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POWER

Introduction

Much has been written on the subject of power and it would clearly be unrealistic to attempt a comprehensive analysis within the space available in this chapter. I shall therefore limit myself to a consideration of what I see as a number of key issues in terms of power and its role in relation to inequality, discrimination and oppression. I shall begin by asking the basic question of: 'What is power?', before exploring theories of power; language, discourse and power; the relationship between power and oppression; and, finally, the key concept of empowerment.

What is power?

In addressing this question, it is important to recognize that the concept of power is a 'paradigmatic' one. That is, it is used in different senses within different paradigms or theoretical frameworks. As we shall see below, there are various models or conceptions of power. However, one common theme is that of the ability to influence or control people, events, processes or resources. It amounts to being able to 'get things done', to make progress in achieving one's ends. In this sense, power can be seen as something positive, something to be valued and welcomed. However, it would be naïve not to recognize that power is also a potentially very destructive force, something that can be used to exploit, oppress or abuse – a significant barrier to equality. As Giddens (1993a) comments:

> Power is an ever-present phenomenon in social life. In all human groups, some individuals have more authority or influence than others, while groups themselves vary in terms of the level of their power. Power and inequality tend to be closely linked. The powerful are able to accumulate

valued resources, such as property or wealth; and possession of such resources is in turn a means of generating power.

(p. 209)

Power is therefore a central feature of the struggle to promote equality. Indeed, the very term 'struggle' is a significant one, as it indicates that there are established structures and vested interests that are likely to stand in the way of progress. Promoting equality inevitably involves entering into conflict with the 'powers that be', the dominant social arrangements that help to maintain existing power relations. Consequently, we need to recognize that an understanding of the workings of power is an essential part of challenging inequality, discrimination and oppression. As Fawcett and Featherstone (2000) put it: 'For those concerned with challenging injustice, exploring and understanding power relations are central activities' (p. 17).

While power is clearly a fundamental concept with regard to promoting equality in general, it can also be seen as particularly important in relation to working with people and their problems. This is because such work very often involves people in relative positions of power seeking to aid or serve people in relatively powerless positions. Power in such situations manifests itself in terms of:

- control or influence over the allocation of resources;
- knowledge, expertise and skills (for example, negotiation skills);
- professional discourse and legitimation;
- statutory powers (the backing of the law and court system); and
- hierarchical power by virtue of status or position within an organization.

Power, then, is a complex phenomenon that applies in a number of ways and at a number of levels. In order to develop further our understanding of these issues, we need to explore some of the key concepts that can help cast light on this important topic.

Theories of power

There are a wide variety of theories of power, and so the discussion here will necessarily be selective. I shall begin by discussing issues that relate to agency before addressing those that are more concerned with structure.

One well-established theory of power is that of Lukes (1974) who introduced a three-dimensional model, as described by Hugman (1991) in terms of three sets of situations:

1. situations of observable decision-making, focused on key issues over which there is overt conflict concerning the subjective interests of the individuals or groups involved;
2. situations of 'non-decision-making' in which only some potential issues become explicit, where there is covert as well as overt conflict concerning the subjective interests of groups or individuals;
3. situations in which the social agenda is established (that is, potential and explicit issues are created), in which there is actual (overt and covert) and also latent conflict over both objective and subjective interests of individuals and groups. (pp. 30–1)

(1) represents the one-dimensional model in which there is a narrow focus on overt conflict and concrete decisions. Power is exercised in a relatively open way, easily observed. (2) goes beyond this to incorporate the second dimension of covert or hidden conflict and 'non-decisions' – the outcomes that arise as a result of certain issues not being addressed. (3) represents Lukes's third dimension and is concerned with the political agenda of which the two other dimensions form a part (Clegg, 1989).

An important element of the third dimension is that of 'interests' – for example, material interests that underpin the operations of power. Power is therefore linked to the broader social context and is not simply a matter of the power relations inherent in interpersonal interactions and everyday social practices. In simple terms, power relates to:

- What is done – decisions made, steps taken (Dimension 1);
- What is not done – decisions or actions avoided or subverted (Dimension 2);
- The context in which it is done – interests, broader social and political factors and ideas (Dimension 3).

Although this approach has been very influential in social science, there are many aspects of power it does not address. It can therefore form only part of our understanding of the workings of power.

Another important theory of power is that of Weber (1968). Abercrombie et al. (1994) argue that, for Weber, power:

is the probability that a person will be able to carry out his or her own will in the pursuit of goals of action, regardless of resistance. He defined 'domination' in a similar manner as the probability that a command would be obeyed by a given group of people. This definition has the fol-

lowing characteristics: (1) power is exercised by individuals and therefore involves choice, agency and intention; (2) it involves the notion of agency, that is, an individual achieving or bringing about goals which are desirable; (3) power is exercised over other individuals and may involve resistance and conflict; (4) it implies that there are differences in interests between the powerful and the powerless; (5) power is negative, involving restrictions and deprivations for those subjected to domination.

(p. 329)

It is worth exploring each of these five characteristics in a little more depth:

l. Choice, agency, intention

Power is a feature of everyday actions and interactions, in so far as it involves individuals making decisions and living with the consequences of those decisions. Such actions can be used to enhance the power an individual holds or, alternatively, they can be used to 'give away' power – a process of self-disempowerment which will be discussed in more detail below. This emphasizes that power is not an absolute quality that a person either has or does not have. The amount of power an individual can exercise therefore depends upon, among other things, the choices he or she makes – in short, human agency.

◀ PRACTICE FOCUS 2.1 ▶

Pat was a community nurse working mainly with older people. She was often concerned that some of the people she worked with had become very dependent on her, often not making decisions for themselves and relying on her for guidance on a wide range of matters. She realized that they needed a lot of help from her physically in order to cope on a day-to-day basis, but worried that they were relying on her for other matters too, as if they did not want to take responsibility for themselves. She discussed this issue with colleagues and found that they too had come across this pattern. Pat therefore decided to look into how she could discourage people from 'giving away' control over their lives in this way, and to encourage them to be as autonomous as possible.

2. Agency and desirable goals

Power can be linked to desired outcomes, attempts to achieve particular goals. In this respect, power has a *past* dimension (it represents the historical outcome of previous actions and power relations) and also a *future* dimension (it represents what the individuals concerned are trying to achieve, the direction they are taking). This is captured in the notion of the 'existential project' (Thompson, 1992a), the everyday

process through which we 'pro-ject' ourselves into the future – our actions are geared towards moving closer to our desired goals. Power does not, therefore, relate only to the present.

3. Resistance and struggle

The power to achieve one's own ends often involves the use of power over other people, or their use of power to resist, block, sabotage or counteract one's attempts. Power can therefore be seen to entail considerable potential for struggle. This is the key element in Foucault's theory of power – power is not a one-way phenomenon.

4. Differences of interest

Conflicts of ends, competition for scarce resources and related matters can all be significant factors in relation to power. An understanding of power therefore needs to incorporate the sociological dimension of *conflict*, recognizing the inherent tensions between individuals and between social groups. Power thus represents a potential, and in many ways actual, battlefield involving a range of conflicts of interests. In this respect, power is an inevitable feature of human existence, in so far as differences of interest are intrinsic to social life.

