought into ‘a certain course of life’ (Dean 1991: 64) through participating in higher education. According to Clarke advocates of educational equity in Australian higher education tended to downplay and even ignore the economic arguments and to base their rationale on social justice arguments (1997: 8). This was certainly true of my own efforts, partly because I had not fully taken into account the wider power relations and the economic political rationality of the then Labor government.

Marginson says that during the early years of the ‘A Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy there was an increasing ‘influence of economic perspectives in education policy’, especially in the ‘upper echelons of the Department of Employment, Education and Training’ (1993: 26). Marginson argues that human capital theory has been the most influential economic theory since the mid 1980s in Australian government education policy. Marginson claims that human capital theory reduces education to ‘merely a servicing arm of ‘the economy’ (1993: 65) and tends to reduce individuals to be self-responsible, but not self-determining (1993: 77). Clarke also says that ‘an economic paradigm has resulted in an emphasis on education as an instrument of economic policy’ (1997: 4). Yet both Marginson (1993, 2000) and Morely (2003) argue that the relationships between education, work and earnings are not as clearly and empirically certain as human capital theorists assume and assert.

Clarke laments that even though “human capital” arguments:

… are quite compelling and clearly serve as central themes of government policies in this area, they are used surprisingly little by advocates of educational equity in Australian higher education (1997: 8).

Clarke’s compelling argument however consists of a mere reference to industry’s appreciations of the need “to capitalise on the talents of diversity”. Clarke is also unjustified in claiming that equity practitioners did not use “human capital” theory to argue for equal opportunities for various groups. When I was employed as equity practitioner I recall arguments were made by women, when advocating for women to gain a fairer share of resources, that it was not sensible to not use women more in jobs, as they represented an under-used pool of talented people (Still 1997). Human capital theory tied in with economic rationalism was used by feminists to advocate for women to gain a fairer share of resources, especially in relation to equal employment opportunity and child care (Brennan 1994; Cox
1995). Feminists in retrospect claim they felt compelled to use these kinds of arguments and its associated language to be heard by those in power.

Clarke says that social justice is ‘not well defined and that it is value laden’ (1997: 8) and thus not a strong basis from which to argue for equity policy in higher education. Marginson argues that human capital theory is also value laden. To be able to separate:

… the effects of education on earnings from that of other influences, including parental wealth, parental income, access to educational opportunity, motivation in education, and access to the best jobs’ is doubted by Vaizey (1962 cited in Marginson 1993: 51) and others like Maglen (1990, cited in Marginson 1993: 53).

Marginson also raises the important point that ‘[u]nlike machines or properties, human beings have conscious preferences and varying motivations’ (1993: 53) and may not conform to a form or way of life that has economic productivity as the primary or guiding principle.

Another problem with human capital theory, says Marginson is the:

… deeply ethical problems in the conception of people as units of capital, controlled by external economic forces external to them, rather than self-determining members of a democracy (1993: 54).

Marginson worries that the increasing influence of market liberals or economic rationalism has negatively affected the notions of social justice and equality of opportunity in education. Marginson says that:

Hayek reserved some of his strongest invective for an attack on social justice. In 1960 he said that social justice was developing into a serious threat to freedom (1993: 71).

Social justice and equity was also often rhetorically positioned as being opposite to “economic” efficiency in higher education institutions which made arguing for social justice and equity much more difficult.

Both Arendt and Foucault claim there has been an amplification of the economic productivity of the individual in modern times. Both Arendt and Foucault were concerned about “economism’s” encroachment on political possibilities and on freedom (Gordon 1999). Arendt conceives this trend to be a result of the expansion and infiltration of “the social” into the public domain, while Foucault understands it to be an effect of disciplinary techniques that maximize the “useful force” of the body’ (Gordon 1999: 208). Both Arendt and Foucault
maintain that the growth of economic productivity is firmly linked to the diminution of people’s political force. Arendt argues that the encroachment of “the social” and its values into all walks of life, results in the aggrandizement of the life process and the destruction of spaces in which people can gather to engage in political debate and to “act in concert”. This in turn reduces the prospects of political mobilisation and organisation. Foucault claims that disciplinary techniques help program the population to produce more in “economic” terms while rendering it politically submissive and complacent (Gordon 1999).

The “human capital theory” of education is said to have displaced an earlier understood relationship between education and democracy. Several authors, like Marginson (1993, 1998) and Ramsay (1998) argue that the current emphasis on economic arguments in higher education leave out earlier considerations of higher education as nation building in the fullest sense of democratic participation of all in the life of the nation. The role of higher education in the “preparation of democratic citizenry” has become less and less emphasised as a rationale for equity measures in higher education. The federal Labor Minister responsible for higher education made the point in 1988 that access is vital to higher education by all groups in society because:

We want to be a society that understands its own political processes enables all citizens to participate in those processes and does not accept without question decisions made on its behalf (Dawkins 1988: 7).


Participation in decision-making was treated as educational in the Family Centre Project in the previous chapter of this study. The family members’ participation on the management committee was “in order to” prepare the so-called poor people for proper decision-making later. This defers political action in both the Family Centre Project and in higher education institutions. Arendt argues that political action occurs only while we are acting together with
others. Continual preparation for decision-making not only delays but alters the nature of political action.

Marginson says:

> Conceptions of access and equity, in which the social space is characterised by equality of respect and a shared right of self-determination, continue to be significant (1993:18).

Clarke claims this kind of view represents:

> … a liberal democratic view of equality of opportunity in education as a means to promote democracy, social harmony, social mobility and equality (1997: 5).

These liberal democratic ideas tend to fit broadly with some feminist critical social workers’ positions on the role of the state and the notion of active citizenship. Powell says:

> Social reformers went a step further by insisting upon the need to change the role of the state in the interests of the welfare of the population as a whole. For them, a healthy public domain involved an active state as well as active citizenship (2001: 26).

The term “active” however has taking on an altered meaning after the introduction of the active society policy framework by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2005). The OECD focuses on welfare to work and welfare in work policies that emphasise labour market integration for groups such as lone parents and those with disabilities. They pre-limit the term “active” to mean self-governance around the notion of the self as an investment, as it is articulated in human capital theory. The notion of “active” invoked by feminist and critical social workers had far more to do with political participation and with people

> … gaining control over their lives, and participating in decisions that affected them in the home and the community, in government and international development politics (Kwapong 2006: 2)

I showed in the previous chapter how activating or politicising certain segments of the population to “empower” them is already a power relation that both enables and delimits certain ways of acting. For this reason the notion of a target population requires further exploration in relation to the ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy.
CHAPTER FIVE – HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY POLICY EMPOWERING ‘THE DISADVANTAGED’?

Target populations

Schneider and Ingram (1993) show that differently positioned groups in society tend to elicit different rationales from policy makers. They discuss the social construction of target populations in relation to target populations that are perceived as “powerful” or “powerless” and in relation to negative or positive stereotyping or positioning. Schneider and Ingram say that:

… rationales for providing beneficial policy to powerless groups seem to emphasize justice oriented legitimations rather than instrumental ones (1993: 6).

In contrast:

… powerful, positively viewed groups, the [policy] rationales will commonly feature the group’s instrumental links to the achievement of important public purposes, currently conceptualised in terms of national defence and economic competitiveness (Schneider and Ingram 1993: 6).

The ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy used both claims, the social justice aspect emphasising the benefits for the target population in gaining greater access to higher education and the economic rationalist arguments emphasising the contribution target populations would make to the nation state’s well being.

The Equity Policy specified the target populations whose participation the universities were to increase. According to Foucault’s early and middle work this kind of approach can be understood as biopolitics in that regulation of the population is “conceived in the abstract”. Cruikshank adds:

Numbers are not just ‘used’ in politics, they help to configure the respective boundaries of the political and the technical (1999: 115).

Seen in this way the identification of target populations is an exercise of power. Foucault discusses how the problem of population made the “art of government” less restricted (1991: 99). Statistics are used to:

… reveal that population has its own regularities… population has specific economic effects: statistics by making it possible to quantify these specific phenomena of population (Foucault 1991: 99).

Certain population groups were identified as statistically under-represented. Target
populations groups were determined through a normalizing practice of comparing the representation of sub-groups in the national population with the national participation overall in higher education. This process in effect was claiming to technically “discover” specific sub-group’s under-representation. According to Foucault this process is actually “creating” the sub-populations to be targeted by government policy. Specific target groups became “political facts” through these supposed neutral technical practices. Foucault highlights that these practices are relations of power that produce a certain kind of knowledge and “truths” about some groups.

Foucault’s genealogist approach stressed the ‘tendency of discourse to constitute that which it then claims to have discovered’ (Ferguson 1991: 330 cited in Hayes 1998: 7). This means that:

In relation to discourses of equitable provision, what they claim to discover is ‘evidence’ of inequity which has been compelled to materialise in the form of ‘the educationally disadvantaged subject’ (Hayes 1998: 7).

For Hayes:

… genealogically speaking, the shift from differential to equitable provision was not about eliminating inequity, rather it was about modifying and improving regulatory practices that discipline the body and regulate the population (1998: 7).

“Under-representation” in higher education could now be understood as representing a condition

… which was distinct from its bearers [and as such could] become a site of theoretical and historical argument and conceptual elaboration (Dean 1991: 143).

The parallels with the previous example of the Family Centre Project are evident. It suits a critical social work sensibility to not morally blame individuals for their situation or circumstances by making “under-representation” ‘distinct from its bearers’ (Dean 1991:143) The moral effect of separating the bearer from their condition (of being under-represented) suited my sense that people were not to blame for circumstances outside their control in the equity practitioner role. What I failed to understand was that continuing with practices and techniques of objectifying and studying these people as sub-populations created ethical and political problems. My job was highly “political” through my involvement in these exercises of normalising power in Foucault’s terms.
CHAPTER FIVE – HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY POLICY EMPOWERING ‘THE DISADVANTAGED’?

The access agenda

Much of the equity work tended to be focused on “the access agenda”, as Morley (1999) calls it. The Higher Education Council also claims that the ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy focussed on equity as an access issue’ (1995: 35). Morley states that:

Quantitative change is important, but simply, counting women, black, disabled or working class students in does not represent a radical transformation of higher education (2003: 147, my italics).

The Equity Policy emphasised that:

All Australians have the right to access the services and benefits our society offers and to contribute to our social, cultural and industrial endeavours (Dawkins 1990: iii, my italics).

This understanding of equity restricts the notion of “participation” significantly.

Even counting people in or as represented was not without methodological difficulties. The federal government however did not think the difficulty with clearly defining and differentiating disadvantaged groups was:

… sufficient reason to delay action to overcome the very real disadvantages apparent in our society, or to fail to develop measures to assess progress towards overcoming such disadvantage (DEET 1990: v).

As far as DEET was concerned this “lack of precision” just meant that the equity practitioners and planning officers in higher education institutions would need to over time develop mechanisms for counting more accurately or better. Thus equity practitioners became intricately involved in the:

… quantification of the lives of certain citizens [which] does not necessarily determine or control their behaviour, but it does determine what is counted will add up to something actionable (Cruikshank 1999: 116).

Equity practitioners and planning officers were engaged in a relay of power relations that assisted in making certain citizens known in the abstract and this facilitated the constitution of the “educationally disadvantaged subject” (Hayes 1998: 7).

One of the most common critiques of the notion of “target populations” was that individuals
would have a label affixed to them and that this would not be helpful. This critique was simply met with a statement that this is ‘not the Government’s intention’ (DEET 1990: v). In the early equity reports (1990-1995) there were no labels affixed to specific individuals. However developments since then suggest that this is changing. The early reporting used abstract numbers (or even percentages) of students with certain “characteristics” such as gender, race, ethnicity or being other than of English speaking background, or having a disability. Some groups of students did however have to specify their target population identity to gain access to resources, for example students with a disability and Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander students.

Hacking argues that:

Ways of classifying human beings interacts with the human beings who are classified. People think of themselves as of a kind, perhaps, or reject the classification. All our acts are under descriptions, and the acts that are open to us depend; in a purely formal way [philosophically speaking], on the descriptions available to us. Moreover, classifications do not exist only in the empty space of language but in institutions, practices, material interactions with things and people (1999: 31).

This highlights the ethical and political issues in classifying human beings especially if power relations are to be based on collaboration and cooperation and not on ruling or command.

An underlying assumption of the ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) Policy:

… (not made explicit until Equality, Diversity and Excellence 1996 report) that this under-representation is not due to different levels of ability or potential but rather has been socially constructed. Implicit in this assumption, as well as in the framework itself (again made explicit in the same 1996 report) is the belief that having been socially constructed these inequalities of education opportunity and outcomes can be reversed, or at least reduced by explicit intervention, not least by the education sector and educational institutions themselves (Australian Government 2006: 1)

Ramsay wanted to say that the ‘A Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy located the cause of the problem away from the ‘characteristics of the groups experiencing and being disadvantaged by these inequalities’ (1998: 2). However later Ramsay argues that the way forward in equity work in higher education is:

By using institutional equity data in wise, scholarly, and insightful new ways we can discover, apply and integrate new ways of understanding the educational implications of
the particular characteristics which are shared by what have come to be known as equity student groups (1998: 6, my italics).

Her comments bring us back to Hacking’s question: are equity students then ‘a new kind of human being?’ (1999). Is the discovery, application and integration of new ways of understanding ‘particular characteristics which are shared by what have come to be known as equity student groups’ (Ramsay 1998: 6, my italics) the furthering of a field of “power-knowledge” as Foucault would claim? Foucault made clear that:

… there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (cited in Lacombe 1996: 338).

The equity practitioner is positioned as needing to be “wise, scholarly and insightful” by Ramsay (1998: 6). Positioning the equity practitioner as wise, scholarly and insightful does not suggest that a priority should be placed on interactive political dialogue with people around various phenomena, practices or certain forms of power. Rather it positions the equity practitioner as “philosopher–king” (Arendt 1961). This positioning indirectly suggests that equity practitioners can make decisions on the basis of their own wisdom (whatever that is or however it is gained) rather than by acting in concert with others.

How knowledge is constructed and how it constitutes identities is a critical aspect of Foucault’s work in understanding the power/knowledge nexus. There is a renewed emphasis on the participation of low socio-economic students (SES) in higher education. This (SES) groups ‘access indicators... demonstrate that they are still significantly under-represented relative to population share in the commencing student profile’ (Martin 1995: 22). There is a renewed focus on the problem of the so-called poor. Low socio-economic status and participation in higher education is again being closely linked to the characteristics of the poor rather than being understood as a problem with the way higher education institutions tend to replicate themselves in terms of their student profile. This new problematisation appears to be shifting the onus again onto “activating” the poor to change their motivation or values to gain access to higher education.

