

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN SOCIAL WORK

# Contemporary Feminisms in Social Work Practice

Edited by  
Sarah Wendt and  
Nicole Moulding



# Contemporary Feminisms in Social Work Practice

*Contemporary Feminisms in Social Work Practice* explores feminism as core to social work knowledge, practice and ethics. It demonstrates how gender-neutral perspectives and practices obscure gender discourses and power relations. It also shows feminist social work practice can transform areas of social work not specifically concerned with gender, through its emphasis on relationships and power.

Within and outside feminism, there is a growing assumption that equality has been won and is readily available to all women. However, women continue to dominate the ranks of the poor in developed and developing countries around the world; male perpetrated violence against women and children has not reduced; women outnumber men by up to three to one in the diagnosis of common mental health problems; and women continue to be severely underrepresented in every realm of power, decision making and wealth. This worrying context draws attention to the ways gender relations structure most of the problems faced by the women, men and children in the day-to-day worlds in which social work operates. Drawing together key contemporary thinking about feminism and its place in social work, this international collection looks both at core curriculum areas taught in social work programmes and at a wide range of practice fields that involve key challenges and opportunities for future feminist social work.

This book is suitable for all social work students and academics. It examines the nuanced nature of power relationships in the everyday and areas such as working with cross-cultural communities, mental health, interpersonal violence and abuse, homelessness, child protection, ageing, disability and sexuality.

**Sarah Wendt** is a Professor of Social Work at Flinders University, South Australia.

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Sarah Wendt and  
Nicole Moulding**

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# Introduction

*Nicole Moulding and Sarah Wendt*

Feminism and social work share an imperative for social change. This goal has connected the feminist movement and the social work profession for more than a century, stretching back to their mutual beginnings in the late nineteenth century and the social upheavals of that period. This is not to suggest that the relationship between feminism and social work has been unproblematic: social work has often been, and continues to be, complicit in the state control of many women's lives (Bell, 2011). However, there has also been a natural alignment between feminism and much of social work throughout the past 100 years, with many social workers drawing on feminist insights into how gender frames women's lives in the course of their day-to-day work. This interconnection has been so enduring that feminist thought, ethics and practice might be now understood as mainstream to social work rather than as simply complementary to it. This book illuminates the interconnections between contemporary feminism and modern social work across diverse everyday practice worlds. It also considers some of the tensions borne of practising feminist social work in neo-liberal sociopolitical contexts that simultaneously 'ignore' gender and exploit and exacerbate relative female disadvantage. Importantly, the book is framed by the contemporary feminist insight that gender intersects with other dimensions of social disadvantage, such as those of race, class, disability and sexuality, which has critical implications for social work as a profession whose central concern lies with understanding and responding to hardship and oppression.

A re-evaluation of the relationship between feminism and social work is arguably timely. Within and outside feminism, the post-feminist school of thought suggests that equality is now readily available to all women. Within the academy and broader society, gender neutrality remains the prevailing stance, and aligning with a feminist position is often met with confusion and discomfort. However, women continue to dominate the ranks of the poor and the homeless in developed and developing countries around the world; male perpetrated violence against women and children has not reduced; women outnumber men by up to three to one in the diagnosis of common mental health problems; and women continue to be severely

underrepresented in every realm of power and decision making across the globe. This paints a very different picture from more popular understandings, and draws attention to the ways gender relations continue to structure most of the problems faced by women, men and children in the day-to-day worlds in which social work operates. Gender also continues to structure the very profession itself. As Orme (2013) points out, social work is a profession mainly providing services for women by women.