5. Negative restrictions

The exercise of power by one person or group is often experienced by others as domination, involving a set of negative restrictions or deprivations. Power therefore contains within it the potential for abuse and oppression – a point which has major implications in terms of discrimination and inequality. However, we should also note that power is not inevitably negative in its consequences. The positive potential of power is a theme to be developed further in this and subsequent chapters.

Theories of power that focus on agency have been heavily criticized by theorists who emphasize the structural properties of power. For example, marxist sociology locates power primarily in class relations as a result of the economic exploitation of the working class (the proletariat) by the owners of the means of production (the bourgeoisie). That is, power is seen as deriving from the capitalist structure in which one class group benefits from economic, social and political domination at the expense of the other. Marxist theory would therefore see agency-based approaches to power as inadequate as a result of their neglect of the structural context, specifically the context of class relations. The power that comes from wealth and position is an important factor that should not be overlooked.

Marxist theories, in turn, have been criticized for too narrow a focus on class-based power relations and a neglect of other forms of social division such as gender and race. For example, many anti-racist feminists base their analysis on the need to go beyond a class perspective by integrating issues of oppression related to gender and race (Segal, 1999). Similarly, Williams (1989) comments on the general tendency of social policy to neglect such factors:

> In general 'race' and gender are issues that have been neglected or marginalized in the discipline of social policy, particularly in terms of a failure, to, first, acknowledge the experiences and struggles of women and of Black people over welfare provision; secondly, to account for racism and sexism in the provision of state welfare; thirdly, to give recognition to work which *does* attempt to analyse the relationship between the welfare state and the oppressions of women and of Black people (and, historically, other racialized groups like the Irish and Jews); and fourthly, to work out a progressive welfare strategy which incorporates the needs and demands which emerge from such strategies and analyses.
>
> (p. xi)

Power should therefore be seen as a structural property in the broader sense – relating to the various ways in which society is structured – rather than simply a question of class dominance. This is an important point for, as we shall see in Chapter 3, there are also other aspects of structural social division – age, disability and sexual identity, for example – that are very significant in terms of power relations and the distribution of life chances.

From the roots of marxist theories of class, therefore, have grown a number of other approaches that focus on the structural dimension. Some such theories, however, have emphasized structure at the expense of agency. For example, the structuralist approach of writers such as Althusser (1976) explicitly rejects the human actor as a significant factor in social theory. This is what is sometimes known as the 'death of the subject' thesis. Craib (1992) explains it in the following terms:

> The idea being attacked is that people are the authors of their own thoughts and actions. It is assumed instead that people are the puppets of their ideas, and their actions are not determined by choice and decision but are the outcome of the underlying structure of ideas, the logic of these ideas. If, for example, I am a Christian, I do not speak about Christianity; rather, Christianity speaks through me; some structuralists reach the extreme of saying that people do not speak; rather, they are

spoken (by the underlying structure of the language); that they do not read books, but are 'read' by books. They do not create societies, but are created by societies.

(p. 135)

This rather extreme form of determinism makes the fundamental mistake of ignoring the role of agency in reproducing social structure. It reduces the structure–agency dialectic to a linear relationship in which structure simply determines human action. As Giddens (1993b) argues:

Most sociologists, even many working within frameworks of interpretive sociology, have failed to recognize that social theory, no matter how 'macro' its concerns, demands a sophisticated understanding of agency and the agent just as it does an account of the complexities of society.

(p. 5)

We are once again in the realm of structuration, the process – or set of processes – described in Chapter 1 by which social structures are reproduced in and by the everyday actions of social actors. Structuralist theories of power can therefore be seen to be one-sided and reductionist.

Sibeon (1991) argues from a similar perspective when he discusses the tendency towards reductionism inherent in theories that emphasize either micro or macro issues, rather than the interaction of the two:

To attempt to account for 'structure' *in terms of* agency is (micro) reductionist . . . equally, to attempt . . . to 'explain' human agency *in terms of* structure is (macro) reductionist . . . Social life is not reducible to a single reductionist principle of 'micro' or 'macro' explanation. Neither is it possible to arrive at an 'accommodation' or 'compromise' based on a *synthesis* of both these forms of reductionism.

(p. 24)

Similarly, Westwood (2002) argues that sociology is beginning to move towards what she describes as a 'quantum' approach, based not on 'either/or' dichotomies which oversimplify complex social realities, but rather on both/and formulations which seek to capture the diversity, complexity and depth of the social world. This is an approach consistent with existentialism, with a focus on appreciating the multidimensional nature of human reality rather than seeking, in bad faith, to reduce it to a single aspect.

In reaction to structuralist theories of power and social relations there emerged a broad school of thought that came to be known as 'poststructuralism'. A number of major theorists are associated with this approach, not least Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault, and a number of important themes can be discerned:

- the critique of metanarratives;
- the dispersal of power;
- genealogy as a form of theoretical understanding; and
- the importance of language.

I shall discuss each of these themes in turn.

The critique of metanarratives

Lyotard (1984) rejected what he terms 'metanarratives', the grand theories that have attempted to develop a comprehensive picture of social life and experience. He describes such theories as 'terroristic', in so far as they are said to suppress difference in their attempts to provide an overview. As we shall see, difference is a key word in the poststructuralist vocabulary, particularly in relation to the workings of power.

◁ PRACTICE FOCUS 2.2 ▷

Alan was a probation officer who was very knowledgeable and skilled in the art of family therapy. He sought to understand all his work in terms of systems, particularly family systems. This approach became the basis of all his work, a 'metanarrative' by which he tried to make sense of the problems his clients faced, the contexts in which they occurred and the interventions he needed to take. Although this proved to be very effective with many of his cases, it was often not an appropriate approach for some people or certain circumstances. However, his commitment to family systems theory prevented him from seeing this, and he often persisted with a family therapy approach when a less 'uniform' approach would have been much more appropriate.

While Lyotard's critique does have its strengths, particularly in terms of pointing out the dangers of an overzealousness for a particular theoretical approach, his complete rejection of metanarratives can be seen to be both inaccurate and excessive. It is excessive in so far as a grand theory or metanarrative does not necessarily suppress difference. It is a potential danger inherent in such approaches rather than an inevitable feature of them. This is a point to which I shall return in Chapter 5.

Lyotard is also inaccurate, in so far as he fails to distinguish between different types of metanarrative and the diversity of thought and culture they represent. Ironically, then, Lyotard's approach is itself terroristic in that he relies on a form of 'Thought Police':

> In our view, a more promising venture would be to make explicit, critically discuss, take apart, and perhaps reconstruct and rewrite the grand narratives of social theory rather than to just prohibit them and exclude them from the terrain of narrative. It is likely – as Jameson argues – that we are condemned to narrative in that individuals and cultures organize, interpret and make sense of their experience through story-telling modes (see also Ricoeur 1984). Not even a scientistic culture could completely dispense with narratives and the narratives of social theory will no doubt continue to operate in social analysis and critique in any case (Jameson 1984b: p. xii). If this is so, it would seem preferable to bring to light the narratives of modernity so as to critically examine and dissect them, rather than to simply prohibit certain sorts of narratives by Lyotardian Thought Police.
>
> (Best and Kellner, 1991, p. 173)

Despite these criticisms, Lyotard's work has proven to be a major influence on the development of postmodernism, a theoretical perspective to be discussed in more detail below.