Schneider and Ingram make the point, which Foucault also makes that:
The agenda, tools and rationales of policy impart messages to target populations that inform them of their status as citizens and how they and people like themselves are likely to be treated by government (1993: 7).

How citizens encounter and internalise these messages influences their ‘orientations toward government and their participation patterns’ (Schneider and Ingram 1993: 7). It tends to tell them ‘whether they are viewed as “clients” by government and bureaucracies or whether they are treated as objects’ (Schneider and Ingram 1993: 7).

The experience with policy tells people whether they are atomized individuals who must deal directly with government and bureaucracy to press their own claims or participants in a cooperative process joining with others to solve problems collectively for the common good (Schneider and Ingram 1993: 7).

Legislation in Australia dealing with discrimination on the basis of race, disability, sex or ethnicity tends to atomise the individuals who experience such discrimination, by instituting a complaints based process that puts the onus on individuals to seek redress through legislation that makes abuses of power unlawful. Often mediation and reconciliation are the main ways of dealing with a complaint by equal opportunity officers at organisational, state and federal levels (Hunter 1992). Group complaints are possible but relatively rare (Sawer 1990; Hunter 1992). Similar complaints processes were also implemented within all higher education institutions in Victoria (1990-1995), especially in relation to sexual harassment by equity practitioners (Bay 1991). The reliance on grievance procedures and mediation similarly suggests an atomised individual relation between so-called “victims” of abuses of power and the higher education institution.

All this taken together means that policy creates politics (Schneider and Ingram 1993). This is a view which disturbs the liberal notion that identity creates interests and demands, and that these interests and demands are based on the characteristics of the identity group. For Foucault power relations constitute both political identities and their interests. Arendt argues that interests are not based on foundational essences attributed to people but created between people. This means that the Equity Policy creates politics and the framework for thinking about political identities and interests. This implies we need to take a closer look at how power relations were understood and how the Equity Policy operated in aiming to empower the “disadvantaged”.

169
Conceptions of power relations

In the 1990’s equity practitioners were employed in both TAFE (Technical and Further Education) institutions and universities to specifically promote equal employment opportunities for staff, equity for students and to ensure anti-discrimination legislation were adhered to by the institutions. Many of the equity practitioners construed their positions within higher education as having similarities with the notion of a ‘femocrat’. Femocrat is a term unique to Australia and New Zealand and referred to:

… those women appointed to work in “women’s affairs” and women’s units in the state apparatus, the bureaucracies’ and was extended to include ‘feminist bureaucrats who seek to work on behalf of women whatever their position’ (Franzway, Court and Connell 1989: 133-134).

The role of these positions was to carry ‘feminist demands to extend women’s rights and opportunities into a direct engagement with the state’ (Franzway et al. 1989: 134). Most equity practitioners understood their equity practitioner role as similarly requiring this bringing especially women staff and student’s demands for equal opportunity into direct engagement with their employing organisation. However Luke claims that ‘an academic ‘femocracy’ is hardly in evidence’ (1993: 62). However the conception of power that equity practitioners in tertiary education articulated in their monthly meetings reflected a modernist analysis of power. Power was thought of as an entity that some people had and white senior management male staff were considered powerful and white female equity staff considered powerless. The interaction between the two groups was often portrayed as a power struggle with the women feeling that they embodied the excluded “other” in these struggles. This conception of power as Fook (2000) indicated tends to delimit the possibility of empowerment and so is relevant to explore further here.

When Yeatman (1993) reflected on these higher education equity positions, she observed that it was primarily white women who took up these new equity positions. According to Yeatman:

An equity-oriented substantive vision for the academic development of the university is not likely… to come from the university’s traditional academic leaders and managers. Instead it is more likely to come from academics who are placed as marginals in relation to this traditional culture of academic leadership and management. The core marginals in
a binary hierarchical ordering of reason and embodiment are women. This is why (usually white and English-speaking background) women are used in organization as equity change agents (1993: 20).

Women as the main equity change agents were treated somehow as if they embodied the “Other”, the excluded. For this reason Yeatman suggested that senior women can all too easily ‘become condensed targets for resistance to change’ (1993: 23). In effect this conception of women equity change agents sets up a framework for understanding the interactions between equity practitioners and management of the universities as a power struggle. This is a similar construction of power relations to the interaction between the staff and family members in the case study discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis.

Activist feminists generally thought that women must aim to gain power and to influence senior managers in their decisions making to improve the conditions and position of women and other equity groups within the organisation. Novarra (1984) exemplifies this by saying:

… women must aim for power… in order to ensure as far as possible that they produce the outputs women want… the word ‘power’ is emphasised… power over resources and being where the decisions are made, (cited in McMaster and Randell 1993: 2).

Femocrats wanted direct reporting relationships to the most senior person in their organisation when working within large bureaucratic organisations. Similarly the equity practitioner wanted to report to the Vice Chancellor or Director of the educational institution they worked in. This organisational arrangement was argued for on the basis that locating the equity position in the Chancellery or Directorate emulated similar arrangements within both the Australian state and federal governments. The Office of the Status of Women, for example was located in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet at the federal level (Sawer 1990). The same arrangement applied at the Victorian state government level with the equity practitioner reporting to the Premier. This organisational location of the equity practitioner position reflected the notion that critical social workers and femocrats had about power and empowerment during the 1990s; that the source of power, the locus of power within an organisation or government is the proper focus of influence for femocrats (Solomon 1976; Payne 1997; Cruikshank 1999).

Equity practitioners expected change could be directed from the top of the organisation. It was:
CHAPTER FIVE – HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY POLICY EMPOWERING ‘THE DISADVANTAGED’?

... generally held that top-down management commitment is essential to make progress in developing equal opportunities, and thus, far less attention was paid to so-called ‘bottom-up’ activist approaches (Price and Priest 1996: 37).

The conception of power relations within the femocrat framework tended to focus on power struggles between the equity practitioners and senior managers for policy and resource gains. This was an oppositional and confrontational view of power, with the equity practitioner positioned to advocate for disadvantaged groups in order to win concessions or resources from the organisation for use by these groups. Paradoxically, the equity practitioner was positioned as both “powerful” because of the location of the position and its reporting relations and supposed capacity to influence management; and yet “powerless” because of belonging to one of the disadvantaged groups (women). Women were pitted in opposition to a “powerful” usually male white middle class senior management group. Women’s relatively “powerless” position in higher education is considered evident in how ‘[w]omen [were and still] are… discursively framed as problem areas’ in higher education (Morley 2003: 20). According to Lamptey (1992, cited in Morely 2003: 20) ‘there are still many essentialised observations about women’s qualities and preferred styles of working’ evident in higher education’.

The femocrat conception of power ‘assumed that a face-to-face confrontation with power was both a possibility and a measure of democratic freedom’, according to Cruikshank (1999: 15). However as Foucault’s work indicated this single locus of power idea misses the point that power relations circulate between and among people and that power is exercised at all levels and throughout an organisation. The oppositional view of power relations also failed to recognise that equity practitioners were involved in exercising power when preparing equity plans, affirmative action plans, policies and strategies for students with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Equity practitioners also hoped to use the top-down power relations to impose equity policies, procedures and strategies within the organisation.

The femocrat conception of power was closely related to force. Equity practitioners sometimes joked that if all the people comprising these so-called target populations got together, they would numerically be larger and thus stronger than the few white, able-bodied males in power. They associated power with the idea of strength and with strength in numbers. For Arendt ‘power and violence are opposites; where one rules absolutely, the other
is absent’ (1969: 56). Arendt was very conscious of paying attention to how some goal was achieved. If some goal was achieved through force or violence this destroys power and the possibility of collaboration and cooperation. Equity practitioners relied on compulsion to ensure particular equity policy directions within higher education institutions were followed. This detracted from political action as understood by Arendt.

What Arendt offers here is a different conception of policy making that does not involve instrumental steps and impositions by some members of the organisation on others about how to act and behave. Even the use of persuasion can delimit debate and not encourage people to think and talk themselves into a commitment to change a situation, according to Arendt. Compelling people reduces their freedom to act in concert and reinforces top-down notions of power and decision-making. The femocrat conception of power relations as top-down tended to devalue politics, plurality, natality and freedom as understood by Arendt. In the next chapter I will explore Arendt’s attempt to develop a path between persuasion and compulsion through “authority” and acts of foundation and augmentation.

The femocrat position and its associated assumed oppositional power relations ironically placed considerable onus on the equity practitioner to take responsibility for improving the higher education institution’s performance in relation to access and participation by target population groups. The onus of negotiating equity initiatives, policies, strategies, and projects were understood as residing with the equity practitioner and perhaps a small team of staff. In effect by holding equity practitioners responsible, it exonerated others within the university from “having to” take such initiatives. According to Franzway, Court and Connell:

… the femocrat project must recognise that femocrats constitute a challenge to the state’s interest in the gender order and to the masculine dominance of public power… [and] The state interprets demands in terms of its own solution strategies aimed at reconciling its internal mode of operation with conflicting constellations of interests…. The state apparatus does not simply reflect whichever demands are successful in the contest, but is implicated in the determination of success (1986: 154).

Similarly even though the equity practitioners were made responsible to the senior managers of higher education institutions for equity achievements, in effect senior managers also have some influence on how “successful” equity policies, programmes and initiatives can be.

Senior managers in higher education institutions did not support the “privileged” reporting lines of equity practitioners to Vice Chancellors or their location in the Chancellery for long.
CHAPTER FIVE – HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY POLICY EMPOWERING ‘THE DISADVANTAGED’?

Reporting lines were a continual source of battle and during the various re-structures within different higher education institutions the equity positions’ reporting lines were frequently demoted. The Higher Education Council found that even though:

... senior responsibility for equity frequently resides with one of the academic senior managers of the university, it is often not considered a major or key part of the portfolio.

Against this trend, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Equity) positions have recently been created in a few universities (1995: 27).

‘Equity is frequently perceived by equity practitioners working in the higher education sector to be marginalised’ (Clarke 1997: 7). Morely (2003: 13) says ‘power is not redistributed, even though the potential space for access to power might have been widened’. According to Morley, ‘[p]ower imbalances in the academy are both structural and played out in micropolitical struggles’ (2003: 15). Clarke argues that the lack of shared values and understandings has led to:

... a superficial commitment being made by many universities to this important area, with student equity resting precariously outside the mainstream of university activities (1997: 1).

The Higher Education Council found that typically:

... a feature of university equity programs [was] that they are commonly associated with clearly identified, typically non-academic and often marginalised organisational units (1995: 27).

Power and identity politics

Over the first five years of the ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) equity policy implementation some universities developed equity branches or offices and employed staff drawn from particular target populations. This is a similar notion to that of the “indigenous worker” in the previous case study of the Family Centre Project in chapter four of this study. For example people with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were employed with specific portfolio responsibilities for policy development for the target population they “visibly” belonged to. When those devising and implementing strategies for people with disabilities, “visibly” embodied that target population, it was regarded as adding credibility to the policy itself.
Foucault’s point about power relations constituting identities and their “visibility” for both surveillance and social control is important here, as is Arendt’s counterpoint about needing “visibility” to gain recognition, while an inherent or essentialist notion of identity, in order to “act in concert” is not understood as necessary in her thinking. Arendt’s point is highly evocative of an alternative way of organising for change not based on identity. One does not have to belong “visibly” or identify with a group to “act in concert” with others. This means anyone can act politically. The liberal notion of politics locates identity as the origin of political interests and as a basis for political action. This liberal conception is a very limited concept of how politics operates and tends to as Foucault suggests reinforce current power relations.

Foucault suggests that there are many risks with identity politics strategies. Iris Marion Young (1990: 165) says that many members of oppressed groups face this dilemma:

When participation is taken to imply assimilation, the oppressed person is caught in an irresolvable dilemma: to participate means to accept and adopt an identity one is not and to try and participate means to be reminded by oneself and others of the identity one is (cited in Morely 2003: 149).

This dilemma was structurally embedded in equity practitioners’ positions within higher education, because to be part of “management” and to be an employee demanded a form of assimilation, whilst advocating on behalf of target groups often accentuated the equity practitioner’s “gender” as some unresolved issue which attracted some hostilities to the role. It also made the question of “who could speak about what” an issue.

Who can speak about what?

Who can speak about what is possibly one of the most sensitive issues in identity politics. Speaking as a white woman about Aboriginal issues might be a point of contention and could be thought by some as being highly “inauthentic”. In this sense:

… a speaker must satisfy the criteria of bearing the marker of identity that one is speaking about. For example, only women are qualified to speak about women’s issues’ (D’Cruz 2001: 1).

Equity practitioners thought it was necessary to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff when institutions received funding to set up Aboriginal education units. It was thought this employment was necessary to engage the local Aboriginal communities and for someone
to speak legitimately on behalf of or for Aboriginal people and issues.

However power relations exist within Aboriginal communities to position the credibility or rights to speak by individual Aboriginal people in relation to Aboriginal culture. This was rarely acknowledged. The Aboriginal staff employed were often drawn from other geographical locations and did not have the presumed connections with local Aboriginal communities. It cannot be assumed that making connections with local Aboriginal people will be easier for them because of their aboriginality. We cannot assume that identity is ever a closed or static category.

The assumption that belonging to a target group “identity” makes claims “authentic” was also used in relation to employing people with physical disabilities as equity practitioners. The daily physical access and personal support needs of such staff illustrated the strategies required of institutions to make the environment suitable for all people with physical impairments. However, as D’Cruz points out, the use of identity as a “right” to speak about the particular identity can:

... encourage the view that knowledge claims are reducible to, and locatable within the ‘authenticity’ of a particular identity’s subjective experience’ (2001: 3).

From Foucault’s point of view, not only is subjectivity understood as having no fixed essence, but as D’Cruz states, it is important to take into account the ways in which ‘speaking positions and subject positions are already effected in an order of discourse’ (2001: 9). D’Cruz adds:

And this is why it becomes important not to group those inscribed with an Aboriginal identity as having an automatic ontological and epistemological standpoint for articulating a united front in politics, or univocal views of social reality, that can remain constant through all institutional sites and discursive practices (2001: 9).

It was easy but deleterious to demand this kind of univocality, a single voice from so-called representatives of target populations, as it failed to recognise the complexity of how power relations historically produced these “disadvantaged” target groups.

According to Honig,

Arendt would have been quite wary of any proclamation of homogeneity in “women’s experience,” of “women’s ways of knowing.” She would have been critical of any feminist politics that relies on a category of woman that aspires to or implies a
universality that belies (or prohibits, punishes, or silences) significant differences and pluralities within – and even resistances to – the bounds of the category itself (1992: 227).