While gender remains pivotal to many, if not all, of the social problems social workers encounter in their everyday work, the idea that equality has been 'won' often complicates an upfront engagement with feminist ideas. The veil of gender neutrality that has been drawn over women's (and men's) lives works to obscure gender oppression, and professional practices are often complicit in this by failing to attend explicitly to gender while continuing to draw on profoundly gendered assumptions about women and men. In this contemporary period, then, there is often a substantial disconnect between *explicit* discourses about gender and the *implicit* gendered social practices that women encounter in their everyday lives. Thus, while the idea of women's rights to equality has been widely accepted at an abstract level (Lamanna, 1999; Sharpe, 2001), in all countries across the world, everyday social practices (including professional practices) continue to be framed by unspoken, even unconscious, discourses about women, their rights and their responsibilities as qualitatively different from those of men. These implicit discourses and practices include the continuing treatment of women as sexualised body objects and the property of men, most graphically reflected in widespread rape, sexual abuse and domestic violence; continuing double-standards about female and male sexual behaviour; assumptions about women's place as primarily and more 'naturally' in the home and family, resulting in heavier burdens of care and double-shifts of paid and unpaid work; assumptions about women as more psychologically unstable, emotional and irrational than men, and therefore as less authoritative, competent and credible; and the laying of responsibility for men's behaviour, especially violence and rape, at women's feet. Thus, women continue to encounter diverse forms of gender oppression in their day-to-day lives based on implicit gender discourses and practices that are very often hidden from view, perhaps at least in part because of the success of the feminist movement in challenging more overt forms of sexism and discrimination.

In order to re-evaluate the place and value of feminism to social work in this contemporary moment, we bring together many of the foremost feminist social workers from around the world to examine and explore the theoretical, ethical and practical intersections between feminism and social work, and directions for the future. The aims of the book are to highlight in an illustrative way the centrality of feminism to contemporary social work; to show how gender-neutral perspectives and practices obscure gender and how feminism can challenge these practices; and, to

showcase the specific ways feminist social work practice can be transformative into the future through its emphasis on relationships and power. The uniqueness of this book primarily lies in the fact that, in contrast to other works that use more singular feminist approaches, our contributors draw on a diversity of feminisms, including post-structuralist feminism, radical feminism, liberal feminism, intersectional feminism, feminist appropriations of critical race theory, structuralist feminism and materialist feminism. This enables multi-faceted insights into the complex dynamics of gender relations and how they play out in the many 'problems of living' social work engages with.<sup>1</sup> As has been pointed out by Freeman, in using diverse feminist perspectives to examine the status of women in society,

[e]ach interpretation yields a different interpretation of the social world and influences the assumptions, observations, and conclusions that are made regarding women's experiences in society, as well as the strategies that are used to change that status and those experiences.

(1990, p. 75)

While some of the contributors to this book do not name a particular feminist theoretical tradition per se, what unites all the chapters is the feminist insight that systems of male privilege frame the lives of women, men and children in myriad ways, and that fairer societies will not be achieved without transformation of these social relations of advantage and disadvantage. All contributions, irrespective of specific theoretical orientation, are also united by an awareness that gender intersects with other social relations of advantage and disadvantage. As such, it is universally appreciated throughout the book that the concerns of all groups of women must be considered, not just those of white, western, heterosexual, 'able-bodied', middle-class women. The book is also distinctive for its global focus through its attention to feminist responses to global poverty and refugees, and for the inclusion of diverse areas of feminist social work practice such as sexualities in social work, body image and ageing, working with Indigenous communities and working with men.

In order to maximise the relevance of the book for feminist social workers, researchers, educators and students, we have divided the chapters into two main parts. Part I engages with the core knowledge and curriculum areas taught in social work programmes, including theory, feminist approaches to social policy, direct practice, management and leadership, social work organisations and community development. In Chapter 1, Sarah Wendt explores the influences of modernism and postmodernism on both social work and feminism to argue the importance of theory for the profession. She shows how feminism enables eclecticism within social work. She argues that feminism and social work have both demonstrated a level of reflexivity and development over time in terms of a capacity to