The dispersal of power

One of the underlying principles of the structuralist approach to power is that such power is concentrated in certain areas of the social structure, within the ruling class, for example. Poststructuralism, by contrast, emphasizes the *dispersed* nature of power. For example, Foucault sees power as a feature of *all* social relations, a ubiquitous aspect of social life: 'What I am attentive to is the fact that every human relation is to some degree a power relation. We move in a world of perpetual strategic relations' (1988, p. 168).

In Foucault's terms, then, power is a much more complex and wide-ranging phenomenon than the relatively narrow conception of power associated with structuralist approaches. As Bell (1993) comments:

> For Foucault, therefore, the locus of power is dispersed. The state, for example, can only operate on the basis of power relations that exist within the social field, the 'polymorphous techniques of power' (1981: 11). For the theorist, the prescription is not to formulate 'global systematic theory . . . but to analyse the specificity of mechanisms of power, to locate the connections and extensions' (1981: 145). It is these local tactics that work to support what may have appeared at first to be the source of

power (1980: 159). Thus one can speak of strategies of power only once one has traced the 'tactics', the micro-techniques of power.

(p. 31)

Power, according to Foucault, is not an absolute entity that people either have or do not have. Rather, it is a property of the interactions between individuals, groups and institutions. It therefore needs to be understood as a relatively fluid entity that is open to constant change and influence. Consequently, a generalized theory will not be sufficient to explain the subtle workings of power. Gergen (1999) makes apt comment when he argues that:

> power resides not in a structure or a person but in a set of relationships. *Power relations* may not only include physical artifacts, but may also be extended outward to the more general conditions of the culture.
>
> (p. 207)

In presenting this fluid version of power, Foucault's work can be seen to represent Lyotard's critique of metanarratives – it seeks to provide specific, historically grounded explanations of the mechanisms of power, rather than an overall, abstract and generalized theory.

In this respect, Foucault's approach is 'ideographic' in so far as it seeks to provide: 'interpretations of individual cases that capture their particularity and uniqueness' (Morrow, 1994, p. 56) rather than a 'nomothetic' approach which seeks to provide overall, invariant rules or scientific laws (see also Sibeon, 1996). An important theoretical tool Foucault used to provide such ideographic explanations was that of discourse, a concept we encountered in Chapter 1 and to which we shall return below under the heading of 'The importance of language'.

Westwood (2002) links Foucault's conception of power to the work of Nietzsche:

> Following Nietzsche (1844–1900), Foucault (1926–84) regards power not as negative or positive but as omnipresent and productive. However, there are different forms of power, from governance through state organisations and the management of populations to discipline through internal bureaucracies and institutional arrangements that come to bear on all citizens in modern societies.
>
> (p. 19)

Genealogy

Foucault's earlier work was described as 'archaeological' in so far as it sought to reconstruct the diversity of discourses that underpinned

particular historical development, for example in relation to the development of empirically based medicine (Foucault, 1975) or the development of the human sciences (Foucault, 1972). His task was not to fit the evidence into a preconceived theoretical framework, but rather to explain specific pieces of evidence, much as an archaeologist would do in trying to piece together fragments of the past. This once again reflects Foucault's ideographic approach.

His later works, by contrast, he described as 'genealogical'. As Bell (1993) explains:

> By the time Foucault wrote *THS* [*The History of Sexuality*], his concerns were less with the search for rules, regularities and the formation of discourses and more with questions of the relationships between power, knowledge and discourse. During the period between *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *THS*, Foucault's own understanding of what he was doing altered. Whilst it still contained important aspects of archaeology, the later approach, which he named 'genealogy', resulted from important changes in his understanding of his work. The interest Foucault had had in the rules which governed discourses disappears, and, although discourses are still the object of study and the level at which Foucault's analysis 'enters', the abstract and generalized approach to discourse of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is replaced by a more 'grounded' interest in the ways that discourse is both built upon networks of power/knowledge and produces certain power effects.
>
> (p. 44)

This approach to history differs significantly from traditional history in so far as it concentrates on meticulous detail and documentation, and does not seek to unearth an underlying truth or historical 'reality'. Indeed, this is a feature of poststructuralism, a movement away from underlying structures to focus instead on the diverse fragments or details – the 'polymorphous techniques of power'. As Rabinow (1986) comments: 'Foucault is highly suspicious of claims to universal truths. He doesn't refute them; instead, his consistent response is to historicize grand abstractions' (p. 4).

Genealogy represents an attempt to piece together the fragmented detail of the complex machinations of power as manifested through discourses in much the same way as a genealogist maps out the interrelationships within a family tree. As such, it is a core element within the poststructuralist approach to power.

The importance of language

Structuralist approaches to language emphasize the underlying structures, or 'deep structures' that underpin our actions and interactions.

Poststructuralism, by contrast, focuses on the surface manifestations of language – the discourses that are so important in understanding the workings of power.

Language, in poststructuralist terms, is the site where meanings are shaped and contested, identities formed and challenged. As Burr (1995) comments:

> If language is indeed the place where identities are built, maintained and challenged, then this also means that language is the crucible of change, both personal and social. A person may feel trapped, restricted or oppressed by his or her identity as, say, 'mother', 'homosexual' or 'mental patient'. Postructuralist theory would see language as the major site where these identities could be challenged or changed. If our experience of ourselves and of our lives is only given structure and meaning by language, and if these meanings are not fixed but constantly changing, sought after and struggled for, then our experience is potentially open to an infinite number of possible meanings or constructions. What it means to be a 'woman', to be 'a child' or to be 'black' could be transformed, reconstructed, and for poststructuralists language is the key to such transformations.
>
> (p. 43)

The linkages between power and language are therefore very significant for poststructuralism, as indeed for other theoretical approaches. I shall therefore return to the question of language and power later in this chapter under the heading of 'Language, discourse and power'.

Poststructuralism owes much to the work of Foucault and it is worth considering two particular aspects of his theory of power, namely surveillance and resistance.

Surveillance: the panopticon

One of Foucault's interests was in the ways in which externally defined discipline becomes internalized as a form of self-discipline. An important part of this work was his analysis of the role of surveillance as a tool of power. In particular, he was interested in 'the panopticon', a form of disciplinary technology proposed by Jeremy Bentham (Foucault, 1977a). This describes a prison arrangement whereby a central tower allows surveillance of a range of levels and cells. Such an arrangement acts as an important metaphor for Foucault's understanding of surveillance. As Rabinow (1986) explains:

> The architectural perfection is such that even if there is no guardian present, the power apparatus still operates effectively. The inmate cannot

see whether or not the guardian is in the tower, so he must behave as if surveillance were perpetual and total. If the prisoner is never sure when he is being observed, he becomes his own guardian. As the final step in architectural and technological perfection, the panopticon includes a system for observing and controlling the controllers. Those who occupy the central position in the panopticon are themselves thoroughly enmeshed in a localization and ordering of their own behaviour.