The “representational” participation on equity committees of those identified as embodying particular target populations was a process likely to reinforce current power relations, especially if that positioning and the notion of univocality was itself not challenged in an ongoing way. Regardless of category,

Analysing the politics of identities as discursive formations would show that, no matter who the speaker was, a specific identity cannot be definitively pinned down in advance in the discourse in which it finds itself effected (D’Cruz 2001: 15).

One of the unintended consequences of ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) policy was that target populations could be treated as a collection of categories and as ‘objects of knowledge rather than as subjects of communication’ (Dean 1991: 181). Butler claims that:

… subjects are formed through exclusionary operations, [and so] it becomes politically necessary to trace the operation of that construction and erasure (1992: 14).

It is worthwhile here to reflect on the way specifically people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds are understood as continuing to fail to participate in higher education despite Equity Policy efforts to increase their participation (Wright 2000:1). Rather than use measures like postcodes to determine low socio-economic status (Van Moorst and Ballock 1995) Western et al. (1998: xii, cited in Wright 2000: 9) suggest these be ‘replaced by measures based upon the characteristics of individual students’. This method of gaining “data” on low socio-economic background people shifts the focus from a geographical location to determine likely low levels of income to a focus on individual’s characteristics. Some studies for example like Andrews’ indicates that:

… low participation by low SES groups in higher education relates to values and attitudes towards higher education and not financial considerations (1999: 25, cited in Wright 2000: 12).

As Wright rightly suggests this kind of focus on low participation rates by SES groups has to do with essential characteristics of “the poor” themselves. It has long been said about the poor that they “have none of the motivations of the rich such as pride, honour and ambition” (Wright 2000). This kind of argument about the poor was made at least as far back as 1787 says Dean (1991: 70). Wright indicates that this:
... type of explanation leads to recommendations that focus on changing these attitudes and values ... [and thus] needs to be scrutinised to avoid a return to policy-making based on a ‘deficit-model’ of the disadvantaged group (2000: 13).

Blaming the problem on the attitudes and values of the poor ignores how the higher education system tends to replicate itself in terms of its student profile in spite of considerable efforts to redress imbalances in participation (Higher Education Council 1995: 31).

The Higher Education Council concludes that:

While low socio-economic status may indeed be the major factor, identification of this characteristic remains one of the more contentious aspects of the definitional and indicator work currently being trialled in the sector (1995: 32).

I am arguing that how identities are constituted is a crucial site for analysis and political action in understanding how inequality is maintained and reproduced.

Another example of how subjects are formed through exclusionary operations according to Morley is that:

Access policies have created a moral panic over standards and ‘dumbing down’. There are contamination fears expressed in the idea that massification and the entry of ‘non-traditional’ learners presents a threat to academic standards (2003: 130).

Yet according to Clarke,

What is not tolerated is the argument that sub-population groups – social classes, ethnic groups – for example – may differ, on the average, in terms of their abilities and/or motivations; sub-populations groups are not more or less capable or motivated on the whole, though individuals may be (Williams, 1987, cited in Clarke 1997: 5).

Clarke is suggesting that there was a discursive constraint on the argument that some population sub-groups may simply lack abilities and/or motivations. Both Morely and Clarke are examining discursive practices that operate to constitute target populations.

On another point, Wright says that:

A particular feature of policy-making and academic discussion in respect of people from low SES backgrounds is that rarely are they actively involved in defining the policy problem, the discussion about policy developments or evaluations of initiatives (2000: 14).
Critical social workers might be alerted to analyse ‘what enables and constrains a subject in the very act of taking up a speaking position’, according to D’Cruz (2001: 15). Some like Alcock (1993) point out that to require the poor to speak for themselves is highly controversial as well as practically difficult. Cruikshank adds that:

Technologies of citizenship, such as those aimed at empowering “the poor”, link the subjectivity of citizens to their subjection, and link activism to discipline (1999: 67).

For critical social workers concerned with transforming power relations towards more collaborative and cooperative forms, it is crucial to explore how various constraints operate to position “target groups” as needing to be “activated” to take a role. It is critical for social work to disrupt the taken-for-granted relation between identity and politics to open up multiple possibilities for political action. I am arguing that it is crucial for critical social workers to analyse how power relations constitute low-socio economic status when analysing how power relations operate to maintain and reinforce inequalities.

According to Butler,

What Foucault suggested was that this subject is itself the effect of a genealogy which is erased the moment that the subject takes itself as the single origin of its action, and that the effects of an action always supersede the stated intention or purpose of the act (1992: 10).

Employing “indigenous” workers to speak on behalf of pre-determined discursive political identities, or a so-called poor person to speak on behalf of low socio-economic status people potentially encourages that person to relate to themselves as that political identity, without unpacking how this “political identity” itself has been fabricated over time. Thus the demands for individuals to speak to and for a particular political identity have to be questioned on an on-going basis.

According to Arendt,

… a political community that constitutes itself on the basis of prior, shared, and stable identity threatens to close the spaces of politics, to homogenize or repress the plurality and multiplicity that political action postulates (Honig 1992: 227).

Arendt assumes that ‘there is no critical leverage to be had from inside formed identities’ (Honig 1992: 231). Yet that was the assumption that prompted the hiring of “indigenous” staff and the allocation of policy-making responsibility to those staff on behalf of the target
population group they represented. Honig believes that

… identities are never seamless, and there are sites of critical leverage within the ruptures and inadequacies, in the ill-fittedness, of existing identities (1992: 231).

Butler strongly recommends that: we

… take the construction of the subject as a political problematic… to call into question… to open up a term, like the subject, to a reusage or redeployment that previously has not been authorized (1992: 15).

In the 1990s disabled people called into question the construction of the disabled subject by developing what was called a “social” model for theorising disability rights. According to Carling-Burzacott this model’s:

… academic formulation is credited primarily to Oliver (1996), who described the social model as focusing on rehabilitating society through a political agenda. The social model aims to remove barriers – environmental, systemic/institutional, and attitudinal. Services provided under the social model would be based on an agenda of rights (2005: 5).

A disability policy developed by LaFontaine (1992-3) for a Victorian higher education institution emphasised that the attitude of the higher education institutions towards people with disabilities was the major barrier to be overcome when increasing the participation of people with disabilities in higher education.

To LaFontaine (1993) people’s attitudes were as much a barrier as physical barriers. Disability activists attempted to disrupt the taken-for-granted constructions of people with disabilities by exploring how disabled people had been historically understood and treated. According to Carling-Burzacott (2005: 9) the religious conception of disability as a ‘moral or spiritual issue’ was later replaced with a scientific construction used by the eugenics movement to legitimise ill treatment and even killing of people with disabilities. The welfare perspective on people with disabilities was characterised as reinforcing the “dependence” of disabled people. The medical definition of disability ‘as a personal tragedy in need of a medical saviour’ (Carling-Burzacott 2005:1) was also rejected in preference of the “social” model. The “social” model located the need for change with society as society’s arrangements and people’s attitudes created the barriers that made people experience their disability as an obstacle to participating in life’s activities.

Disability activists reconceptualised disability not as something that is inherent in a person or
as something that defines them as a particular kind of person. Rather “disabilities” only become a barrier when society is not planned in ways that accommodate people with disabilities. The responsibility was put on the higher education institution to remove barriers that prevented people from participating. The work by these disability activists indicates how taken-for-granted “identities” and an analysis of their histories could be used to disrupt and de-authorise that given “identity” and to redeploy it in potentially new and empowering ways.

Arendt values plurality as the condition of public life and encourages political action based not on inherent essentialist essences or identities but on the points of disagreement that might galvanise people into action around a particular phenomenon, power relation or event. Similarly, Foucault would promote the struggle to be around resisting a specific kind of power and modern power’s propensity to constitute political subjects and to require them to tell the secrets of their inner selves. Both Arendt and Foucault encourage a commitment to politics that contests closure. As Mouffe states,

> A healthy democratic process calls for a vibrant clash of political positions and an open conflict of interests. If such is missing, it can too easily be replaced by confrontation between non-negotiable moral values and essentialist identities (2006: 6).

Whereas ‘political liberalism’ offers:

> … us a picture of the well-ordered society as one from which antagonisms, violence, power and repression have disappeared… [but it is only that] they have been made invisible…(Mouffe 2006: 141).

In effect, the formal processes of policy making undertaken by equity practitioners in higher education reinforced this picture of a well-ordered organisation and gave the impression that there were few antagonisms involved in the development of an Equity Policy. Equity Policy-making within higher education institutions presented few challenges to liberal democratic ideals and tended to reinforce power relations both through condoning top down policy initiatives and by reinforcing subordinate political identities.

**Policy-making**

In a sense equity practitioners were acting belatedly into the web of relationships that pre-dated their arrival in higher education institutions. The way higher education institutions make policy through various governance and management processes was to a large extent pre-determined and most of the institutional arrangements were pre-scribed. Policy-making as
part of the formal decision-making structures of an organization from Arendt’s perspective can mean that an instrumental idea of politics and policy as “making” is evident. The notion of making policy using a representative committee structure highlights the instrumental rationality that may be involved in these processes according to Arendt’s perspective. Arendt’s perspective can alert critical social workers to consider how these arrangements might seriously delimits what Arendt would call political action, by relying on politics as ruling rather than an understanding of politics as agonal and of power as collaboration and cooperation.

In exploring the relationship between the state and individual bureaucrats, Franzway et al. quote Weber as staying that:

“The individual bureaucrat cannot squirm out of the apparatus in which he is harnessed”. State workers are unable to avoid bureaucratic imperatives and the logic of policy production. But they have their own basis for action, their own interests as state workers which shape and are shaped by internal demands. The state worker is no ‘mere cog in an ever-moving mechanism … the state is not unitary nor are state workers and so their interests conflict (1986: 53).

Equity practitioners were compelled to use committee structures that were formal, pre-determined a “representative” membership in relation to a prescribed preset policy. According to Mouffe (2006: 1) these processes seek to delimit if not eliminate the political. The political as indicated by Yeatman with her comment about the determination of women as the “other”, ‘is linked to the existence of an element of hostility among human beings’ (Mouffe 2006: 2). Differences between collective identifications can, when considered to put into “question our very existence”, become a site of political antagonism. Mouffe suggests that ‘we accept the necessity of the political and the impossibility of a world without antagonism’ (2006: 4). The management of Equity Policy through formal governance mechanism seemed to eliminate the need to confront any of these hostilities directly. Nevertheless, these hostilities were present, though unacknowledged, and they continued on some levels to influence relations between people.

Honig argues,

… to displace politics, [is] to deny the effects of power in some of life’s arenas for the sake of the perceived goods that power stabilizes under the guise of knowledge, respect, rationality, cognition, nature, or the public-private distinction itself (1993: 205).
CHAPTER FIVE – HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY POLICY EMPOWERING ‘THE DISADVANTAGED’?

If equity is about developing shared principles on how we relate to one another, at times perhaps in relation to collective identifications, it requires that people can move beyond the desire to destroy their enemy (Schmitt 1976). A minimum requirement would be that adversaries must be considered ‘legitimate and must be tolerated’ (Mouffe 2006: 4).

Both Arendt and Foucault seek more than that, they seek an agonal political space for debate, discussion, disagreement and judgement, which means placing the care of the world as the focus between us. The focus is not on oppositional power relations, a point Fook (2002: 54) made earlier, nor on each other as enemy or friend. An ongoing point for discussion, according to Foucault needs to be: how particular groups or categories are themselves created through the ‘will to empower’? (Cruikshank 1993). In this way,

... neither the good fortune of fittedness nor the misfortune of ill-fittedness [of collective identities in higher education] is de-politicized’, (Honig 1993: 205).

Politics can then be regarded more comprehensively as consisting:

... of practices of settlement and unsettlement, of disruption and administration, of extraordinary events or foundings and mundane maintenance. It consists of the forces that decide undecideables and of those that resist those decisions at the same time (Honig 1993: 205, italics in the original).

The identification of target populations in the Equity Policy at times reduced the whole endeavour to a focus on difference and otherness. Foucault would encourage us to politicise the relations of the self to its self and to the “(potentially demonized) other”. Both are politically significant (Honig 1993: 205). As Foucault states identity politics can reinforce the truth of one’s identity and make refusal of that identity less possible yet more attractive. As such identity politics delimits political action to deal with inequities.

Equity Policy contributed to the micro-management of universities through its reporting obligations and inputs into the annual “Educational Profiles” discussions held with DEET representatives and university management (Clarke 1997: 3). According to the brief executive summary introduction to ‘Fair chance for All’ (1990) equity policies should be working towards behavioural changes on the part of academic staff and administrative staff.

Institutions with a demonstrated commitment to equity have already shown that much progress towards achieving equity goals can be made without the need for the institution
Neo-liberal governance likes to focus on behavioural changes while not taking responsibility for providing resources to institutions to achieve equity goals (Clarke 1997). This focus also distracts from power relations that reinforce and maintain inequalities.

Both equity and quality assurance were imposed on higher education institutions and people in universities have found it very difficult to be against either on principle (Morely 2003). Who can be against quality? Who can be against equity? The very naming of the policy makes opposition difficult. Which is not to say that there is no opposition to these externally imposed projects and policies. Indeed, Clarke suggests that:

… the university sector has a natural aversion to being compelled to do something and tends, as a matter of course, to react negatively to such attempts, almost regardless of the issue (1997: 8).

Morely (2003) indicates that resistance to “quality” in higher education has been difficult. Morely says:

… demands for prescriptive performance, within established regimes of logic and reason, have intensified as the culture of excellence expands in higher education (2003: 48).

Morely rightly points out that this:

Performativity involves a damaging process of ventriloquism and impersonation as academics and managers attempt to represent themselves in a language that… [senior managers and government officials] will understand and value (2003: 70).

Morley (2003) describes in relation to quality assurance how an academic disciplinary group passed the quality assurance process and gained the highest score possible for their area of study, only to feel completely demoralised because the score could not possibly have reflected what quality teaching is or can be about. The inauthenticity of the score according to Morley reduces trust because in a sense reality is being denied and as such ‘nothing can be construed as authentic anymore’ (2003: 70).

I felt a sense of demoralisation when the “Social Justice Package” developed by the equity branch I was managing gained an outstanding rating by the Higher Education Council. I felt a sense of unreality and inauthenticity in that the document was merely an instrumental plan that could not capture what equity might be about. The plan specified who was supposed to be
CHAPTER FIVE – HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY POLICY EMPOWERING ‘THE DISADVANTAGED’?

responsible within the university for certain aspects of equity policy, strategy and monitoring without any acknowledgement of the complexity or frailty of human affairs. The equity and social justice package reflected a level of agreement and closure that was not possible in reality, as reality is far more complex and chaotic. Such closure is also not desirable, as it denies plurality, dissent and the on-going need to augment and begin again. A statement of principles about how we might relate to each other in the organisation and which is regularly used to debate what is happening in the organisation would perhaps be a better model than a policy package for transforming power relations.