incorporate new theoretical insights, without losing the original impetus for social transformation. In Chapter 2, Melanie Shepard and Lake Dzien-gel consider the future of feminist social work practice into the twenty-first century. They argue that while social work practice and feminism have sprung from the same roots with similar values and goals for personal and social transformation, the impact of feminism on social work practice in the future is less clear. The authors explore the characteristics of feminist social work practice as shaped by the past, the influence of a changing social and practice environment, and their vision for feminist social work practice in the future. In Chapter 3, Annie Pullen Sansfaçon considers ethics in social work. She overviews the main ethical perspectives in this field, mapping some of the tensions and exploring the potential of feminist ethics of care, elaborating how this approach might be distinctive from other ethical positions in social work and its implications for future feminist-informed practice. In Chapter 4, Lesley Laing undertakes an analysis of feminism and social policy using the example of policies in family law as they are applied to 'shared parenting' arrangements. She shows how these supposedly gender-neutral policies obscure the gendered nature of parenting and the gendered assumptions that influence policy development and decision making. In Chapter 5, Sue King and Deirdre Tedman-son also explore feminist perspectives on social policy and its delivery, focusing on the gendered nature of social and economic disadvantage and the consequent social exclusion of women, in particular in their role as heads of sole parent families. This chapter also explores women's participation in the political and bureaucratic decision-making processes and looks at the impact of neo-liberalism on women's access to services.

Repositioning social work research is considered by Lia Bryant in Chapter 6. The chapter argues that it is timely to mainstream feminist approaches in social work because they have the potential to use critical and interpretive methodologies at the interstices between research and practice, thereby creating the potential for powerful social change. The chapter considers two key critical feminist approaches to research, Foucauldian archaeological discourse analyses and intersectionality, and introduces creative methods that may accompany these approaches. In Chapter 7, Margaret Alston focuses on rural community development in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region as sites of major restructuring, climate challenges and environmental degradation. She shows how rural spaces and policy responses take the masculine as the norm, with the consequence that women's efforts to sustain families and communities through their paid and unpaid work are marginalised and their interests and needs overlooked. The chapter draws out the importance of taking a feminist lens to rural issues and policy, and to community development strategies and actions, and argues that social workers have a significant role to play in challenging the dominant framing of rural life and advocating for policies and practices that advance gender equality and foster

quality of life for women. In Chapter 8, Mel Gray and Leanne Schubert explore leadership in social work through a feminist lens, drawing out how feminist perspectives diverge from gender-neutral theoretical approaches. They critically examine the implications for feminist leadership in social work where women predominate in the social work workforce and also as service users, specifically contextualising feminist leadership within current managerialist models of service delivery and management, and exploring the scope of feminist social work leadership and mentoring to influence change. In Chapter 9, Lena Dominelli critically examines poverty alleviation strategies for their potential to increase the burden that women already carry for family wellbeing, especially that of children and older people. The chapter examines the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which allege to have women and children at their heart, and the more recent 'social protection floor', demonstrating their gender-neutral approach and failure to engage with the limitations of neo-liberal forms of social development. The chapter draws out the implications of this for research and teaching in social work.

Part II looks to the everyday practice worlds of social work, bringing to life the ways gender plays out in the social problems and relationships social workers encounter in practice through the authors' research and practice, and offering feminist approaches to practice. In Chapter 10, Deirdre Tedmanson and Christine Fejo-King consider some of the gendered dimensions of social work's contemporary engagement with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and issues. The chapter draws on critical race theory to analyse how white privilege remains one of the most powerful, pervasive and under-discussed forms of contemporary racism. The chapter also identifies the ways white privilege continues to adversely impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and argues for strategies that dismantle 'whiteness' and build greater reflexivity in professional practice around the intersections of gender and race issues. In Chapter 11, Laurie Cook Heffron, Susanna Snyder, Karin Wachter, Maura Nsonwu and Noël Busch-Armendariz explore the weaving of feminist theories into social work practice with refugees. The chapter points out that women account for approximately one-half of those displaced in the world, with many facing a complex array of challenges, including trauma and gender-based violence. The chapter specifically discusses the gendered nature of resettlement experiences in the US, and explores the implications of four aspects of feminist theory for social work practice with refugees. In Chapter 12, Nicole Moulding critically examines the gendered dimensions of mental health and the potential of feminist-informed social work practice for challenging individualising and pathologising approaches. The chapter focuses specifically on mental health in contexts of gendered violence and abuse because much of the heavier burden of mental health problems experienced by women is traceable to these experiences. Drawing on the