(p. 19)

This is a significant passage with important implications not only for our understanding of power in general but also, more specifically, for the role of the maintenance of power relations in working with people and their problems. This is because such work can be seen to involve an element of surveillance (Abbott and Sapsford, 1988). For example, helping someone to deal with a drink problem is likely to involve monitoring levels of alcohol consumption – care and control are necessarily intertwined through the use of such 'surveillance' (Thompson, 2000b). These implications include:

- Individuals contribute to their own oppression through the internalization of disciplinary practices.
- Power relations operate within systems of ideas (discourses) and do not rely solely on the actions of individuals or groups.
- Those who wield power, including those of us engaged in 'people work', are also subject to disciplinary practices – the controllers are controlled.

All three of these points relate to issues that can be seen to be of major importance in understanding inequality, discrimination and oppression. They will therefore feature in arguments to be presented in subsequent chapters.

Resistance

Simplistic conceptions of power often present it as something which some people have, while others do not have it. The reality is far more complex, as Foucault was at pains to point out. For Foucault, power is a dualistic phenomenon – that is, it is both constraining and enabling (Westwood, 2002). It allows one individual or group to dominate others through 'discursive practices', the powerful ideas and assumptions rooted in particular discourses. However, power also manifests itself as 'resistance', the ability of individuals or groups to struggle against such domination.

As power operates primarily through discourse (ideas, assump-

tions, knowledge, frameworks of understanding), such dominance can be challenged through acts of *resistance*, through the use of counter-vailing power to undermine dominant discursive practices. As power is an ever-present feature of everyday life, opportunities for resistance are also ever-present.

Callinicos (1990) makes apt comment in this regard:

> Indeed, it is impossible to account for historical struggles and transfor-mations without an understanding of the powers which human beings have, by virtue of their shared nature and their position in social struc-tures, to change the course of events. It is in part because agents have the ability to choose between different courses of action that historical processes do not follow an inevitable path of progress.
>
> (p. 115)

This conception of power has important implications for practice in so far as the minutiae of day-to-day work can be seen, at every step, to offer opportunities for empowerment through the process of resis-tance. This is a theme that will be developed in later chapters.

PRACTICE FOCUS 2.3

Linda was a skilled and experienced worker who was highly respected by her colleagues. One of her skills was the ability to influence others, subtly but effectively. Over the years she had care-fully nurtured the ability to exercise power in her day-to-day inter-actions without entering into direct conflict with others. She was particularly adept at using these skills to resist pressures from above to work in particular ways that she did not like, and gener-ally seemed to get her own way on most things. She had clearly developed a good understanding of micro-level power relations and had become very skilled in the art of resistance.

Resistance is also a significant concept in so far as it acts as a bridge between poststructuralism, with its emphasis on discourse, and another theoretical perspective, that of postmodernism, with its emphasis on deconstruction and fragmentation.

Postmodernism and power

Postmodernism is not so much a theoretical perspective as a style of theorizing. It encompasses a wide diversity of theoretical positions and political viewpoints. Despite this diversity, my focus here will be on the common themes and concepts, as space does not permit an

analysis of the differences of emphasis and perspective across this broad intellectual movement (see Hollinger, 1994, for a more detailed exposition of postmodernist thought).

Postmodernism has its roots in art, architecture and philosophy as well as social theory. It represents a critique and rejection of 'modernity' and its aims and assumptions. Modernity refers to the post-Enlightenment era in which society is assumed to be based on rationality, progress towards humanist goals and the development of universalizing, totalizing theory. As such, it was seen as a development from traditional, or 'pre-modern' times which were characterized by unquestioning religious faith, a focus on continuity and a mistrust of innovation. For postmodernists, we are now in (or are approaching) an era of 'postmodernity' in which the assumptions of modernity are breaking down.

Postmodernist theory can be seen as a range of attempts to understand the social changes taking place and to draw out their implications. Such theory has much in common with the poststructuralist theory already discussed in this chapter but the two cannot be fully equated. For example, the work of Foucault has been very influential in both camps, yet he explicitly rejected the label of 'postmodernist'.

Postmodernism, as I have indicated, represents a broad intellectual movement, and so it is difficult to pin down precisely. However, there are a number of recurring themes that are closely associated with the term, and so I shall outline each of these and consider their implications for a postmodernist conception of power.

Fragmentation

Postmodernists criticize modernist thinking for its 'universalizing and totalizing' tendencies and, in this respect, they reflect the poststructuralist critique of grand narratives. Postmodernism rejects attempts to develop an overarching framework or all-encompassing theoretical perspective. Consequently, fragmentation is an important theme of postmodernist thought.

Such fragmentation can be seen to apply in terms of:

- *theoretical understanding*   The rejection of metanarratives in general and the dialectic in particular.
- *self or personal identity*   For postmodernists, the self is characterized by fragmentation rather than unity or coherence.
- *the affirmation of difference*   Building on Foucault's emphasis on difference, postmodernist thought attaches great significance to social and cultural differences.

In short, postmodernists criticize 'modernist' theorists for emphasizing totalities, commonalities and coherence at the expense of fragmentation and discord. As Callinicos (1990) puts it: 'One might then say that where Modernism experiences fragmentation as loss, Lyotard and the other prophets of the postmodern celebrate it' (p. 110).

The rejection of logocentrism

Logocentrism is a term that refers to:

> the claim to be able to achieve the *logos*, an *unmediated* knowledge of the world; a claim, which in Derrida's (1976) view, has informed philosophy since Socrates, and is a theme replicated in the variety of discourses which have sought to explain the world, be they philosophical, religious or scientific. 'Presence' – this unmediated knowledge – is an indicator of authenticity, of experience of reality, of – simply put – being able to speak 'the truth' about something or other . . . In scientific discourse, logocentrism inheres in the claim that scientific method makes reality accessible, without the intervention of any mediating process which might distort our perception.
>
> (Fox, 1993, p. 8)

Postmodernists are critical of attempts to discover 'absolute' truth or to establish a fixed, underlying reality. To a large extent, this parallels both the social constructionist perspective outlined in Chapter 1 and existentialist thought (Thompson, 1992a). What counts as 'truth' depends, of course, on power relations and the discourses that sustain them. Foucault referred to 'truth effects', by which he meant the ability of a discourse to 'create' a truth, to construct reality in such a way as to make it 'real' and 'true'. Logocentrism is therefore a naïve approach that neglects the significance of discourse, language and power.

The myth of progress

A central feature of modernity is the belief in progress towards humanist goals, driven by rationality and scientific advancement. By contrast, postmodernist thought regards this as a myth with no basis in reality. In place of this grand plan of human progress, postmodernism paints a picture of diversity, difference and fragmentation in which no clear path of progress can be discerned.

There are two important aspects to this. First, the notion of progress can be seen as logocentric, in so far as it implies an absolute reality unmediated by the interpretations or constructions people place on actions and events. What constitutes progress is a contested issue rather than an undisputed consensus.