If equity practitioners took on board Arendt’s point about not taking the terms of the situation as given in advance and also not taking its members as designated in advance, this would challenge the taken-for-granted way the Equity Policy within higher education institutions was regulated and instrumentalised. Both Arendt and Foucault consider the way politics and power are instrumentalised is itself an aspect of the way modern power operates and they consider this element a highly politico-ethical issue to be treated as contestable in an on-going way.

Conclusion

Efforts to transform power relations require an understanding of how a particular situation is constituted and how the political identities of the people involved are produced and inequalities maintained. The example of the Equity Policy implementation (1990-1994) in Victorian higher education institutions highlights the taken-for-granted way a social problem and target populations was defined reinforced the way power operated and as such delimited any efforts to transform power relations. I conclude that critical social workers cannot disrupt or alter power relations without an analysis of how power relations operate to produce “identities” and the problems to be addressed.

My analysis here indicates that equity policy-making overall contributed to the neo-liberal governance of higher education institutions in a top-down manner, rather than challenging or changing the relations from ruling to collaboration and cooperation. Arendt offers a new way to think about “power” as achieved through people acting together. Instead Equity practitioners tended to become trapped in the “continuous improvement” cycle of performativity encouraged through the managerialist techniques which generated further
performativity rather than finding ways to address inequalities (Morely 2003). Other measures that aimed to address inequality like inclusive curriculum projects were considered valuable and brought diverse groups of people together across the University and reflected more closely the potential to transform power relations.

Foucault’s insights on power and politics highlight the taken-for-granted aspect of identity categories and of practices intended to empower the disadvantaged or “the poor”. Target population categories are ‘neither incontrovertible fact nor pure fiction; [they are] a political fact’ (Allen 1999: 112). They operate as a political fact and it is through the political that they are changeable. Foucault’s point about the political importance of our relations to our selves in current circumstances of modern power relations that both totalize (treat everyone the same) and individuate (separate off from others and treat as a separate unit, not as a unique human being(s)) alerts critical social workers to the importance of identity categories as sites for on-going political contestation.

Arendt’s thinking about politics makes it clear that top down policy making is a form of ruling that does not leave much room for collaboration and cooperation. The intention of critical social workers to transform power relations ‘that perpetuate domination and exploitation’ (Leonard 1994: 47) requires comfort with agonal politics. The Equity Policy tended to reinforce a top down neo-liberal governance approach through the use of managerialist techniques. These managerialist techniques are instrumentalist and deeply politically unsatisfying as they fail to recognise politics in the way that Arendt understands that concept. Arendt’s notion of plurality as the human condition, as a political achievement and as part of the reason for politics completely changes how to approach equity policy making. Instrumentality emphasises outcomes, products, plans, accountability and conformity. In contrast Arendt argues that political action requires people as both equals and as distinctive individuals to act in concert while continuing to disagree and debate. Power is then not about violence or ruling but about cooperating and collaborating through political action.
Chapter Six
Rethinking empowerment
with Foucault and Arendt

To understand empowerment requires an analysis of power. How one depicts power determines whether there will be an alertness to its full implications in social relations (Morley 1995: 1).

When we hear that subjects are apathetic or powerless and that citizenship is the cure, we are hearing the echo of the will to empower. It is the echo of a way of thinking about politics that is forever blinded by what is not there (Cruikshank 1999: 122).

Their displacements of politics tends to disempower the very subjects they seek to empower, leaving them politically, strategically, and even cognitively unprepared to engage or resist or affirm the closures and settlements reinforced by their state or communities (Honig 1993: 205).

Now it is time to show what it means to re-think empowerment with Foucault and Arendt. Firstly, I use the two specific historical case studies as elaborated in the previous two chapters to draw out what Arendt’s and Foucault’s insights on power, politics and freedom can add to our thinking about empowerment. Morely (1995: 1) notes, ‘[t]o understand empowerment requires an analysis of power’. I argue that it matters how power and power relations are thought about and that it also matters how related notions of politics and freedom are understood when aiming to empower. I show how thinking with Foucault about empowerment tends to emphasise the governmental aspects of empowerment practice and to identity the limits to transforming power relations. However I also argue that Foucault’s analysis of power relations as constituting identities and political interests opens new possibilities for resisting political identities. This is especially true if we also think with Arendt’s way of revaluing the political, political action and plurality. Arendt provides a way to think about transforming power relations that focuses on the possibility of freedom through our capacity to “act in concert”.
I now briefly summarise how power was understood in the historically specific empowerment examples analysed in chapters four and five of this study. I want to explore in more detail what applying Foucault’s ideas to empowerment practice might mean for critical social workers’ rethinking of empowerment practice. I argue that Arendt’s theorising can bring new ways of thinking about power, political action and freedom to critical social work empowerment practice. Foucault’s and Arendt’s theorising about power, politics and freedom can assist critical social workers to think about what it is they “do” when they seek to empower. Neither Arendt nor Foucault provide a plan of action for achieving social change or for transforming power relations to achieve a better world; rather they encourage an analysis of power relations that includes exploring how identities become a political fact. Arendt advocates we care for the world by acting in concert with others through political processes that acknowledge each of our distinctive qualities and value on-going disagreements.

My analysis of the two empowerment case studies in the previous chapters showed that critical social workers conceived of “power” in modernist ways (Fook 2002). Power was to be transferred from the “powerful” to the “powerless”. The femocrat notion of power required “powerful” senior managers to transfer power to the “powerless” through increasing the equal employment opportunities of women and equity for students within higher education institutions. The Family Centre Staff were to transfer their professional power to the family centre members and assist the family members to eventually run their own self-help organisation (“by the poor for the poor”). This binary conception of the “powerful” and the “powerless” tends to frame interactions between people in terms of power struggles (Liffman 1978; Benn 1981).

Fook (2002) suggested that empowerment practice hopes to achieve equality. Fook warns how equating equality with sameness implies that there is only one way of life and that empowerment practice in effect promotes conformity to mass society, rather than promoting diversity and freedom. Both empowerment examples were about bringing the “poor” or the “educationally disadvantaged” into conformity with society’s norms. The empowerment projects sought to increase the opportunities of so-called poor and educationally disadvantaged groups without challenging, disrupting or altering the current power relations.

Foucault’s work highlights the relationship between identity and power as a site for political struggle. Fook says that a disempowering aspect of empowerment is ‘to be related to in terms of labels and categories is potentially dehumanising and discriminating’ (2002: 51). This
‘need to create service user category groupings so that services can be administered appropriately’ creates “contrary circumstances” to empowerment, according to Fook (2002: 51). The need to categorise people demonstrates how power relations in society operate to reinforce the requirements to constantly answer the question: “who are you?” (Foucault 1981). Foucault understands power relations as constituting identities and if critical social workers identify how various “identities” become politically generated “facts”, they can then challenge the constitution of these identities, the processes and the broader power relations that make that constitution possible and reinforceable.

Thinking with Foucault

Foucault in his early and middle work thought of power as repressive. Using this part of his work to analyse the empowerment project examples explored in this study shows that empowerment practice reinforced the power relations that govern the so-called poor or disadvantaged through their political identities. Cruikshank (1999) says that empowerment practice is highly politicised. According to Cruikshank (1999) empowerment can be understood as “governmental” in the broad sense Foucault applies to that word. Foucault directs us to explore how power relations constitute particular political identities and interests. Foucault’s middle and early work tends to conflate subjectivity and subjection and this lends his analysis a focus on repressive power relations. To Foucault these repressive power relations are productive, but the notion of “productive” does not equate with positive or good power relations. Instead Foucault directs our attention to the effects of power relations and specific techniques of power. To think with Foucault about power requires ‘an alertness to its full implications in social relations’ (Morley 1005: 1).

For Foucault a comprehensive analysis of how power operates in particular settings means attempting to understand how political or social identities are constituted. He focuses our attention on how the problem is thought about and how this thinking about a problem changes over time. He directs us to explore how the problematisation generates knowledge and fields of practice. Foucault’s insights also encourage critical social workers to analyse what forms of governmental rationalities and related practices are used to empower. Foucault does not treat any of this analysis as identifying mere background factors or as defining the “context”. Rather these problematisations are understood as constitutive of the situation. In contrast
critical social workers tend to use Foucault’s emphasis on local relations of power or micro-politics to limit their analysis of power to just the local situation. Brass warns that:

A micropower focus, however, does not mean selecting the smallest possible site of personal interactions and examining it intensely, but rather extending one’s gaze in all directions from that site. One examines the networks of power throughout society rather than those extending downward from some ultimate source or structure of power (Brass 2000: 319).

Critical social workers need to understand the way power relations constitute empowerment practices. They need to pay attention to how the exercise of power changes over time, the continuities and discontinuities of practices and techniques of empowerment. How critical social workers understand power relations matters when re-thinking empowerment practices especially after the incursion of “post” theories, which indicate that “empowerment” itself is a relation of power, with a ‘will to truth that lies concealed within the desire to emancipate others’ (Healy 2001: 7).

How we understand injustice to inhere in cultural constructions of identity also matters, so that we do not reify identities that themselves are products of oppressive structures. The post-structural position is that the subject is itself already a product of discourse. If “discourse” in Foucault’s terms means practices, then it includes the way we think about a problem. The notion of discourse includes ways of relating and the kinds of material environments that are established (Hacking 1999). In this sense discourses set out the possibility for subject-hood in advance of any possible expression by any particular individual. Hence, critical social workers seeking to reclaim “authentic” identities or encouraging us to seek or speak our “inner” truth may not be offering as useful a strategy for contesting injustice as originally thought (Healy 2000).

Cruikshank (1999) claims that empowerment is governmental and represents a new mode of governance that is highly politicised. Cruikshank thinks that basically empowerment has been about getting people to govern themselves in relation to pre-determined goals. ‘The left uses empowerment to generate political resistance; the right, to produce rational economic and entrepreneurial actors’ (Cruikshank 1999: 68). Both the New Right and the Left, according to Cruikshank, at bottom, focus on the same process of “activating” the poor or the disadvantaged. This activation is usually required to respond to an identified “lack” within the poor or disadvantaged group. Experts discover the particular aspect missing within poor
people that require change or “activation”. The “poor” or “disadvantaged” are to be activated in their own self-interests to overcome the identified lack of powerlessness or their lack of motivation. Both those on the left and right of political ideologies ‘share a political strategy: - to act upon others by getting them to act in their own interests’ (Cruikshank 1999: 68). This represents a liberal notion of politics and Cruikshank refers to this as the impulse or the “will to empower”, while Healy calls it the ‘will to truth’ (2001: 7).

Cruikshank (1999) says rather than asking whether critical social workers should attempt to deal with inequalities (this remains unquestioned) the question is more importantly how to go about dealing with these inequalities. Cuikshank suggests that:

… we must focus on how we are governed and by what practices, rather than by which people in which sphere (1999: 120, italics in the original).

Dean adds that:

A full appreciation of the analytic of governmental-ethical practices includes more than the how of government, it includes, ‘what is governed, who is to be governed and why … [as] equally central questions’ (1995: 581).

Dean says that:

… governmental self-formation concerns the ways in which various authorities and agencies seek to shape the conduct, aspirations, needs, desires and capacities of specified political and social categories… [and in a closely related way] ethical self-formation concerns practices, techniques and rationalities concerning the regulation of the self by the self (1995: 563).

Foucault stimulates critical social workers to explore how “the poor” or the “educationally disadvantaged” are constituted as the who to be governed. Theorists like Dean 1999; Rose 1996, 1999; O’Malley 1996 suggest exploring how various practices and techniques relate to specific political rationalities. The very way “the poor” and “the disadvantaged” are defined and constituted is political. According to Brass, ‘what is political about those discourses is the establishment of difference, of divisions in society’ (2000: 314).
Empowerment as a mode of government

Cruikshank (1999) claims empowerment is a mode of government using Foucault’s broad meaning of this word. Cruikshank says the following aspects of empowerment show that it is a mode of government. Firstly, empowerment is a relationship established by expertise, even though that expertise is constantly contested. Secondly, because “empowerment” constitutes the disempowered it is also “democratically unaccountable” (Cruikshank 1999: 72). Thirdly, the relations of empowerment are both voluntary and coercive. And fourthly, empowerment is ‘dependent upon knowledge of those to be empowered’ (Cruikshank 1999: 72). Cruikshank’s analysis of “empowerment” explores as Foucault suggested a historically specific project, the 1960s “War on Poverty” in the United States. Cruikshank shows how to analyse power relations and how these constitute the problem to be solved and the people to be involved. Her approach can assist us to apply this kind of Foucauldian analysis to the Family Centre Project and the Equity Policy.

There are several ways in which the empowerment issues involved in the Family Centre Project and the Equity Policy can be understood as established by expertise. In the Equity Policy example, the use of census data to draw conclusions about who needed to be targeted for inclusion in higher education is based on a form of social science and statistical expertise. The uses made of the census data may incense many, for these social statistics do not explain the sources of inequality. Nor do they allow for the frequently drawn conclusions that low socio-economic families lack cultural capital that leads to lower participation rates in higher education.

Expert power was exercised in the selection of the “multi-deficit” families into the Family Centre Project. Yet expert power was often problematised for staff within the Project. Staff members were to be de-professionalised to stop preventing poor families from taking control over the Centre. Family members’ expertise was also frequently questioned in relation to their preparedness to take on decision-making roles within the Project. Family members’ understanding of politics and their preparedness to be involved in political activities outside the Project was questioned by Benn (1981). Experts pre-determined the situation, the problems to be addressed, the “players” (Fook 2002) and the desired outcome. This does not of course mean that everything is or can be determined: rather it means that the situation was pre-defined by experts.

Empowerment “deals with a particular kind of block to problem solving: that imposed by the external society by virtue of a stigmatised collective identity”… our focus [as social workers] is on members of stigmatised groups (Lee 2001: 33).

It is taken-for-granted that these stigmatized groups are to be worked with by social workers. Simon says that:

The poor, children, people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, and women, for example who make up a substantial portion of social workers’ client base, each constitutes an “underdeveloped” group with subordinate status in every country of the world, and, therefore, are obvious subjects for empowerment (1990: 33).

How this stigmatisation works and how these stigmatised groups’ collective identities keep being reproduced needs to be specifically and genealogically investigated, according to Foucault. Rather than taken-for-granted as Simon does when she says that:

Social work’s commitment to helping marginalized and impoverished people empower themselves is as old as the occupation itself (1994: xiii).