author's empirical research, the chapter argues for a feminist approach to practice that challenges the discursive construction of mental illness as individual pathology, situates mental health in the context of social relationships and engages with the material impact of unequal gender relations on women's mental health and wellbeing. In Chapter 13, Fiona Buchanan offers a radical feminist approach to working with women and children. The chapter examines how knowledge of childhood and attachments has been appropriated by experts who classify relationships between women and their children by means of observation and survey. By drawing on the author's own research, the chapter adds to feminist understandings of women's knowledge about protectiveness and argues that children's wellbeing is best promoted in a society that honours and supports women's mothering abilities. In Chapter 14, Sarah Wendt makes the case that domestic violence can only be properly understood and responded to by understanding gender. The chapter outlines the debates of gender to explain why men are predominantly perpetrators of domestic violence and women and children victims, exploring how feminism has been instrumental in exposing domestic violence as part of a range of tactics used by men to exercise power and control over women and children. The chapter concludes by examining how feminism has influenced practice and policy responses to domestic violence in social work.

In Chapter 15, Fiona Buchanan and Lynn Jamieson bring an intersectional feminist perspective to the issue of rape and sexual assault. Whether rape is committed against women, trans-gendered people or men, they argue that it is an attack on self-worth exercised as an act of control by the perpetrator. While outlining the contributions of earlier feminist analyses of rape, the chapter examines how an understanding of how rape and sexual assault intersect with other categories of social disadvantage such as race, class and disability. The authors offer a more nuanced perspective and explore the implications for social work practice. In Chapter 16, Carole Zufferey demonstrates how homelessness is a gendered and embodied experience, with gendered violence the main cause of women's homelessness. The chapter argues that intersectional feminism is an important lens through which to examine social work research, policy and practice responses to homelessness because it enables social workers to recognise and address the diverse and intersecting disadvantages that constitute the lived experiences of homelessness for women. Margaret Rowntree explores sexuality in social work as an emerging area of scholarship in Chapter 17. The chapter examines why knowledge about sexuality is important for social work practice and, by drawing on the author's research, it discusses how gender impacts on the experience, practice and portrayal of sexuality. The chapter concludes by offering a feminist perspective on the way in which knowledge about sexuality can be embedded into social work practice, theory, values and ethics. In Chapter 18, Jill Chonody and Barbra Teater explore



the gendered dimensions of ageing with a particular focus on western societies' obsessions with beauty and youthful sexualities as symbols of social worth. They examine the gendered experience of growing older in western cultures, and show that youth-dominated cultures impact more negatively on women through drawing on contemporary examples and research. This chapter examines the implications for feminist social work approaches to working with older women. In Chapter 19, Barbara Fawcett demonstrates how the social model of disability has drawn from feminist perspectives in order to challenge and change disabling constructions. This chapter explores 'disability' by means of the various lenses that feminism has to offer, highlighting the opportunities and also the challenges posed by these perspectives and appraising how the various feminisms have influenced social work responses. In Chapter 20, Bob Pease explores some of the issues associated with engaging men in feminist social work. He points out that feminist social workers have emphasised the need for feminist thinking to inform work with men, but that few men in social work have taken up the feminist challenge. The chapter explores the personal, professional and practice implications for men of feminist principles in social work, arguing that it is possible for men to change their subjectivities and practices to constitute a profeminist men's standpoint by recognising their own gender privilege and the gender privilege of their male clients. The chapter also explores ways of encouraging men to reflect critically on the social construction of their own masculinities, and the consequences for women and for themselves of the male privilege that flows from their structural location. In the final chapter, we draw together the key ideas that have been showcased throughout the book, summarising the centrality of feminism to contemporary social work.