Second, progress towards humanist goals implies what postmodernists would call 'closure', an ultimate goal or purpose that humanity can reach – Marx's notion of the 'end of history' would be a good example of this. This can be seen as a form of optimistic naïveté that distorts our understanding of human experience and social processes. It is for this reason that postmodernists are generally critical of the dialectic, a point to which I shall return below.

Subjectless history

The poststructuralist concept of the 'decentred subject' emerges in postmodernist thought as 'subjectless history'. History is construed in terms of 'discursive practices', the complex interactions of discourses. As Fox (1993) comments: 'In postmodern theory, subjectivity is the outcome of power, and the subject is no more than an effect of power, constituted in discourses of power/knowledge' (p. 163). That is, the subject is seen as the outcome of discursive practices, a product of history rather than a motor force of history.

This ties in with the theme of the myth of progress, in so far as history cannot be seen as the strivings of individuals towards emancipatory goals. Postmodernism therefore rejects the notion of the romantic hero.

Simulations

Contemporary society is characterized by 'hi-tech' global communication systems – the mass media, computerized information technology and so on. We have become an 'information society' in which access to, and control over, information are important sources of power. Information and representation/simulation are therefore seen as very significant issues.

This is particularly the case in the work of Baudrillard. As Hassard (1993) comments:

> Unlike in modern industrial society, where production was the cornerstone, in the postmodern society simulations structure and control social affairs. Models and codes precede reality and are reproduced unceasingly in a society where the contrast between the real and the unreal is no longer valid. As Baudrillard says, 'the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is already reproduced, the hyper-real' (1983b: 146). In this society, 'simulacra' – that is, copies or representations of objects or events – now constitute 'the real'.
>
> (p. 8)

Différance

This is a term introduced by Derrida to refer to the 'slippery' nature of reality as mediated by language and systems of meaning. As Fox (1993) comments:

> Briefly, *différance* concerns the fundamental *undecidability* which resides in language and its continual *deferral* of meaning, the slippage of meaning which occurs as soon as one tries to pin a concept down. *Différance* is unavoidable once one enters into a language or other symbolic mode of representation, in which signifiers can refer not to referents (the 'underlying reality'), but only to other signifiers. While trying to represent the real, one finds that the meaning which one is trying to communicate slips from one's grasp. We are left not with the reality, but with an approximation which, however much we try to make it 'more real', is always already deferred and irrecoverable.
>
> (pp. 7–8)

The complexities of language and discourse are therefore part and parcel of the operations of power, in so far as our relationship with the world is mediated by language (Thompson, 2003). This is a topic to which I shall return later in this chapter.

Postmodernism: an evaluation

Postmodernist theory has much to say about power and is, in many ways, a radical departure from earlier theoretical perspectives. However, the argument I shall be presenting here is that postmodernist thought is a 'mixed blessing', in so far as it offers what I see as some important insights but also suffers from some major flaws and inadequacies. I shall therefore comment first on the positive aspects of postmodernism before exploring some of the criticisms.

Strengths

A major strength of postmodernist thought is its thoroughgoing rejection of essentialism. That is, the notion of fixed essences, such as an unchanging personality or an immutable human nature, is not given any credence. As noted in Chapter 1, essentialism is a significant barrier that stands in the way of developing practice based on empowerment. The anti-essentialist stance of postmodernism allows and encourages the possibility of personal and social change.

A further strength of postmodernism is its focus on 'dedifferentiation'. This refers to the tendency to break down discipline boundaries and recognize commonalities across the social sciences, humanities,

arts and so on, to move away from traditional, somewhat arbitrary divisions.

A movement away from such potential divisiveness can be seen to be particularly important for the helping professions which have their roots in diverse theoretical traditions including sociology, psychology, social policy and philosophy. There is much to be gained from breaking down such boundaries to allow a constructive cross-fertilization of ideas and insights. Similarly, each of the professional disciplines can usefully draw on the knowledge base of other disciplines if artificial boundaries can be removed. For example, it has been argued that social work education has much to learn from nurse education and management theory (Thompson and Bates, 1996) and, increasingly, nurse education is following a path that has been a major issue for social work education for many years – namely the tackling of discrimination and oppression (Baxter, 2001a; Culley and Dyson, 2001a).

The process of dedifferentiation can therefore be seen as a valuable one for developing and consolidating the knowledge base of the helping professions and facilitating the integration of theory and practice.

Foucault's notion of 'normalization' is also an important and valuable theme in postmodernist thought:

> By 'normalization', Foucault means a system of finely gradated and measurable intervals in which individuals can be distributed around a norm – a norm which both organizes and is the result of this controlled distribution.
>
> (Rabinow, 1986, p. 20)

Such norms are maintained (or 'policed') through surveillance, the subtle workings of Foucault's panopticon. Again this is a particularly significant issue for practice, in so far as the potential for oppressive forms of surveillance and 'normalization' is ever-present. As Rojek *et al.* (1988) comment:

> Foucault and other commentators have remarked on the paradoxical nature of humanist caring. In determining the needs and rights of citizens, humanists are said to install new and extended patterns of surveillance and control which unavoidably limit the freedom of the individual.
>
> (p. 115)

◀ PRACTICE FOCUS 2.4 ▶

Jan was a health visitor on the outskirts of a large city. Although children at risk of child abuse formed only a tiny proportion of her

> caseload, she recognized that they took up a lot of her time and energy – it was something that worried her quite a lot. In particular, she was concerned that, although her role in monitoring certain children's welfare and safety was very important in protecting children, she still felt that she was playing more of a policing role than the caring one that had attracted her into nursing in the first place.

Unfortunately, the critique of normalization has been taken too far by some postmodernists who regard all social norms as inherently oppressive (for example, Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 1984). None the less, the concept of normalization remains an important one in explaining aspects of social control and warning against the dangers of oppression inherent in uncritical 'normalizing' approaches to practice.

A strength of postmodernism discussed by Fox (1993) relates to White's (1991) notion of 'grieving delight' and the Nietzschean concept of the 'eternal return' (Bogue, 1989). Both of these concepts relate to 'difference', an important concept in postmodernism, and to 'finitude', the recognition of the finite nature of human existence.

Fox (1993) explains grieving delight in the following terms:

> Grief sensitizes us to *injustice* – to the added burden of needless suffering, while the element of delight deepens the concern with *fostering difference*. Difference is no longer something to be normalized or tolerated, but to be celebrated. In turn, a caring for difference affirms our humanity, our finitude ... Grieving delight, while a consequence of the postmodern responsibility to otherness, White suggests, constitutes the conditions for an ethical–political engagement with modernity, and an attitude towards the responsibility to act.
>
> (p. 130)

Grieving delight is therefore an important concept in relation to discrimination and oppression. It can be seen as an ontological concept that incorporates personal issues of grief and loss with sociopolitical issues of injustice and inequality (Thompson, 2002a).

The concept of 'eternal return' refers to the hypothetical question of what would our reaction be if we were to live our lives over and over again in fine detail – would it be one of despair or one of exhilaration? The answer to this question will reveal a great deal about our attitude towards ourselves. As White (1990) puts it: 'The burdensomeness of the eternal return will depend on how you are disposed towards yourself – on how you view your life' (p. 67, cited in Fox, 1993, p. 131).