Critical social workers cannot consider these people as “obvious subjects for empowerment”. How power relations produce these stigmatised identities has to be questioned and investigated in such a way as to open power relations to transformation. Critical social workers need to question how these “underdeveloped” subordinate status groups are constituted as “fitting subjects” for empowerment and how these power relations can be resisted and transformed.

The twist in this (re)production of empowerment subjects, is that it claims ‘[o]thers can only aid and abet in this empowerment process’ (Simon 1990: 32). This puts the onus on the “fitting subject” to change themselves. Because ‘[t]he empowerment process resides in the person not the helper’ (Lee 2001: 33), the fitting subject for empowerment is both identified as underdeveloped and as ultimately responsible for achieving their own empowerment. This understanding of empowerment indicates that people are to govern themselves and work on themselves to be empowered and this also applies to how critical social workers are to relate to themselves by firstly empowering themselves before empowering others (Adams 1996).
This idea of empowerment practice implies that empowerment is some permanent feeling state that can be attained once and for all. When empowerment is not understood as a subjective feeling state then engagement with how rules, laws and governance processes either promote the capacity to act or delimit action can be analysed. What Foucault highlights is how these relations of the self to the self are political and how they relate to forms of self-governance.

According to Legg, the process of subjectification is: where one

… conceives of oneself as a subject, positioned in various discourses, for instance of gendered, sexuality, age, class, physical abilities, but also of citizens’ responsibilities (2005: 145).

Foucault closely related the process of subjectification to relations of subjugation. According to Cruikshank

… the “powerless” do not exist prior to the application of technologies of citizenship; the “powerless” are the object of the outcome of the will to empower (1999: 72).

When empowerment is considered to reside in the person, it becomes subjective and something people feel or experience, while possibly deflecting from a broader analysis of power relations. Fook makes the point in her suggested four steps empowerment process that:

You may need to develop a process of dialogue and communication so that different parties can come to understand how each experiences empowerment or disempowerment (2002: 34, my italics).

This proposes a specific kind of subjectivisation. For instance, Cruikshank points out that:

During the War on Poverty the powerlessness of the poor was posited not as an objective fact, but as a subjective “sense of powerlessness” (1999: 73).

Both the 1960s “War on Poverty” and the Family Centre project acknowledged the objective circumstances of the poor, however it was the subjective causes of powerlessness that tended to become the:

… object of intense governmentalization in these programs, primarily because the poor often chose not to participate and failed to constitute themselves as a constituency for antipoverty policy (Cruikshank 1999: 73).
The fitting empowerment subject is someone to be worked on. The poor are to be empowered to fix their powerlessness. The poor are required to participate and constitute themselves as poor to act for and on behalf of the poor. Benn’s (1981) view that the poor were “powerless” and lacked access to decision-making within society justified her encouraging the family members to agitate for social changes and to become politically “active” on their own behalf. In effect, Foucault’s theorising would suggest that Benn’s approach reinforced the power relations within society that designate the poor as powerless in the first place.

Foucault calls on us to analyse how the power relations in society constitute the so-called poor as powerless. By taking the fitting empowerment subject for granted the power relations that made the so-called poor a fitting subject were left undisturbed, and worse perhaps, were reinforced. As Honig states, these processes leave the:

... very subjects they seek to empower... politically, strategically, and even cognitively unprepared to engage or resist or affirm the closures and settlements reinforced by their state or communities (1993: 205).

It is of concern to Cruikshank that empowerment is “democratically unaccountable” in that it is initiated by one party seeking to empower another (1999: 72). Both of the examples in this study clearly reflect that the people to be empowered did not have a direct say in defining the problems or the solutions. The experts decided on the subject to be empowered and the mode of action. Yet both projects sought participation and political activation by their identified and selected sub-population groups. In the Family Centre Project, the so-called poor were expected to engage in political activities to alter the resources available to the poor within the Project and beyond. The higher education equity policy project considered participation in education would facilitate potential economic productivity and prevent the risk of poverty for “vulnerable” target groups. Cruikshank (1999: 71) argues that by pre-determining the subject positions of those to be empowered prior to any actual participants entering the Family Centre Project or higher education institution, their subjectivity was already linked to their subjection.

However, as Cruikshank (1999: 72) goes on to point out, relations of empowerment are both voluntary and coercive, and various individuals within the targeted identity groups used the effort to be empowered to their advantage and some gained much from the opportunities provided through these empowerment efforts. Foucault also focuses our attention on ‘how we participate more or less freely in the processes that make us what we are’ (Hendrickson 2001:}
154). Some opportunities did arise throughout these projects for some participants to have a say and to influence some aspects of these projects or policies, within the context of these pre-determined projects. How did this transform subjects’ capacity to act, or as Cruikshank adds to this questions, how did empowerment alter and shape the subject’s capacity to act?

In one instance of Equity policy making, people with disabilities challenged how they were thought about and gained support from various senior managers and architects to have physically accessible new campuses built. This example shows how people with disabilities worked consciously to challenge and change attitudes about “who” they were and what their rights were. Their goal to have “normal” physical access through intentional design of buildings and campuses was meant to provide opportunities for people with physical disabilities to participate in education. Physical access makes a very big difference to physically impaired individuals and influences their capacity to participate with others in on campus education. Their capacity to act was enhanced by their successful claims to the right to equal physical access. In this sense “empowerment” did transform the physically disabled subject’s capacity to act to claim the right to an equal level of physical access. Some leverage was possible from within a politically made identity in this instance as long as the responsibility for providing access could be shifted to those with the resources to act to achieve that goal. Partly this required challenging the notion of a person with a physical disability being the one who is handicapped to understanding that it is the new campus that needs to be built differently to enable access and not become a handicap or barrier to a person with a physical disability seeking access.

The fourth key point Cruikshank indicates is that empowerment is ‘dependent upon knowledge of those to be empowered’ (1999: 71). In the Family Centre Project, the various processes set up for self-assessment in relation to financial, housing, employment, family arrangements, child care, holiday camps and social activities provided information about family members that at times was used to regulate participants’ actions (Benn 1981). In the Equity Policy example knowledge of those to be empowered operated on a number of different levels, for instance in relation to sexual harassment complaints, detailed studies of the socio economic status of students by post-code (Van Moorst and Ballock 1995), the registering of specific disability support services, like attendant care, note takers, and various equipment; research into gender inclusive curriculum and cultural change in various male dominated departments (Copeland & Lewis 1998). Each of these instances was dependent
upon knowledge gained about or from those to be empowered. Who benefited from the various forms of knowledge about those to be empowered? This is the kind of question that arises from Foucault’s approach to power relations.

When empowerment practice relies on the knowledge of participants’ inner secrets for pastoral power’s guidance to be applied to individuals’ behaviour, then transformations of power relations are highly unlikely. Cruikshank says:

… the object of empowerment is to act upon another’s interests and desires in order to conduct their actions toward an appropriate end; thus “empowerment” is itself a power relationship and one deserving of careful scrutiny (1999: 68).

Regimes of truth

What Foucault contributes to re-thinking “empowerment” is his historically specific studies that aimed to explore ‘how a certain regime functions, in what it consists, so as to prevent an entire series of manipulations and mystifications’ (Orlie 1997: 81). Another example is Dean’s (1999) Foucauldian genealogical analysis of poverty. Dean in discussing the New Poor Law in 1834 in England as representing a change in a mode of governance, suggests that it:

… set free the individuality of the propertyless male labourer as an answer to both the requirements of the economy and the demoralisation of the character of the poor… [and which promoted an] inherent capacity of the poor to consult their own self-interest and take up the more eligible condition of independent labourer (1999: 216).

Dean makes the interesting argument that this liberal mode of governance creates the “independent labourer” through:

… the responsibilisation of the poor … as a wage-labourer and male breadwinner, and wives and children as their dependants… (1999: 217).

What Dean concludes is that:

Liberal governmentality, whether in regard to state or non-state measures is overwhelmingly concerned with the establishment of those conditions - both negative and positive – which make the poor responsible for what later generations would term their ‘standard of living’ (1999: 218).
What Dean’s analysis of the *Constitution of Poverty* (1999) alerts critical social workers to is the need to engage with both historical and contemporary changes in governance. Gordon says that historical discourses and the mode of governance over time in relation to “the poor” show how ‘the context itself is an effect of power’ (1999: 200).

Foucault’s work directs our attention to:

… how historically specific sets of practices come to be seen as altogether natural, self-evident and indispensable part of our way of doing things (Hendrickson 2001: 149).

Empowerment has certainly become a “natural” and “self-evident” part of what social workers say they aim to do. I hope that this study, by reviewing this reification of “empowerment”, can disrupt this view and thereby show how we have come to take as ‘given and inevitable what in fact is the product of human action’ and to recapture the idea of the ‘human capacity to originate’ and to ‘continually augment these beginnings’ (Honig 1993: 114).

Foucault thinks that ‘it is the structure of our practices, not our intentional action orientations, that is decisive for power relations’ (Hendrickson 2001: 162). This draws our attention to the possibility that:

… regardless of our action orientations or intentions, our actions contribute to the exercise of power in that they open up certain possibilities while foreclosing others (Hendricksen 2001: 161).

This challenges the idea that critical social work practices can ever be outside power relations, somehow egalitarian, anti-oppressive, non-exploitative and anti-racist mainly on the basis of the kind of social analysis undertaken. It is a “permanent political task” to bring into question power relations and the harmful effects, not those intended but arising from our participation in social processes and identities, according to Hendricksen (2001: 160).

When critical social workers attempt to increase the aptitude of clients to deal with difficulties and this occurs in relation to normalising and disciplinary power, it means that there is a ‘link between increased aptitude and an increased domination’ (Hendricksen 2001: 166). Thus, any radical potential for altering power relations, from Foucault’s point of view involves resistance to disciplinary power. Resistance becomes possible precisely when we refuse to lend ourselves to the “normalizing” practice of self-and other monitoring’ (Hendricksen 2001: 167). Because disciplinary power can be exercised only to the extent that we actively
comply with it, resistance requires non-compliance, refusing to be “who” we are constituted to be. Refusing “who” we are made to be also means that social workers need to analyse how they are constituted through power relations and what may be important to refuse about that identity to work at the limits of ourselves.

The empowered critical social worker

Foucault’s later work on ethics aspires to be a political ethic in that ‘no political issue is more significant than how the person is defined and how one’s relationship to one’s self is organized’ (Bernauer and Mahon 1994: 146). The problem Foucault raises is how can we be responsible for our effects upon others when those effects themselves are the effect of what we have been made to be? How can individuals be free who are subjects of normalising power? Foucault, in his later work, attempted to theorise our:

… capacity to exercise power freely and deliberately within the necessity and upon the limits of what we have been made to be (Orlie 1997: 148).

How we fashion ourselves into ethical subjects is the focus of Foucault’s later works on governmentality and Care of the Self (1990). According to Orlie,

One exercises power within a complex network in which one occupies a key position as both ruler and ruled. Signs of status mark what one is and place one in a position to exercise power, but they do not prescribe political action (1997: 151).

Foucault problematises how we conceive of the relationship one ought to have with one’s status, one’s function, one’s activities and one’s obligations - the relationship between “what” and “who” we are. Critical social workers are called to an intensified reflection on their responsibilities and freedom. This is reflected in Hough and Briskman’s (2003: 205) claim that:

Some of the strongest critiques have come from inside the institutions of social work, with the development of an extensive anti-professional literature from within the profession itself. It can be argued that such a degree of self-critique distinguishes social work from most other professions (Sibeon 1991, cited in Hough and Briskman).

Foucault says ‘[t]he art of governing oneself becomes a crucial political factor’ (1990: 89). The positioning of social workers as necessarily self-reflective can also be understood as
political. One of the practices that attained self-evident status in critical social work is the invocation to self-reflection or more recently self-reflexivity or reflexivity. It is important to distinguish between these ideas of self-reflection, self-reflexivity and reflexivity because each concept focuses critical social workers attention on different matters.

The focus of self-reflection and self-reflexivity is on the self. However, there is a difference between reflectivity and reflexivity even though these terms are frequently used interchangeably in some social work texts (Fook 2002: 43). Payne (1997) points out that these terms are frequently confused. The important distinction to draw between reflection and reflexivity is that reflection relates to an objectivist ontology, where reflection is the mirror image of external reality. Cunliffe and Jun say there is an assumption with reflectivity that:

... there is an original we can think about, categorize and explain... we assume that reflection and reflection-in-action addresses our subjective experiences, we are objects to be studied and lose sight of our “active subjectivity”... reflection is disembodying because the thinker separates the self from the moment of existence. Reflection was called “calculative thinking” by Heidegger (2002: 5-6).

Fook says reflexivity:

... refer[s] more to a stance of being able to locate oneself in the picture, to appreciate how one’s own self influences [say] the research act’ (2002: 43).

Healy (2000:121) suggests that 'reflexivity about the context, power, identity and processes of change in activist social work' may be enhanced because of the implications of critical post-structural theory on social work. There are high hopes for reflexivity evident in the social work practice literature. For instance, Dominelli, when outlining anti-oppressive social work practice states:

Moreover, reflexivity and social change form the bedrock upon which anti-oppressive practitioners build their interventions (1998: 10, my italics).

However, it matters where the focus of reflexivity is directed. For example, two social workers Taylor and White (2001) argue for a refocusing of ideas about reflexive practice.

Instead of providing introspective accounts of inner thoughts and feelings, or ‘structural’ analyses of oppression’, [they] want to emphasize the active processes of meaning making (Taylor and White 2001: 4).

Taylor and White aim to move beyond the construction of “reflexivity” as ‘a form of
reflection or 'benign introspection' - a process of looking inwards, and thinking about how our own experiences may have influenced our thinking (2001: 5- 6).

A “lack of reflexivity” is seen by Cunliffe and Jun (2002) to turn individuals into “uncritical functionaries”. Cunliffe and Jun claim that:

   We need to engage in reflexive practice and question how we relate to our surroundings, to others, and to our knowledge of the world (2002: 8).

They claim that ‘self-reflexivity requires critical thinking, and that it is a difficult and demanding task’ (Cunliffe and Jun 2002:14). Self-reflexivity, according to Cunliffe and Jun (2002:14) is the acquired ability to face and question our own connection to ourselves and to the social world. Thus, reflexivity challenges critical social workers to act ethically and politically. According to Orlie, in thinking this through with Foucault and Arendt, the difficult question is:

   How we might enact the possibility of ethical political action that begins with the responsible and free exercise of power in relation to socially produced necessities? (1997: 10).