## Note

- 1 British social worker Jerry Tew (2008) specifically reframes 'mental illnesses' as 'problems of living' to emphasise the social nature of mental health and illness rather than relying on pathologising and individualising medical discourses. We suggest that this term could be extended to describe more generally most, if not all, of the problems social work engages with.

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## **Part I**

# **Social work knowledge**

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# 1 Conversations about theory

## Feminism and social work

*Sarah Wendt*

### **Introduction**

This chapter is written from my reflections on teaching social work theory to undergraduate and masters students. I write this chapter imagining that I am having a conversation with a social work student. The person I am talking with believes feminism is not relevant to social work. In my course on social work theory, in the week we examine feminism, it is not uncommon for me to hear ‘I am not a feminist’, ‘equality is won, we don’t need feminism anymore’ and ‘feminism should lighten up’. Let me also say, though, that not all students agree. Many come to class either already identifying strongly with feminist politics or engage enthusiastically with the ideas introduced to them. So perhaps I also write this chapter for other reasons. These include that I want to showcase and show off the richness of feminism, I want feminism to remain an integral part of social work and I want future social work students to see its applicability, relevance and close relationship with the profession.

In this chapter, I show how feminism and social work have evolved over time in similar ways in response to complex debates and competing ways of knowing. This journey enables me to argue that feminism is core to social work knowledge and hence cannot be separated from the values and ideals of social work. Similar to Phillips and Cree (2014), I engage in a form of reflection as a feminist researcher, teacher and scholar in social work. These are my thoughts about why I believe in the continuing relevance of feminism in all its diversity, richness and contradictions, as a body of knowledge that must remain central to social work. I also argue that feminism enriches other theories and approaches used in social work.

### **Modernism and postmodernism: parallel journeys for feminism and social work**

Modernism and postmodernism denote a range of theoretical orientations characterising particular periods of thought in the twentieth century. Modernism captures ideas and values that rest on strong notions of order,

and the belief in unity, progress and rational scientific objectivity (Fawcett, 2013). Modernism is also often associated with the operation of grand narratives or 'big stories', which are viewed as having a universal application and principles, for example psychoanalysis, liberalism and Marxism (Fawcett, 2013, p. 148). On the other hand, postmodernism involves key ideas and values that reject the view that any one theory, system or belief can ever reveal the truth. Instead, postmodernism brings an emphasis on the plurality of truth and a critical appreciation of 'the will to truth' (Parton & O'Bryne, 2000; Parton, 2000). Postmodernism also embraces deconstruction, plurality and relativity, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and emphasising that a wide range of understandings can be operating at any one time (Fawcett, 2013).

Both social work and feminism have been influenced by modernism and postmodernism and have grown in similar ways. Social work has become increasingly comfortable with discussing the implications of modernism and postmodernism. Many scholars have posed questions about the wide-ranging theoretical perspectives shaping social work (Morley & Macfarlane, 2012). It was recognised some time ago that social work has primarily arisen within a modernist tradition. As Howe (1994) has pointed out, social work is located in modernity because professional organisations have formed and social work departments have emerged. There has been considerable intellectual effort to analyse social work practice and write about its knowledge bases. As a profession, social work has synthesised various modernist theories and practices, which are evident in a range of contemporary textbooks today (see Payne 2014; Gray & Webb, 2013; Teater, 2010). For example, attachment and cognitive behaviour therapy often feature in textbooks, highlighting the importance of social workers understanding individuals and the psychological dimensions of their problems. Systems and empowerment theories are rarely missed in textbooks as they have a long history within social work, emphasising the importance of social workers understanding the interactions of the person within their environments. Critical theories include structural and radical social work, feminism, and anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice, all of which take the view that many social problems are caused by the structures of society (Payne, 2014). A range of theories is included in social work education because they aim to improve both individuals and society.