The 'eternal return' is significant as a means of understanding the extent to which we adopt a positive attitude of change towards ourselves, an attitude of *becoming* rather than an essentialist one of fixity. The eternal return:

> is not a desire for repetition, or for a cyclical return of the same, but the opposite: an affirmation of becoming and difference (Bogue 1989: 28–9). The eternal return needs to be read within Nietzsche's philosophy of a will-to-power, an active principle of becoming other, as opposed to reactivity and passivity.
>
> (Fox, 1993, p. 131)

The eternal return has much in common with the existentialist theme of ontological freedom as a precursor to political freedom and emancipation (Thompson, 1992a). If the individual denies or resists the ability to change and develop, then the potential for collective political change is severely limited, and with it the potential for challenging inequality, discrimination and oppression.

A key aspect of postmodernist thought is the affirmation of difference. However, we need to recognize that this is an ambiguous concept. It refers to two separate but related conceptions that are often used interchangeably:

- *Difference as flux* As the example above of the eternal return demonstrates, difference is often used to refer to movement, change, development – in short, flux. In this respect, difference is seen as being in opposition to essentialism. It is therefore similar to the existentialist concepts of contingency and choice of being.
- *Difference as social diversity* Contemporary society is characterized by a multiplicity of social divisions (Thompson, 2001a), and so social diversity is an important question to address. In this respect, difference is seen as being in opposition to normalization, the tendency to attempt to impose restrictive social norms at the expense of diversity and heterogeneity.

In both these senses, difference is an important concept that can be used to challenge oppression – in the first case, the oppressive nature and consequences of essentialism and, in the second, the range of oppressions that includes sexism, racism, ageism and disablism (see Chapter 3). As such, it can play a valuable role in countering oppression and promoting equality.

Weaknesses

Postmodernist thought has proven to be very influential in some quarters. However, despite this influence, it is marred by a number of flaws that seriously undermine its value as a social theory.

Primary among such weaknesses is its tendency towards internal contradiction. For example, the rejection of metanarratives as a serious theoretical proposition is contradicted by the fact that postmodernism itself can be seen as a metanarrative. As Paul Thompson (1993) argues:

> As has been widely noted (Boyne and Rattansi, 1990: 39–40), postmodernism is itself a metanarrative, and one that is greatly undertheorized. The issue, then, is what *kind* of narrative and generalization, avoiding teleological explanation or forms of totalization that impairs much theorizing. Arguments that it is impossible to grasp the whole of reality within a single analytical framework are well taken. But that does not invalidate social theory that seeks to generalize and make truth claim across more limited territories.
>
> (p. 197)

This passage also refers to another weakness of postmodernist thought – its tendency to overstate the case, to indulge in extremism. A clear example of this would be Baudrillard's (1983a) argument that human beings should abandon subjectivity and adopt the fatalism of being as object-like as possible.

Such fatalism is also linked with another weakness of postmodernist thought, namely its nihilism – the mood of pessimism in relation to possibilities of emancipation and social progress that postmodernism engenders. As Crook (1990) comments:

> When radical social theory loses its accountability, when it can no longer give reasons, something has gone very wrong. But this is precisely what happens to postmodern theory, and it seems appropriate to use the overstretched term 'nihilism' as a label for this degeneration. The nihilism of postmodernism shows itself in two symptoms: an inability to specify possible mechanisms of change, and an inability to state why change is better than no change.
>
> (p. 59)

While the modernist belief in absolute progress fuelled by scientific rationality is one that has rightly been challenged, this does not support the postmodernist rejection of the notion of emancipatory progress. Callinicos (1990) captures this point in the following passage:

It is in part because agents have the ability to choose between different courses of action that historical processes do not follow an inevitable path of progress. Lyotard, rightly recognizing that there are no guarantees of human emancipation of the kind the *philosophes* sought to give, wrongly concludes that we must therefore abandon the goal of emancipation itself, and the conception of human nature which it presupposes.
(p. 115)

The postmodernist rejection of the potential for emancipatory progress is therefore not justified theoretically or politically.

This can also be seen to relate to the postmodernist emphasis on playfulness. Hollinger (1994) sees playfulness as a counterbalance to the disappointments experienced as a result of the failure of the belief in inevitable progress. However, such 'playfulness' can also be seen as a self-indulgent refusal to engage in the genuine struggle for emancipation – a means of avoiding the challenges of promoting equality rather than engaging with them. In this respect, playfulness can be seen as an example of bad faith. Postmodernists who prefer playfulness to emancipatory practice are therefore very much part of the problem rather than part of the solution (Thompson, 2001a), in so far as they contribute to legitimizing the status quo and undermining the emancipatory project.

However, we should note that not all postmodernists fall into this trap of rejecting the possibility of emancipatory progress – that is, progress in promoting equality and valuing diversity. This is captured in the following passage from Pease and Fook (1999):

we side with those expressions of postmodern thinking that do not totally abandon the values of modernity and the Enlightenment project of human emancipation. Only 'strong' or 'extreme' forms of postmodern theory reject normative criticism and the usefulness of any forms of commonality underlying diversity. We believe that a 'weak' form of postmodernism informed by critical theory can contribute effectively to the construction of an emancipatory politics concerned with political action and social justice.

(p. 12)

This is a point to which we shall return later.

In addition, much postmodernist writing can be accused of 'obscurantism' – a style of language that distances and alienates many readers through its unnecessarily obscure references and constructions. This is ironic for a form of social theory that emphasizes the significance of language in relation to power. It is also significant that

such obscurantism acts as a barrier to understanding and thereby further impedes the development of a critical social theory that can play a part in challenging power structures and their inherent inequalities.

A good example of such obscurantism is to be found in a hoax perpetrated by a physicist who objected to what he regarded as the inappropriate use of mathematical and scientific language in the works of certain postmodernist writers. Alan Sokal wrote a paper comprising mathematical and scientific language but with no actual meaning (Sokal, 1996). To the great embarrassment of the editors, it was accepted for publication in the journal, *Social Text*. Sokal claimed that he did this to expose 'the empty verbiage of postmodernist discourse and . . . the spectacle of an intellectual community where everyone repeats sentences that no one understands' (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 192).

Perhaps the most significant weakness of postmodernist thought, however, is the reductionist conception of selfhood. The early work of Foucault specifically rejected human agency. As Best and Kellner (1991) put it:

> the subject must be 'stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse' (Foucault 1977[a]: p. 138). Hence, Foucault rejects the active subject and welcomes the emerging postmodern era as a positive event where the denuding of agency occurs and new forms of thought can emerge.
>
> (p. 51)

However, in his later work, Foucault was to argue that: 'We have to create ourselves as a work of art' (1982, p. 237). He developed an interest in what he called 'technologies of the self', the means by which autonomous subjects are created and maintained. Clearly, then, the later Foucault has rejected the earlier determinism. None the less, despite Foucault's own movement away from a reductionist determinism, others within the postmodernist school of thought have tended to maintain the earlier focus.