As critical social workers act belatedly into situations, within and in relation to organisations that inevitably harm as well as do “good”, we engage in practices within settings that are not of our own making and to some extent are outside our agency. As Orlie indicates:

   We exist amid historical harm and wrongdoing, inherited or institutionalised advantages and disadvantages. As a consequence our relations with one another are suffused by collective and individual harms, both past and present. We do not, however, possess these powers that bring ill effect to others, we are constituted by and through them (1997: 11).

According to Orlie, it is imperative for ethical and political action to be able to ‘recognize the harm brought to others by our imbrication in social rules and their governing ways of envisioning and making the world’, and to be able to ‘imagine how to alleviate such harm’ (1997: 12).

   Harm and unfairness are inevitable and ubiquitous in human living… usually through what she calls ‘ordinary evil’ which is the product of trespass, not sin; of thoughtlessness, not wickedness (Orlie 1997: 12).
However, Orlie considers that prevalent notions of ethical conduct which emphasise ‘performing contracts, being reasonable, behaving predictably tends to not diminish ordinary harm, but often ‘reinforce and extend it’ (1997: 10). Orlie suggests that:

Moreover, predominant rationalities often make us thoughtless rather than thoughtful agents of the governing powers that multiply harm (1997: 11).

Foucault claims ‘we face a “crisis of the subject” because of our difficulty in forming ourselves as ethical subjects of our actions and giving purpose to our existence’ (1990: 95).

Lemke argues the political ethos engendered by neo-liberalism and managerialism tends to promote ‘[s]ocial relations and individual behaviour [that] are deciphered using economic criteria and within economic terms of their intelligibility (2001: 198). According to Lemke,

Neo-liberalism encourages individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form, the price–tag of this form is that individuals themselves have to assume responsibility for their activities and the possible failure thereof (2001: 202).

What this political ethos does not recognise is how our imbrication in social rules, rationalities and practices brings harm to others collectively and individually, through thoughtless practices. Critical social workers need to recognise how they are involved in ruling and whether or how they are complying with current political rationalities. If social workers do not recognise these aspects it may foster thoughtlessness about governing power’s effects. This also suggests that empowerment practice is an historically contingent practice and as such needs to be understood historically or genealogically.

According to Arendt empowerment tends to fail to be political, though a highly politicised endeavour, because politics requires the constitution of alternative orders in addition to disruptive action (1963: 223). Empowerment in the examples analysed in this study attempted to be disruptive even radical (Liffman 1978, Benn 1981) but by predetermining the situation and predetermining those to be targeted and activated severely limited the ‘constitution of alternative orders’ (Arendt 1963: 223).

For Foucault, the question becomes ‘[w]hat political ethos will enable games of truth and power to be practiced with minimal domination and maximal freedom?’ (Orlie 1997: 77). Foucault focuses specifically on this conjunction of social rule and individual conduct. Orlie says:
Precisely what we need is to discern the active conjunction between individual agents and the governing powers that condition them to conceive how the freely subject produce social necessities (1997: 75).

Much of what we are made to be is contingent, meaning that these are not natural or apolitical modes of being. Through his historical inquiries in the fields of criminality, madness and sexuality Foucault revealed the contingency of different modes of subjection. This means that power relations and ethical relations and modes of subjections are not “necessarily so” or “natural”, but are open to new practices. Orlie says:

How we become subjects – what binds us to our selves and submits us to others (and vice versa) – are integral to the governing powers and functions of the modern state and implicate us in its rule. Individuals are integrated into this social totality as our individuality assumes forms that reinforce, elaborate, and extend patterns of social rule (1997: 146).

Analysis of the current socio-political context in Australia by Hough and Briskman in relation to how social workers are responding to ‘economic fundamentalism’ and managerialism suggests that ‘social workers can be seen as part of the problem rather than as advocates for reform’ (2003: 205). According to Orlie, ethical and political practices require that we resist our subjection to social rules in ways that foster thoughtfulness about governing power’s effects and about how we participate in their constitutions.

Foucault says it is through the fashioning of new forms of subjectivity that the subject attains an unstable and undefined freedom. However this is not an easy task, as resisting power can just as easily reinforce or reinstall power relations, rather than transform them. Orlie says ‘[n]o practice is free of discipline or power and its effect. But relations of power differ in the practices of freedom which they enact and enable’ (Orlie 1997: 148). Foucault claims that:

When one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others, when one characterizes these actions by the government of men by other men – in the broadest sense of the term – one includes an important element: freedom (Foucault 1982: 221).

Foucault sees freedom as “the free play of antagonistic reactions” any time a power relation is “fixed” and rigidified.
When these relations of power are more or less taken for granted and consolidated by means of a long-term confrontation between adversaries then Foucault suggests a locking together of power relations with relations of strategy. This usually means that procedures are used in a situation of confrontation to deprive the opponent of his means of combat and to reduce him to giving up the struggle. It is this kind of situation that suggests stable mechanisms have replaced the free play of antagonist reactions. This leads us to ask: how open is our system to “agonistic struggle”? What role do critical social workers play in valuing and nurturing spaces for “agonistic struggles”? Is there nurturance and affirmation of agonism to sustain the active, participatory capacities of subjects required for both resisting domination and the establishment of “alternative regimes”? (Simons 1995: 86). Foucault is calling for the ‘engagement of agonal subjects who seek not the end of struggle, but the liberty of participating in it’ (Simons 1995: 87). For Foucault, ethics is ‘the practice of liberty’, entailing perpetual transgression of limits (1988, cited in Simons 1995: 87).

Foucault conceives of ethics in terms of the self’s relationship to itself, how it rules itself and, as a result, rules others. Foucault understands ethics as a matter of self-rule. In this sense ethics concerns how we rule our selves and others; since ethics deals with the question of what is proper and appropriate in ruling. Unlike Foucault, Arendt’s ‘conception of the political, queries, contests and transfigures the necessities of governance…She seeks to differentiate politics and ruling’ (Orlie 1997: 70). For Arendt ‘ruling is not equivalent to politics but rather evinces the sovereign mentality that would govern politics out of existence’ (Orlie 1997: 77). When “necessity” and “making” define relations, we simply have effects upon others and receive their effects upon us. Neither we nor they are called to answer for those effects. Under these conditions:

Power is exercised thoughtlessly. In political spaces, we have the opportunity to discern and answer for our effects and, at least potentially, to transfigure them by means of political power generated when we act in concert (Orlie 1997: 86).
CHAPTER SIX – RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT WITH FOUCAULT AND ARENDT

Thinking with Arendt about empowerment

Thinking with Arendt’s theories about how critical social workers engage in empowerment practice emphasises the importance of “acting in concert” as it ‘is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence’ (Arendt 1958: 200). For Arendt:

Without freedom, without the possibility of disrupting, shaking, and creating ruptures, and without the capacity to generate breaches within the structures, political life as such would be meaningless (Gordon 2002: 135).

For Arendt, the process of empowerment conceived as acting upon another to “conduct their actions toward an appropriate end” is totally anti-political and thus not coterminous with freedom. Once, the “appropriate end” of empowerment is determined by experts, the purpose or meaning of empowerment is taken for granted and no longer open for political debate. All that tends to remain is instrumental action on the part of many “responsibilised actors”. This is a model of politics that is based on fabrication, where action is undertaken for the sake of the “in order to” (Villa 1996), which Arendt thinks makes political action meaningless. The Equity policy example in chapter five of this study sought to responsibilise individual position holders for various outcomes and obligations, many of which were ironically not really within their agency or control. Rather than engaging in on-going conversations about what was and is going on between us all, the notion of equity tended to be reduced to action plans, policies and procedures. This focus on instrumental outcomes in the Equity Policy program tended to lend an air of unreality to the whole initiative, as it tended to displace the political and attempted to order any antagonisms.

Politics was reduced to an instrumental apparatus for achieving certain goals. Politics was thought synonymous with the higher education institution’s governance processes and participation in politics was understood as being represented within these structures, directly or indirectly. It is in this context that Beiner asserts that ‘in liberal societies today political membership is restricted to only the most formal and attenuated expressions, such as the symbolic ritual of voting’ (1984: 371). This notion of politics means that politics is not valued in and of itself. It is when people demand a “worldly space” in which to ‘exercise active freedom that is not freedom from politics but freedom for politics, that political action might come into play’ according to Beiner (1984: 369, italics in the original). By defining politics as governance processes and political action as representation on formal committees the Equity
Policy making process delimited politics in ways that made transforming power relations highly unlikely.

Acting in concert

The concept of “acting in concert” is vital to Arendt’s theorising of power and politics. Arendt is said to ‘offer key insights into the power… of solidarity’ without reliance on essentialist or exclusionary notions of identity (Allen 1999: 97). Solidarity is understood from a liberal political point of view to require common interests based on our social or political identities. According to Foucault, this liberal view puts common or shared interests before politics, whereas he considers politics as creating those interests and political identities. Arendt redefines solidarity by shifting the locus of the possible common purpose that inspires collective action from the “inner selves of political actors to an “articulated” common interest in the world” (Disch 1994: 38).

It is the:

… possibility of a common interest that accomplishes the contradictory task of uniting individuals and separating them in an “articulate way” [and] departs in important ways from liberal and communitarian understandings of interest (Disch 1994: 36)

For Arendt, ‘interests are not private bargaining chips, defined with reference to individual goals and traded competitively on the political “market”. In contrast to the communitarian ideal, the “inter-est” is not a common cause that in some way expresses the authentic beings of its disparate participants and harmonizes their wills (Disch 1994: 37). Arendt calls this “inter-est” an “in-between” which suggest that there is a commonality. At the same time, her insistence on argumentation suggests that commonality does not mean concord. The public realm, according to Arendt, is an:

… area in which there are many voices and where the announcement of what each ‘deems truth’ both links and separates men, establishing in fact those distances between men which together comprise the world (1978: 30).

Arendt shows how political spaces were delimited in both the empowerment examples explored in this study. Arendt fears that when:
… political spaces are absent, the distinct perspectives our locations allow become indiscernible, and, again, both plurality and commonality are at risk and with them our political agency and the capacity to thoughtfully effect the conditions of our lives (Orlie 1997: 86).

Benn’s (1981) account of the Family Centre Project showed that not only were the identity categories pre-determined, but the nature, kind and purpose of political engagement was also imposed on the family members. According to Arendt’s theorising the Family Centre Project put at risk ‘political agency and the capacity to thoughtfully effect the conditions of [the family members] lives’ (Orlie 1997: 86).

Benn (1981) says she used persuasion to convince the families about how they were to understand their circumstances, political concerns and strategies for acting collectively for and on behalf of “the poor”. “The poor” were to act on behalf of the poor, however, the “truth” of that category was a truth, willed, produced, created and made up through power relations. Moreover the “indigenous workers” in the Family Centre Project were actively denied ‘the possibility of a set of actions with [which to] disrupt the very borders of identity concepts’ (Butler 1990: 15). The social workers aimed to ensure that “indigenous workers” maintained their “poor” identity. The social workers wanted the “indigenous workers” to retain their “poor” identity as it was thought to be the origin of and reason for political action (Benn 1981). This idea:

… tends to disempower the very subjects they seek to empower, leaving them politically, strategically, and even cognitively unprepared to engage or resist or affirm the closures and settlements reinforced by their state or communities (Honig 1993: 205).

The ‘Fair Chance for All’ (1990) equity policy promoted one particular way of life with its policy direction. Ralston Saul says power is able to ‘maintain its influence by projecting a way of life and the full methodology needed to support it (2005: 260). The Equity Policy projected an economically productive life as the way of life and identified those sub-population groups not yet participating fully in this style of life. However the very way the policy is framed as inclusion makes it difficult for target population groups to engage or resist the biopolitics of their selection as targets of action.

Further Foucault points out that relations of truth that expect marginalised identities to be univocal in order to make claims on the mainstream repress any differences between those understood as the poor, women, people with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islanders. However when univocality or the appeal to common interests of these “targeted groups” has been problematised, some theorists take this to mean that:

… we are compelled to choose between (exclusionary) identity and (fragmented) non-identity, neither of which is a tenable option (Allen 1999: 99).

Whereas Arendt is keen on us imagining and talking about solidarity among people, according to Allen, it may be possible:

… that non-repressive group identities could be forged out of shared political commitments and that solidarity could be achieved through collective political action, rather than assumed in advance (1999: 102, my italics).

The performative aspect of achieving solidarity through doing is a key point in Arendt’s thinking about politics.

For Arendt (1958: 176), otherness is an important aspect of plurality, and ‘it is not difference that is our human condition, but plurality that is our human condition’ (Allen 1999: 105, my italic). Thus, importantly there can be commonality within difference. This offers critical social workers a way forward from the “post” theory incursion, in that it ‘reformulates solidarity as the result of concerted action, rather than as a pre-given, fixed, and hence, repressive identity’ (Allen 1999: 106).

The challenge Arendt poses to critical social workers, according to Taylor is that if we take:

… the notion of obligation seriously here [it] implies that when groups commit themselves to engaging in collective practice of freedom, they also implicitly commit to the more general task of continually re-creating and supporting the conditions for the possibility of practicing freedom, without which any particular political struggle to improve worldly existence will not matter (2003: 269).

This means keeping power relations dynamic, rather than static. Like Arendt, Foucault’s later work disturbs ‘the notion of guarantees, of security and certainty, [which] is fundamentally opposed to freedom’ (Taylor 2003: 270).
CHAPTER SIX – RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT WITH FOUCAULT AND ARENDT

Freedom

Arendt argues that freedom has been displaced from its proper place in the political sphere and moved to an inner domain, to the will. In this way freedom becomes opened to self-inspection. Beiner says it is common that freedom is understood as:

… preserving and fostering individuality - the autonomy, self-determination, and unchecked activity of the free individual. [Whereas Arendt’s] concept of freedom… departs radically from [this] (Beiner 1984: 349).

Further, autonomy, when regarded as mastery over oneself, ‘relies on domination of one’s self and rule over others’ (Honig 1993: 83). Arendt ‘rejects the command model of authority as inappropriate for the human condition of living together in a secular and political world’ (Honig 1993: 113).

Analysts, using Foucault’s work on governmentality and analysing political rationalities, are suggesting that current political technologies of “advanced liberal” rule seek to activate individuals’ freedom to achieve self-governance. Self-governance means people will govern themselves in ways that comply with the norms of neo-liberalism and economic rationalism. Advanced liberal rule respecifics the citizen as ‘an active agent both able and obliged to exercise autonomous choices’ (Larner 2000: 11). And in this way, ‘[l]iberalism has conditioned us to believe that freedom begins where politics ends’ (Beiner 1984: 351. Arendt contests this conception of politics and of freedom as a property of individuals.