Since the 1990s social work has considered postmodernism and what this body of thought means for the profession. Drawing on the influences of postmodernism, some have argued that social work needs to revisit its claims to 'cure and control' arising from modernist assumptions of progress, emancipation and perfection (Howe, 1994; Healy, 2005). Thus, there has been a questioning of the possibilities for human liberty and equality (Morley & Macfarlane, 2012). Instead, it can be argued that social work is more about interpreting. The focus of social work is therefore understanding local details, complexities and diverse experiences of

people. Being self-reflexive, de-centred and deconstructive is what characterises social work influenced by postmodernism (Howe, 1994; Healy, 2005; Fawcett, 2013). For example, discourse, subjectivity and relations of power have been particularly picked up as tools for theorising and analysis (Healy, 2005). Similarly, implications for practice and hence approaches such as narrative therapy are now discussed in textbooks. In addition we see approaches showing engagement with and development from post-modern influences such as strengths approaches and solution-focused practice; these acknowledge how discourses construct clients as ‘problematic’ or ‘deficit’ (Payne, 2014). In summary, through consideration of post-modern ideas, social work as a profession has tried to shift away from ‘problem solving’ to a more forward-looking approach that contextualises the experiences of people. People are positioned as experts in their own lives and as active in developing their knowledge of the world; hence the social worker takes a stance of curiosity and a non-expert position (Teater, 2010; Payne, 2014).

Feminism too has become comfortable, discussing modernism and post-modernism and, like social work, has been shaped by these ideas. As Morley and MacFarlane (2012, p. 690) point out, feminism is also a modernist emancipatory project. It has a particular political agenda pertaining to a particular identity (i.e. woman). It has a grand narrative espousing a ‘truth’ about how patriarchy oppresses women. Feminism therefore seeks changes through structural reform, addressing social and political disadvantage by challenging inequitable social arrangements. As Gray and Boddy (2010) point out, feminism has achieved much under the influences of modernism. Feminism has challenged employment discrimination, advocated for voting and reproductive rights, and sought rights to property ownership and education. Feminism has raised awareness about and responded to male violence against women and children, including domestic violence, sexual assault and pornography. Under modernism feminism showcased various schools of thought with emancipatory ideals. For example, radical feminism focuses on practices of sexism in relationships between men and women. Marxist and socialist feminism highlight the need to differentiate between structures of production and reproduction to gain a fuller understanding of the historical material basis of patriarchal oppression (Swigon-ski & Raheim, 2011). Liberal feminism focuses on reform through juridical means and hence lobbies for legal and civil reforms through affirmative action and anti-discrimination campaigns. Lesbian feminism highlights the dominance of heterosexuality in feminism and hence challenges the hegemony of the white, middle-class, heterosexual woman. Black feminism highlights racism, domination and white privilege (Gray & Boddy, 2010). Like social work, there has been considerable intellectual effort within feminism to analyse the oppression of women and bodies of knowledge have emerged as a result along with academic journals devoted to feminist thought both in and outside social work.

Also similar to social work, feminism has questioned its emancipatory claims as a result of postmodernist challenges and insights. The power and authority of feminist claims about women's oppression have been widely questioned over the past 30 years. Some have argued that the third wave of feminism reflects the postmodern mood, as feminism has re-considered its social actions and theorisations of women as a homogeneous group. Feminism therefore embarked on a commitment to be more inclusive of race, class and sexual orientation. The third wave has been characterised as striving to be inclusive, non-judgemental, multifocal and multivocal, and focused on the complexity of identities and systems of oppression (Swigonski & Raheim, 2011, p. 18). In this era, we see feminism being self-critical, diverse and contradictory. For example, feminism has engaged with post-structuralist ideas to understand dominant discourses of gender. Feminism has embraced intersectionality to develop nuanced and inclusive understandings of gender, race and class. Feminism has been influenced by postcolonial thought which critiques western imperialism and its subordination of whole peoples, races and ethnic groups, hence drawing attention to the importance of Indigenous and local cultures (Gray & Boddy, 2010; Swigonski & Raheim, 2011). In summary, feminism has moved away from the notion that women are unified and uniform and instead embraced theorising about women's differences, diversity and the contextualised experiences of women. Like social work, feminism takes a position of curiosity, to embrace the ambiguity, contestations and richness of women's lives (McCann & Kim, 2013).