Haber (1994) argues that the denial of self implicit in postmodernism stands in the way of the development of a politics of difference. That is, there is a contradiction between the affirmation of difference and the 'death of the subject': 'So in effect, any notion of a politics of difference which accepts the postmodern/poststructuralist disjunction: *either* difference *or* similarity leaves no locus for politics: no community, no self, no viable political theory' (p. 134).

The question of identity is a complex one. We should therefore not oversimplify matters by seeing identity as either a matter of unity and sameness (the traditional, personality-based approach) or a matter of difference (the poststructuralist/postmodernist approach), but rather as a process involving both unity and difference mediated through language and social interaction (see Thompson, 2003, for a discussion of language and identity).

As the discussions in later chapters will confirm, selfhood can be seen as a crucial concept in the politics of empowerment that I shall present as a fundamental part of the promotion of equality.

Perhaps the most damning criticism of postmodernism comes from O'Neill (1995) when he comments on the destructiveness of postmodernism's tendency to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater':

> Many on earth do not eat at all. But that cannot be the question. There is no justice for them. But that cannot be the question. Nor is there any truth for them. But that cannot be the question. Who, then, owns these questions? Why are they not raised without irritation and scorn, if not impatience and ridicule?
>
> These questions go unasked because those of us who own knowledge, who enjoy literacy, health, self-respect and social status have chosen to rage against our own gifts rather than to fight for their enlargement in the general public. We have chosen to invalidate our science, to psychiatrize our arts, to vulgarize our culture, to make it unusable and undesirable by those who have yet to know it. We honour no legacy. We receive no gifts. We hand on nothing. We poison ourselves rather than live for others. We despise service and are slaves to our own self-degradation.
>
> (p. 2)

This very powerful passage illustrates well the pessimistic, nihilistic tendencies to be found in much postmodernist thought and writing.

Beyond postmodernism

The preceding pages have shown postmodernism to be a 'mixed blessing', in so far as it brings both strengths and weaknesses. However, the situation is not quite so simple. This is because many of the strengths associated with postmodernism are not unique to this particular school of thought. For example, the rejection of essentialism, grieving delight (although not referred to as such) and the politics of difference can all be found in existentialist thought (Sartre, 1958, 1976; Thompson, 1992a, 1992b). Indeed, it is no coincidence that
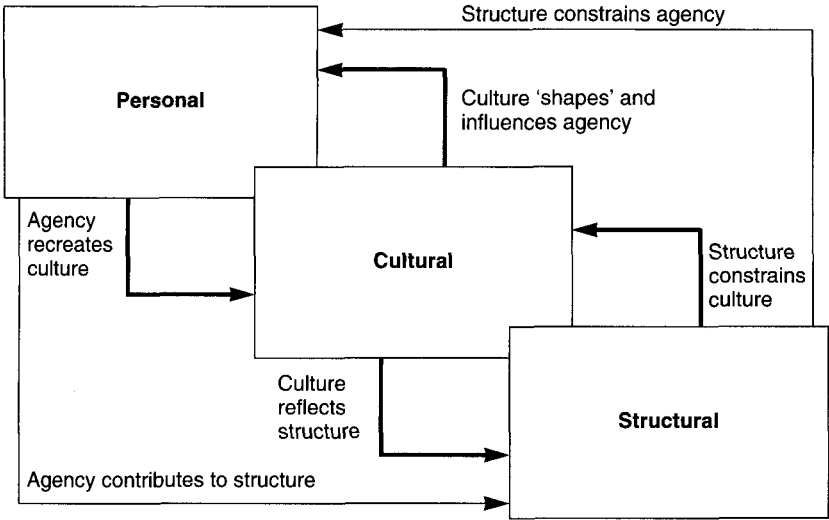
Figure 2.1   The interactions of the personal, cultural and structural levels

both modern existentialism and postmodernism have been strongly influenced by the works of Nietzsche.

Although postmodernist ideas have proven to be very influential and have raised a number of important issues, the overall value of this theoretical perspective can be seen to be quite limited and does little to displace the existentially based critical theory presented in Chapter 1.

The insights of such a dialectical approach relate to the interaction of the individual (the microstructural **P** level) with the wider sociopolitical context (the macrostructural **S** level). However, a dialectical approach need not be seen as a simple two-way process – it can be a set of interacting processes, as Figure 2.1 indicates. What poststructuralism and postmodernism can bring is a greater emphasis on the intermediary role of culture (the **C** level), particularly with regard to the role of language. Consequently, it is to the question of language that we now turn in order to explore the interrelationships between language, discourse and power.

Language, discourse and power

Spender (1990) makes the point that:

> Language helps form the limits of our reality. It is our means of ordering, classifying and manipulating the world. It is through language that we

become members of a human community; that the world becomes com-
prehensible and meaningful, that we bring into existence the world in
which we live.

(p. 3)

This underlines the significance of language as a dimension of
human existence, both as a means of making sense of the world and
for communicating and interacting with others. Spender (1990) goes
on to point out that this involves the workings of power, a point
which she illustrates with reference to gender:

Through my language and socialization I did learn to see as *sensible*
many arrangements in my society which an 'outsider' (who did not share
my socialization) would find absurd. So at one stage I did learn, for
example, that it was sensible to give the least educational experience to
those who appeared to take longer to learn. I did learn that it was sen-
sible to classify some forms of skin pigmentation as possessing mystical
powers. I did learn that it was sensible that one half of the population
should be paid for their work while the other half should not. I did learn
that it was sensible to ensure the survival of the species by amassing a
vast arsenal that could destroy the planet many times over. And I did
learn that it was sensible to see men as superior.

(p. 3)

Language, then, is not only a system of communication but also a
vehicle for power (Gergen, 1999).

◀ PRACTICE FOCUS 2.5 ▶

As part of his professional training Kevin was required to under-
take a project. For this he chose to analyse the significance of lan-
guage in terms of the interactions between staff and patients. For
several days he listened carefully and tried to identify patterns that
might be significant. He was simply amazed by the results. He had
not realized how significant language was in conveying subtleties of
meaning, power relations, hidden agendas (or subtexts) and so on,
until he undertook this practical project. This experience helped him
to learn the importance of taking language issues very seriously and
not dismissing them as trivial.

Language can be seen to be particularly significant in relation to
working with people and their problems, and the power dynamics
that operate in the interaction between helpers and those we are
seeking to help. The following can be seen to be key issues in this
regard:

- *Jargon* Although the use of specialized or technical language is necessary at times, there are also times when it is not appropriate. For example, in discussions with service users, jargon can create unnecessary barriers by reinforcing power differences between the two parties. In short, the inappropriate use of jargon can have the effect of alienating the people we are trying to help.
- *Stereotypes* Discrimination can be maintained by a reliance on stereotypical images and assumptions. For example, terms used to refer to older people tend to be unduly negative. Such negative stereotypes have the effect of reinforcing ageist ideology, and thereby bolstering the existing power relations in which older people are relatively disenfranchised (Thompson and Thompson, 2001).
- *Stigma* Some forms of language carry with them a degree of stigmatization. That is to say, certain terms or forms of speech can tarnish a particular individual, group or community. For example, in recent years, attempts have been made to move away from the use of terms such as 'mental handicap' as a result of the stigma associated with them.
- *Exclusion* Language can be 'exclusive', in the sense that some groups are overlooked or marginalized as a result of the use of certain forms of speech. A commonly cited example is that of 'chairman', a term that reinforces the notion that women do not belong in positions of power. Similarly, 'given name' is an inclusive term, whereas 'Christian name' is an exclusive one.
- *Depersonalization* Some terms have a depersonalizing or dehuman-izing effect. Terms such as 'the elderly' and 'the disabled' have been criticized for their depersonalizing and derogatory connotations (Fennell *et al.*, 1988; Brisenden, 1986), while 'older *people*' and 'dis-abled *people*' are seen as far more appropriate. Similarly, the ten-dency to refer to a child as 'it' can be seen as problematic (Thompson, 1997b).