Arendt made it clear that the liberal notion of freedom as doing what one pleases and as inner freedom to not be interfered with by the state or others is a narrow and mistaken view of freedom. ‘Arendt rejects autonomy…as she sees in it a mastery which relies on domination of one’s self and rule over others’ (Honig 1993: 83). For Arendt, freedom is something achieved through political action and in concert with others. Arendt indicates that this displacement of freedom from the political sphere is due historically to the hostility of philosophers towards politics (Beiner 1984). The political as the sphere of human affairs with its unpredictability and relation to everyday life was, according to Arendt, shunned by philosophers. Moving freedom to the inner world has meant that freedom lacked a worldly condition. Arendt called this:
… ‘world-alienation’ which designates that situation where I do not feel that I can act in the world and make my presence felt in it, but rather, where I experience the world as something alien, to which I cannot feel that I belong (Beiner 1984: 351).

It is exactly this sense of powerlessness that became the site of intensive governmentalisation during the 1960s “War on Poverty” in the United States, as indicated by Cruikshank (1999). This inner sense of powerlessness is related to experiences in the world where participation in politics is delimited and politics widely represented to everyone as comprising of “voting” for politicians during elections (Beiner 1984).

Whereas Arendt says:

Freedom is the distinctive achievement of citizens, of political men acting in concert to secure shared objectives… without the prospect of freedom there would be no incentive for men to act politically (Beiner 1984: 352).

Part of the problem with the 1960s “War on Poverty” and the Family Centre Project example in this study is that powerlessness was located inside the so-called poor and the so-called poor were to be “activated” to engage in so-called political activities as prescribed by experts. These practices diminish the notion of freedom that Arendt unites with politics and understands as the very reason for politics. Arendt provides a possible explanation for why the so-called poor, as they are regarded, do not usually constitute themselves as a politically organised constituency. The “poor” might sense that “the prospect of freedom” is highly unlikely when one is being called on to act politically on the basis of a predetermined identity. So if the poor are without a prospect of freedom there may be no incentive for them to act politically (Beiner 1984: 352).

Freedom can only have a worldly reality when there is a public realm, ‘a worldly space in which freedom can make its appearance’ (Beiner 1984: 352). Attempting to empower the poor through political engagement is a strategy that constitutes and regulates the political subjectivities of those to be empowered and thus allows no ‘possessing of power embodied in collective action’ (Beiner 1984: 353). Although the stated intent of both the “War on Poverty” and the Family Centre Project was to empower the poor to act on their own behalf in solidarity, there is a marked difference between being acted upon as “powerless”, and the ‘joy of sharing a public space with others’ (Beiner 1984: 353). A situation where experts are willing the poor to form a group to act together to gain a fairer share of resources and opportunities is in many senses the very opposite to freedom. Because willing is a form of
command or dictate, it denies human plurality by relying on a subjectivity like “the poor” or the “powerless”, or the “educationally disadvantaged” neither of which exists prior to the ‘will to empower’ (Cruikshank 1999: 72, my italics).

Freedom is not a property of a person; freedom is identified by Arendt with the capacity for action. Being activated to mobilise on behalf of and for the poor required knowing the truth of the poor, telling the truth of the poor and the poor had to know the truth they were to tell about themselves. These processes mean that ‘the category of “the poor” was transformed into a calculable, knowable grouping’ (Cruikshank 1999: 76). These processes do not ‘anticipate the unpredictable, [or] expect the unexpected’ (Beiner 1984: 356), and as such do not recognise the importance of freedom for breaking historically automatic processes or governmental rationalities. Arendt’s concepts of freedom, plurality and natality create spaces for people to act together but not in prescribed ways. Arendt argues that the:

… ultimate alternative to the freedom of willing exercised in public action is thus the freedom of imagination exercised in judgement and taste (Beiner 1984: 365, italics in original).

In both of the “empowerment” examples in this study, the public domain for action by “the poor” or “the educationally disadvantaged” were delimited. Within each of the institutions, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and Victorian higher education institutions, these identified targeted groups were not often engaged in processes where they could experience the:

… freedom to understand the standpoint of others situated differently… to survey the common world from a perspective which is not my own… (for in order to act with them I must understand how they view the common situation) (Beiner 1984: 365, brackets in the original).

Separate committees were established in each of the organizations that reported to the main formal decision-making group. These formal arrangements were presented as increasing the capacity of target population group members to have some control over decision-making. Morely (2003) indicated this broadened or widened access to decision-making, but did not transform power relations.

These formal committee structures tended to reduce politics to a kind of instrumental apparatus for achieving certain goals and in a way these committees were a symbolic ritual to channel any dissent or challenge to the status quo. In the Family Centre Project, when the
family members voted all social work staff and indigenous workers off the management committee, they claimed to be freer to discuss issues among themselves without feeling dominated. Family members are referring to freedom as non-interference by workers, a liberal conception of freedom. The family members’ comments imply that an absence of workers means an absence of worker power and thus an absence of domination. Arendt’s and Foucault’s thinking about power, politics and freedom challenge these very ideas. Further what was lost in these moves was perhaps the ‘freedom to understand the standpoint of others situated differently… to survey the common world from a perspective which is not my own’, as Beiner (1984: 365) argues. The capacity to “act in concert” regardless of predetermined political identity category and to fight subordination or subjection with others is also missed in this move.

Always beginning again

Like Arendt, Foucault stressed that in relation to both practices of the self and practices of freedom ‘we are always in the position of beginning again’ (1984: 47). Arendt considers that the ‘moment of intervention is the moment of politics’ (Honig 1993: 115). The notion of beginning or foundation is critical to Arendt (1963). Arendt searched for an event in our political history where that notion of beginning or foundation was decisive. Arendt (1963) selected the American revolutions as one such founding event.

American founders through the declaration of independence, according to Arendt (1963), found a solution to the problem of establishing ‘lasting foundations without appealing to gods, a foundationalist ground, or an absolute’ (Honig 1993: 97). The founders came to ‘value political action and participation, the act of coming together in deliberation, debate, and decision’ (Honig 1993: 97). Liffman’s (1978) earlier comment about the intellectual freedom enjoyed by the staff and volunteers of the Family Centre Project captures some of the excitement of this kind of coming together in deliberation, debate and decision-making. It seems a pity that the family members were excluded from these deliberations, debate and decision-making, at the beginning of the Project and were later channelled into specific formal sites of decision-making, like the management committee. Some of the “activist” families appear to have enjoyed a freedom among themselves, but there is little in the accounts of either Liffman (1978) or Benn (1981) about this, as presumably the workers were
excluded from “activists’” gatherings. The modern conception of power created divisions between staff (and volunteers), the organization’s executive and family members in effect preventing them from coming together to “act in concert”.

The family members were denied their capacity of world building which is an act of foundation until later in the Action Resource Centre (ARC) proposal. For Arendt:

The authority of the world built by power derives from all that is implied by the fact that the world is the product of power rather than strength or violence (Honig 1993: 101).

In this way:

… the source of authority is in the act of foundation, thereby making appeals to an absolute, transcendent source of authority not merely illicit but redundant and unnecessary (Honig 1993: 102).

The beginning of the Action Resource Centre (ARC) project might have been such a moment of foundation. Arendt rightly points out, we are always acting into the web of relationships belatedly and so space needs to be made for the new comers to add to the Project, to re-found it. Newcomers through their participation in the process of beginning again, can share in the authority derived from founding the project. This opens the possibility for projects that were initiated by experts to be refounded through augmentation. Arendt’s concept of authority and founding may contribute an important aspect to our understanding of political action, participation and empowerment practice.

**Authority and augmentation**

Honig (1993) quotes Arendt at length about the importance of the link between the concept of authority and the practice of augmentation. Arendt searched for what “authority” meant historically and aimed to think about authority politically (Arendt 1961: 92). Arendt used her search as a thinking exercise to understand different kinds of political experiences and to clearly distinguish between authoritarian rule, tyranny and totalitarianism. Arendt found that these three forms of “government” delimit freedom and so do not protect political freedom and the human capacity to begin, to initiate anew.

Arendt’s search for what “authority” might mean as a valid political experience involved an attempt to find that space in the realm of human affairs where there is not only the foundation
of beginning of action, but also the on-going openness to augmentation. According to Arendt, the realm of human affairs and relations should not have absolute standards imposed on it, whether on the basis of God, or the law of Laws or the law of Nature. Arendt argues that because ‘authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence’ (1961: 92-93). Arendt claims that:

If authority is to be defined at all, then it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments. (The authoritarian relation between the one who commands and the one who obeys rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands; what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place) (1961: 93).

Arendt is highly critical of politics as a process of rule, which she considers relies on violence. She found that:

[a]uthority… is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance (Arendt 1961: 93).

Arendt says that what we are confronted with is a:

… simultaneous recession of both freedom and authority in the modern world… [and attempts by conservatives or liberals] to reassert authority… [or] to reassert freedom, have resulted only in… confusing the issues, blurring the distinctive lines between authority and freedom and eventually destroying the political meaning of both (1961: 101).

Arendt worries that people tend to think ‘if violence fulfils the same function as authority – namely, makes people obey – then violence is authority’ (1961: 102-103). Authority is mistakenly understood as making people obey. It is only in instances of glaring inequality that ‘rule could be exerted without seizure of power and the possession of the means of violence’ (Arendt 1961: 109) - a situation where relationships can compel prior to any “actual issuance of commands”, like the patient who becomes subject to the physician’s authority when he is ill (Arendt 1961: 109). This implies that ruling is related to the inequality of relationship between parties. Critical social workers are sensitive to this automatic ruling in professional relationships and advocate de-professionalisation, as Benn (1981) showed in the Family Centre Project. However, Benn (1981) did not reject the command model of authority and
several times throughout her account declares she imposed various goals and processes on the staff and on family members, sometimes against her own wishes.

Arendt ‘rejects the command model of authority as inappropriate for the human condition of living together in a secular and political world’ (Honig 1993: 113). She claims that:

A practice of authority centred on an irresistible law of laws is inappropriate for the post foundational age… [and] deeply antipolitical (Honig 1993: 113).

Honig explains that ‘[t]his notion of resistibility is at the centre of Arendt’s re-covered conception of authority for modernity’ (1993: 109). For Arendt then, ‘an absolute is illicit in politics, because it is irresistible,’ continues Honig (1993: 109). To rely on God, self-evident truths, natural law as sources or origins of authority, something above or outside human affairs, is considered:

… despotic because they are irresistible. Because they are irresistible, they do not persuade to agreement, they command acquiescence (Honig 1993: 109).

Honig says it is resistibility that ‘distinguishes secular law from divine command, political authority from religious devotion’ (1993: 110).

The “authority” for Equity Policy making within higher education institutions was based on hierarchy, on national policy, on international conventions and various equal opportunity, anti-discrimination and affirmative action legislation. However, many times, even though secular law is resistible, in practice equity practitioners presented these secular laws as irresistible in an attempt to compel higher education institutions to adopt various policies and procedures. In terms of Arendt’s political notion of authority, this kind of practice is totally anti-political, as it reduces the political to practising in ways that are inherently violent. The conception of compelling higher education institutions to adhere to secular laws forecloses on political engagement that may lead to founding of policy initiatives that are derived from open debate and deliberation about how we will live together and relate to each other as political equals.

Paradoxically the model of policy making in the Equity Policy was based on fabrication, on instrumentality, and was concerned with and involved in governance and rule. This policy making process tended to reinforce the notion that power and authority are about obedience. Arendt says violence and discrimination inheres in conceiving of politics as making and fabrication is not a fit model of politics, because it inevitably brings violence to the realm of
human affairs. The instrumental conception of policy making led to the desire to “complete” policies and to think of them as finished, an idea that fails to recognise the awful beauty of politics that, ‘[p]olitics is never a fait accompli’ (Honig 1993: 115).

‘In Arendt’s politics, institutions and individuals are always incomplete, forever calling out for augmentation and amendment’ (Honig 1993: 115). Arendt points out that ‘in politics, in authorship, and in institutions it is not possible to get it right’ (Honig 1993: 116). If it is not possible to get it right then the practice of augmentation pertaining to continuous foundation is required. The notion that foundation is far back in the past tends to reify the beginning, whereas ‘our practices of augmentation and amendment make that beginning our own’ (Honig 1993: 114). I found that when politics is reduced to “making” and takes on an instrumental rationality, there is impatience with the incompleteness of policies, strategies and procedure and a desire to finalise arrangements. The demand for completed policies, within set timelines to be agreed upon through formal processes and then implemented in the higher education equity policy example failed to appreciate this ongoing augmentation and amendment and its role in disturbing the “givens”, which were a product of human action in the first place. In this way:

Arendt’s account of practice of authority consists largely in this commitment to resistibility, the practice of authority turns out to be, paradoxically enough, a practice of deauthorization (Honig 1993: 115).

Arendt’s understanding of authority and augmentation can reframe the notion of participation in ways that are quite radical by drawing attention to how newcomers can be engaged in founding and beginning again. Rather than understanding this process as inefficient and closing off on those opportunities, the acceptance of politics as on going and agonal, may be a far more realistic way to achieve participation as “maximal involvement in decision-making” than, for instance, Benn’s (1981) notion of “power over” decision-making. Rather than the idea of participation being about “power over” decision-making, the power in augmenting and practising authority might capture the importance of freedom, political action, plurality, natality and publicness that Arendt’s theorising contributes to critical social workers rethinking of empowerment.
Conclusion

What Foucault and Arendt offer critical social workers are ways to think about what we “do” when we aim to transform power relations to address inequalities. Foucault does not allow the terms of what we think we are doing to be taken for granted. He challenges the taken-for-granted habits of thinking about people, problems and solutions in particular ways. Foucault’s insights indicate that critical social workers need to be alert to the effects of power relations and identify when disciplinary techniques for observations and classification are continued despite morally progressive rhetoric about improved practices. Foucault guides us to pay attention to the effects of practice as these are more important to assess than the intentions behind the practices.

Foucault promotes resisting what we are made to be through the truths of the social sciences (Simons 1995). New subjectivities devised with others are considered a way forward in resisting normalising power. However, how this is to occur is not clearly spelt out by Foucault, although an analysis of how we are encouraged to relate to our selves and others ethically and politically is part of that process. Action for change can be focused on forms of power relations or particular kinds of techniques rather than focusing change activities on the so-called poor or educationally disadvantaged, whose political identities are according to Foucault, already the effects of particular modern power relations.