When one examines the journeys of both social work and feminism, it is clear they have similar emancipatory values and that during the 1990s in western societies they together entered a space of critical reflection prompted at least in part by the influence of postmodernism. To position feminism as no longer relevant to social work, as some contemporary social work professionals and students suggest, is a denial of the importance of feminist critical analysis and questioning over this period. In the remainder of this chapter, I show how feminism enables the development of sophisticated understandings and responses to the problems faced by women. First, I elaborate the contribution of feminism to more nuanced understandings of domestic violence, followed by critical feminist analysis of three key social work practice theories and their implications for working with women.

### *Feminism and social work: my example of the dual journey*

I predominantly work in the practice field of domestic violence. In understanding domestic violence, feminism has argued historically that patriarchy and its associated economic and social processes are central. Power differences between men and women therefore contribute to domestic violence (Walby, 1990). With influences from postmodernism, explaining

domestic violence as resulting from patriarchy has been seen as limiting because it assumes that gender roles are dichotomous or essential. The critique has pointed out that such explanations do not account for complex ways in which gender operates in social interactions between people (McHugh, 2005). As a social worker, I understood this debate and agreed with such insights; however, simultaneously, as a feminist working in the area of domestic violence, for me, gender needed to remain central because the statistics of violence against women and children by male partners remain alarmingly high (Phillips, 2008). For these reasons, as a feminist, I have turned to post-structuralist ideas to expose how violence plays out in gendered social contexts. Through examining complexities and nuances of gendered positioning, I argue that feminism can and should continue to centralise gender in understanding domestic violence (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015).

I have interviewed diverse groups of women and written about their experiences of domestic violence including mothers, religious women, rural women, Aboriginal women and women living with intellectual disabilities. As a social worker, both feminist and post-structuralist theories push me to be reflective, reflexive and open in writing about women's stories. My work could be considered an example of interpretation and understanding within social work influenced by the insights of post-modernism. In line with this, I focus on local details, complexities and the diverse experiences of women, arguing that change follows from questioning and challenging gendered discourses and subject positions.

### **Why feminist theory matters in social work**

As the discussion above has shown, social workers have an ethical and professional responsibility to have knowledge of established social theories that are grounded in social work values. Or as Orme (2003, p. 132) argues, theoretical debates are relevant to social work because understanding how others come to experience, know and make sense of the world is core to social work practice. Theories help social workers explain phenomena and shape social work's purpose (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2008). Theory brings together a range of explanations that have a bearing on interpretations, decisions, assessment and interventions, and advocacy strategies (Cleak & Wilson, 2007). I argue that feminism exemplifies this for social work because feminism has a willingness to engage with debates, analyse and reflect, which can benefit social work. Social work is a profession that requires the integration of complex and evolving knowledge to inform practice.

Theory guides the focus, objectives and processes of social work practice. Through this guidance, theory provides accountability to service users, employers and funding bodies. In simple terms, theory enables social workers to be clear about what they are doing and why they are



doing it. Theory pushes social workers to review their own assumptions and accepted ways of doing things as well as their own opinions and personal values; hence theory enables and demands critical engagement, thinking and reflection. Theory also creates a shared identity in social work (Healy, 2005; Osmond & O'Connor, 2006). I argue the continued growth and diversity of feminism is an example of what theory can do, and therefore enables a shared identity in social work. Developments within feminism can be used to guide processes and practices. Feminism is not static because feminist theorising over time continues to expand the tools and strategies that can be used in social work (Swigonski & Raheim, 2011). Feminism stimulates awareness and change, promotes reflection and opens up processes that can build egalitarian relationships. It emanates values of empowerment and these ways of working matter to social work (Payne, 2014). In summary, feminism particularly matters in social work because, as Swigonski and Raheim (2011, p. 11) eloquently point out, the actions and tasks of feminism and social work are often one and the same. Similarly, Barretti (2011, p. 264) points out that there are compatibilities and partnerships between social work and feminism because both come from a similar foundation of shared responsibility for social change and development.

### **Feminism: a lens for interacting with social work theories**

Theory is essential in social work and so I do not argue in this chapter that feminism is and should be the only theory that social work requires. In teaching social work, I believe we have a responsibility to cover the breadth of theories that influence social work and it is ethical practice for social workers to acknowledge and use a range of established researched theories. As Phillips and Cree point out, it is important for social work to examine continually 'how it is best done and how it best responds to the complexity of the lives of the people that it aims to serve' (2014, p. 941). In the remaining part of the chapter, I therefore also want to show how feminism provides me with a social work identity that comes from critical social work, which questions taken-for-granted ideas and arguments. I want to understand and change 'harmful divisions, unequal power relations, injustices and disadvantage' (Morley, Macfarlane & Ablett, 2014, p. 2). Feminism provides me with a lens to engage with other social work theories, enabling me to practise eclecticism and draw on the rich bodies of thought that social work has embraced across time. I therefore present three social work theories that are being used in contemporary Australian social work. I draw out the strengths and limitations of such theories for working with women by examining these theories through my feminist lens. By engaging with feminism I am able to enact critical thinking, which is an important part of social work. Feminism helps social workers question existing assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of being and

knowing, and aids one to remain open minded to take account of different perspectives (Payne, 2014, p. 87).

### *Systems theory*

Social work has a long history with systems theory (Besthorn, 2013) and has distinguished itself from other helping professions through its dual focus on the person and the environment (Norton, 2012). The purpose of engaging with systems theory is to help the social worker customise their intervention to the person, the environment and the interaction between the two. The aim of practice is to facilitate the restoration of an adaptive balance between the person and environment by reducing stress, improving coping and therefore establishing stability (O'Donoghue & Maidment, 2005). Systems theory has enabled social workers to understand the developing person in the context of family, social network, community and wider society (the environment) (Scott, Arney & Vimpani, 2010). For example, human development is seen to be based in a concentric arrangement of systems (micro, meso, exo and macro) and analysing each systems level provides different insights (Ambrosino et al., 2008; Scott et al., 2010).

As Besthorn (2013, p. 179) points out, systems theory has relevance to social work because it provides a comprehensive, multidisciplinary and holistic framework within which the complex and interrelational elements of people's lives can be connected and understood. However, systems theory has been criticised for being conservative and justifying the status quo (Hanson, 2001). Furthermore, some argue that systems theory has no organised methodology and therefore its complexity of concepts and assertions act as a barrier to clear prescriptions for action (Payne, 2014). Systems theory has also been criticised for its lack of critical perspective and, despite its claims to focus on both person and environment, many argue that the adaption perspective within systems prevails and in most cases individuals and their adaption is the focus, not changing environments (Besthorn, 2013).

In responding to some of these critiques, feminism offers additional important insights. For example, Stephens (2012) introduces feminist systems theory (FST) as an emerging theory grounded in cultural ecofeminism and critical systems theory; hence, it brings to social work a set of principles that contain implications for community development, social research and intervention practice. Specifically, FST adopts a gender-sensitive approach that is missing from systems theory and thereby centralises what is distinctive about women's experiences. One could also argue that FST has been influenced by postmodernism because it promotes practice that is contextualised, where change happens when it is locally embedded. Similarly, Norton (2012) argues that for social work to respond to the critiques of systems theory it could look to feminist psychology and ecofeminism. Specifically, she argues that social work needs to redefine its