Arendt ‘reminds us, [that] the single hardest thing we can ever do is to think what we do’ (Bessant et al. 2006: 336). In reflecting back on the two empowerment practice examples with Arendt, her valuing of human affairs, of political action and plurality indicates some of the ways critical social workers could avoid the traps of reinforcing power relations that are based on an idea of politics as rule and self-governance. To think with the notion of plurality as a human condition and a political achievement in itself reconfigures the simplistic notion of equality as sameness (Fook 2002) and promotes a relation to self and others that is not based on “mastery”. The commitment to “act in concert” in ways that do not demand submersion in a political identity is also key for unlearning the long-standing liberal assumptions in critical social work about political identity being a basis for political action and interests. Arendt focuses attention on the inter-est between people in defining, disagreeing about and altering a situation rather than predetermining the situation and predetermining who needs to be empowered.
To set about trying to transform power relations, as critical social work empowerment practice seeks to do, is a difficult task. How we think about power relations is important in this task. Both Foucault and Arendt offer important and complementary points about power relations to help us set about transforming power relations with others. Foucault alerts critical social workers to how power relations constitute identities and how disciplinary, pastoral and governmental practices reinforce power relations. He proposes that regimes of truth need to be resisted and new subjectivities developed, that people are freer than they think and that freedom is about maintaining an agonal space and the liberty of participating in the struggle to keep power relations from solidifying and becoming dominitory.

In a similar vein, Arendt also seeks an agonal politics and a space for understanding the world, through debate and deliberations, from multiple standpoints. Arendt values opinion and incessant discourse about the world and prices power as the capacity to act in concert about issues and situations that are not predetermined, but that arise and are defined through disagreement in ways that promote a commitment to act together. Arendt and Foucault do not consider political identity the basis for, or origin of, political action and it seems that critical social workers in order to ‘set about trying to enable ourselves and our fellow citizens, both nationally and globally, to flourish’ (Bessant et al. 2006: 336), need to find ways of practising empowerment without reliance on predetermined political identities.
Conclusion

“Unless the meaning of politics and power and the interdependence of policy and practice are addressed social work… will be adrift… [as to] why some forms of practice are encouraged and others are actively discouraged” (Rees 1991: 4).

At the beginning of this study I stated that there was “something” about the notion of “empowerment” I consider vitally important. This “something” about “empowerment” that I was seeking to articulate I now believe relates theoretically to “empowerment” not being possible without a notion of “freedom” or “politics”. Through both Arendt’s and Foucault’s theorising it has become clearer to me that “freedom” is not a possession of individuals nor a state of not being interfered with by others, but something maintained and achieved with other people. This means that “freedom” is not possible without political action and political action is not possible without achievement and respect for human plurality.

Critical social workers sole emphasis on “power” as the main concept to re-conceptualise when re-thinking empowerment practice, I found is too limited. The concept of “power” was understood by critical social workers like Solomon, as central in providing ‘insights into the possibilities for effecting an inequitable and oppressive power distribution in social system’ (1976: 16). Critical social workers recent re-thinking of power using Foucault’s insights on power aimed to assist in transforming power relations (Fook & Pease 1999; Healy 2000; Fook 2002; Pease 2002). It is beyond doubt that Foucault’s theorising can add much to a broader understanding of power relations by critical social workers, depending on how the notion of power is conceived. However, I also conclude that the concept of “power” is not the only central concept in re-thinking critical social work empowerment practices. Rather related concepts like freedom, politics and plurality are also key notions in thinking about critical social work empowerment practices.

Some critical social workers in using Foucault’s insight on power tend to re-theorise “power” without taking into account power relations more broadly and “governmentally”. Critical social workers turned to analysing local practice examples, supposedly in line with Foucault’s insights on power, to indicate the micro-politics of power within a local practice example.
This focus within local practice examples tends to displace an understanding of power relations as constituting both the identities and the field of possible actions of subjects. Foucault’s analysis of power relations as indeed constituting identities and the field of possible actions means he is articulating more than the “context” of practice. For me the constitutive aspects of power relations are a crucial component in understanding power relations. Usually Australian critical social workers tend not to draw on Foucault’s notion of governmentality and his analysis of political rationalities. Yet I consider Foucault’s governmentality approach to power relations very helpful for understanding power relations, despite the theoretical limitations of this early and middle work, as power is still conflated with domination in the earlier part of Foucault’s work.

What Foucault’s insights on power offer are examples of how a “project” can be the starting point from which to go out in all directions to understand how the “situation”, “site”, or “context” are constituted through power relations. It seems key that critical social workers aim to understand how power relations constitute identities and problems and also how these power relations establish a field of possible action for them and their clients. This is not to imply that social workers are determined or compelled to act in a certain way, rather that possible fields for action tend to be pre-scribed and as such exert an influence on practice. For instance, the United States “War on Poverty” opened up ways of thinking and new technologies that constituted a field of action for critical social worker to work on the powerlessness of “the Poor” through community action experiments. The implications for the so-called poor were that they were expected to engage in political action “for and on behalf of the poor”. These pre-scribed political actions however are likely to reinforce the power relations that constituted the so-called poor in the first place, rather than altering or transforming those power relations. It is difficult to conceive of how “activating” the so-called poor to act on their own behalf could address structural inequality and transform social inequality, when so much of this scenario was pre-determined by those exercising power. As Arendt’s theorising suggests attempts to alter power relations from within politically constituted identities provides very little leverage for activating change.

Similarly the equity policy case study showed that by conflating politics and power with government and formal committee structures the policy process tended to displace the possibility of political action and promoted a limited instrumental approach to equity. Equity practitioners on the whole were aiming to redress structural inequalities and sought to
transform power relations and might attempt to do so by facilitating political action, as Arendt understands that term. By revaluing the political as a robust on-going dialogue, with a focus on principles, ways of acting in concert might arise. The equity policy initiative at best widened access to formal decision-making but did not transform power relations within the higher education institution. The moves, by for instance the disability policy activists, to contest the subjectivity of people with disabilities and to shift responsibility for accessibility to the higher education institution were reasonably successful and did begin to alter power relations. An important aspect of this success was challenging the constitution of so-called “disabled” peoples’ subjectivity and locating the need for change in the world rather than in the person with a disability (La Fontaine 1993). However, it was also a “normalising” claim, by people with physical disabilities asking to be treated the same as everyone else through improved physical access. In that sense the policy and practice validated norms and reinforced conformity to the norm by reinforcing the idea that treating everyone the same was fair and promoted equality. The increased physical access is a great achievement but whether this approach transformed power relations is another question.

Critical social workers’ idea of “participation” by the poor, or educationally disadvantaged was partly based on an understanding of democracy and social justice as requiring input into projects and policies by those designated as being poor or educationally disadvantaged (Adam 1996). The mantra “by the people - for the people” (Simon 1994) was applied to the “fitting subjects of empowerment”. It is experts who sought to activate “the poor” to act in their own interests. It seems that experts considered that if this worked for the civil rights movement it could be adopted and transferred to “the poor”’. Once a category like “the Poor” is numerically and politically “discovered” and located through various expert technologies, then these “poor” or “educationally disadvantaged” people could be “activated” to address their own interests. I consider participation in decision making as crucial in transforming power relations and thus necessary in empowerment practice. However I concur with Arendt that “participation” is vital not so much from the point of view of democracy (rule by the many) but through engaging in political debate deliberation and discussion with others who are “unequal equals” where politics is not about rule over self or others, but a matter of authority and augmentation.

There is a difference between understanding equality as a political concept, like Arendt who takes it to mean that everyone is equally distinctive and capable of speech and action, and
understanding equality as a social concept, where everyone has the right to be treated equally, or as the same. Politics is thus not considered by Arendt as a means to achieve instrumental ends, but rather is a way of creating a “common world” and a way of being in the world with others. The Family Centre Project took into account that people who are driven by “necessity” cannot be free to engage or participate in the political, and the payment of the guaranteed minimum income did economically support some people to change their lives through the opportunities offered by the Centre. However, the notion of the political in the project was narrowly conceived as “power over” and linked to instrumental goals imposed to a large extent on the family members. Despite the conception of power as “power over” within the Family Centre Project some families became “activist” families and changed their lives in many ways. This seems to indicate that people are never fully determined by power relations and may be freer than they think.

Arendt identifies the political as the realm of freedom, where decisions are made through words rather than force, violence or coercion. The political is a sphere of equals, not equals as in everyone being the same, but:

… where to be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or the command of another and not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule or to be ruled (Arendt 1958: 32).

In this way, the concern in the Family Centre Project for who should govern or have “power over decision-making”, “power over information”, “power over relationships” and “power over resources”, is challenged by Arendt’s notion of freedom as a sphere of equals not commanded or ruled over, nor ruling over others, but acting in concert with each other.

Foucault’s and Arendt’s theorising when carefully combined offers complementary ways to understand the political aspects of freedom. Arendt challenges us to locate freedom in human action rather than in human willing. Both Foucault and Arendt argue that, ‘the very fact we think about freedom and power in instrumental ways is itself a by-product of the modern age’ (Havercroft 2003: 29). Arendt’s political conception of freedom is not attributed to the free will. To equate one’s will to freedom means to dominate one’s self, using one’s will power to overcome oneself, meaning that power over one’s self is equated with dominating one’s self. Healy (2000) recognised this problem when she indicated critical social workers’ propensity for conflating power and domination. Foucault advocates that we need to work at the limits of what we are made to be, as we are never fully determined and freer than we think.
Arendt’s reconceptualisation of freedom aims to move freedom out of the inner realm back to the political realm. Arendt’s re-conceptualising of freedom sounds particularly odd in relation to current “advanced liberalism” ideas of getting people to govern themselves through their inner freedom (Rose 1999). Arendt’s notion of freedom is not about an inner feeling or inner state, but is considered a political achievement in acting in concert with others. Politics is something that happens in the space between plural people. It means that freedom is something that “springs up in between people” when they act together (Arendt 1951). According to Canovan:

The experience of plurality is an experience of both equality and of distinction; we are all human, and we are all separate individuals (1992: 206)

This conception of politics is quite different from the common liberal view, which conflates politics with government or the State.

For Arendt, human plurality and natality pre-exist Foucault’s power relations and it is on this basis that her insights can break with Foucault’s notion that power relations constitute identities and fields of action in a way that is impossible to step outside, although Foucault does moderate his notion of ubiquitous power, in the later part of his work by suggesting that self-determination and autonomy are possible through thinking. Arendt in contrast does not understand freedom as self-determination ‘but as something that appears in the interaction of plural beings’ (Canovan 1992: 211).

The notion of plurality is potent for thinking about the problem of “allowance for difference” that both Fook (2002) and Healy (2000) raise with modernist conceptions of empowerment. For instance using Foucault’s theorizing to answer the question asked at the beginning of the Family Centre Project, “are the poor different”? means using a governmentality perspective, where he suggests we understand this question as related to a new governmental mode, framed by bio-politics and largely enacted through pastoral power. “The poor” are constituted as a sub-population ready to be used, managed or optimised, directly and indirectly by the state. From Arendt’s perspective of plurality the question: “are the poor different”? makes no sense. We are all gloriously different and unique, and we are all the same in that each of us is unique. In a sense, a category like “the poor” is a political identity created through various techniques of governance, and this category provides no basis for understanding someone, nor a sufficient basis to interact with someone. It is the “will to empower” that creates the abstract category of “the poor” or “the educationally disadvantaged subject”, according to Cruikshank.
(1999). This does not deny that some people live without adequate income, but rather highlights how political identities are constituted and that this is an important site of on-going political contestation.

According to Cruikshank’s reading of the politics of empowerment and the United States’ “War on Poverty”, the Family Centre Project was about how critical social workers, despite their best efforts to avoid power relations of domination, through the will to empower, aimed to activate those identified as “the poor” or “the disadvantaged” in order to politicise them in accordance with pre-ordained goals and the norms of mass society. Both Arendt and Foucault question the instrumental “in order to” in the political realm as this pre-determines what it means for people to live well and to achieve a way to live together.

According to Foucault, critical social workers cannot escape power relations. There is no innocent space outside power relations and hoping to be a “positive” worker is not an adequate engagement with these issues. Orrie (1997) indicates that the focus has to be on the imbrication of critical social workers in power relations when conversing with, for instance, the young women in Healy’s (2000) example from Chapter One of this study. Discussion needs to be about how specific power relations operate to constitute both the young women and the workers, as well as the forms and techniques of power used or promoted. Otherwise, like Rees suggests social workers ‘will be adrift… [as to] why some forms of practice are encouraged and others are actively discouraged’ (1991: 4).

For Foucault, it is politics that impact on the techniques, identities and relations that promote certain kinds of power relations. These power relations operate to both enable and delimit the field of action in a setting. For Arendt, the conversation is also about what is happening between the “workers” and “clients” from their points of view and their opinions about what is happening in the world. Disagreements are to be valued as these differences can stimulate change or a commitment to alter some aspects of the situation, as without articulating these differences political action is not possible.

Arendt’s notion of human plurality and natality makes it possible to think about what Foucault attempts to articulate with his idea of the undefined practices of freedom. Arendt’s main focus was on human agency and freedom and Foucault’s main focus was on how we are constituted and yet, in some ways are freer than we think, even as we are to be regulated through our inner freedom. Arendt’s notion of plurality and natality helps explain how it is possible to generate something new together, in that we are reliant on each other to resist
normalising powers effects in constituting what we are made to be, through being attributed some identity often as a political or biological fact. However, as each of us is not ever completely determined, when we come together to debate, deliberate and discuss the world between us, from each of our positions, it is possible to generate a way of acting together, and also a way of resisting mass society’s dictates, to develop something new, through the capacity of beginning again, and by continually augmenting or amending that beginning.

This means that even when experts have set up a program for a particular target population, an understanding of human plurality and natality and the importance of the political and of acting together, can keep open the possibility of beginning again and of amending this beginning. When the political is not equated with the instrumental, these connections, conversations, deliberations, discussions and disagreements can be valued, plurality respected and freedom invited to have a place at the table (Arendt 1961). The continual putting into question of political identities and expected related political interests, the incessant discussion about the world and how to share it, are crucial aspects of critical social work empowerment practice.

This study has illustrated the importance of engaging with concepts like power, freedom and politics when re-thinking critical social work empowerment practices. Arendt’s and Foucault’s insights have revealed the importance of understanding “empowerment” historically as both contingent and potentially novel. Both Arendt’s and Foucault’s theorising of power, freedom and politics mean understanding that the context or local site of critical social work practice is constituted through power relations. Understanding how power relations historically operate to constitute identities and problems as well as modalities for redress is a crucial aspect in empowerment theorising. The notion of participation in empowerment practice if based on Arendt’s theorising of human plurality and natality adds a way to overcome the previous limited view of “equality as sameness” in critical social work (Fook 2002). Arendt’s theorising alerts critical social workers to the importance of public spaces that need to be continually created for the meeting of “unequal equals” to deliberate, to decide and disagree on how to live together and build the common world. Freedom and power are not something people can possess. Freedom and power are achieved through acting in concert with others.
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