These are just some of the ways in which language has connections with power and can therefore contribute to the maintenance of inequality, discrimination and oppression. However, what needs to be emphasized is that the question of language is a complex one, and is not resolved by a simple lexicon of taboo words that are to be avoided. As I have argued previously:

> One problem with developing a sensitivity to the discriminatory poten-tial of language is that this complex area is often over-simplified and

trivialized. Many people see it as a simple matter of identifying certain 'bad' words (such as 'chairman' or 'blackleg') and trying to avoid them, without necessarily understanding why they should be avoided.

This approach is characterized by the term 'political correctness'. But this in itself is indicative of the deeper problem. The fact that 'political correctness' has become a term of ridicule illustrates the basic point – the power of language to reinforce existing power structures. Because the development of anti-discriminatory practice has cast light on the oppressive potential of language and the need for linguistic sensitivity, a new term has been coined to decry and undermine the focus on the power of language. The term 'political correctness', then, is not the solution – indeed it is a clear example of the problem.

(Thompson, 2002c, p. 94)

The political correctness (or 'PC') issue has had the unfortunate effect of distracting attention from important issues of power and oppression. It has created a lot of confusion and discouraged open debate about the relationship between language and power, inequality, discrimination and oppression. This is a point to which we shall return in Chapter 5.

Wheen (1996) provides a clear example of the distortions introduced to discredit attempts to challenge oppressive aspects of language use:

Anti-PC campaigners complain, with wearisome frequency, about the 'appropriation' by homosexuals of 'that fine old English word "gay"'; did they ever object to the anti-homosexuals' appropriation of the equally fine old English word 'queer'?

(p. 5)

While language has clear links with power, we also need to recognize that the related concept of discourse, as discussed in Chapter 1, is closely intertwined with power relations. As Hugman (1991) confirms, discourse is more than language. Discourse refers to frameworks of thought, meaning and action that have their roots in frameworks of language. As Burr (1995) comments:

A discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event (or person or class of persons), a particular way of representing it or them in a certain light.

(p. 48)

This can be linked to power in two ways: First, as Burr goes on to say:

> If we accept the view . . . that a multitude of alternative versions of events is potentially available through language, this means that, surrounding any one object, event, person etc., there may be a variety of different discourses, each with a different story to tell about the object in question, a different way of representing it to the world.
>
> (p. 48)

This variety of perspectives or frameworks creates the potential for conflict, for powerful people to present their construction of the world in ways that protect and consolidate their positions of power, at the expense of less powerful people. That is, discourses can be used ideologically.

Second, discourses relate to power in that they shape and constrain the way we see the world. As we noted in relation to social constructionism, there is no underlying absolute reality. Language in general and specific discourses in particular play a primary role in the construction of reality. As Roberts *et al.* (1992) comment:

> Language not only reflects and transmits the values and relationships of a society; it actively creates and maintains them. So all the time we are getting things done with language; we are creating a piece of reality and sanity for ourselves. We are constructing a social reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967), in the sense that we are making relationships and establishing roles and identities in the choices of language we make and our orientation to the world consists, in part, in our language behaviour. We are also acting out the social systems and structures which help us, as a society, to order the world and make sense of it, even if, as with many power structures, we do not benefit from them.
>
> (p. 67)

Gergen (1999) gives a very good example of this. He argues that, if a person believes he or she is depressed and needs to find a cure for that depression, then he or she is reflecting a story (a narrative or form of language) created by the mental health professionals. As he puts it: 'I have swallowed the medical model in which I am the one who requires a cure for my deficiency' (p. 173). Language and discourse, then, can be seen to play an important role in constructing the individual's sense of reality ('I am ill and need medical help to be cured').

Language can also play a part in concealing power. Certain forms of language use can have the effect of 'camouflaging' power relations, thereby reducing the likelihood of such power being resisted or chal-

lenged. Montgomery (1995) gives an example of this subtle operation of power through language when he discusses the use of what he calls 'known-answer' questions:

> asking of 'known-answer' questions . . . seems generally to be associated with situations where one participant assumes power and authority over another, a relationship which will often be displayed in the follow-up turn from the questioner, where prior knowledge of the answer will be revealed. Consider, for example, the following interchange between a mother and a teenage daughter:
>
> M: what time did you get in last night?
> D: oh about half eleven
> M: no it wasn't I heard you coming in around twelve-thirty
>
> (p. 199)

A further example of the interlinking of language and power is the actual choice of language used. For example, attitudes towards the Welsh language are a case in point (Morris and Williams, 1994). The choice of language can be just as significant as the choice of words, if not more so (Lynn and Muir, 1996). As Williams (1994) comments:

> The power, influence and significance of words have been acknowledged. For example, a consensus has been reached that some words and phrases are racist or sexist, part of the structure of oppression, and efforts have been made to ban them. Some attention has been paid to the use of interpreters with monoglot clients. It has been argued that words need to be defined so that change can take place. However, the debate about choosing to use one language rather than another, in this case English rather than Welsh, has not been developed to the same degree.
>
> (p. 175)

One problem that is commonly encountered is that speakers of a minority language may be perceived as less intelligent or less able than speakers of the dominant language. Once again, this is a question of power, with minority languages being devalued (Bellin, 1994). Here the potential for speakers of a minority language being discriminated against and oppressed is very great indeed.

◄ PRACTICE FOCUS 2.6 ►

Mair was placed with foster carers on a temporary basis only a few days after her eighth birthday, as a result of her mother's admission to hospital for an emergency operation. Mair was totally fluent in English, although Welsh was her first language, and the language

she was used to using at home and at school. The foster carers spoke only English, and, in view of Mair's fluency in English, this was not seen as a problem. However, although Mair appeared to be settling in reasonably well in the circumstances, when it came to bedtime, she became extremely upset and distressed. This caused major problems, and was stressful for all concerned, including the foster carers' own two children. Eventually, after getting to know Mair a bit better, the foster carers began to realize what had caused her distress. The simple fact was that she was used to having her bedtime story in Welsh, and having to make do with a story in English had emphasized very strongly to her that she was not at home, and was not in an environment where she felt secure. From this, the foster carers, and subsequently the social worker, came to realize just how important language and linguistic identity are.

For speakers of some minority languages (Urdu or Punjabi, for example), the potential for linguistic oppression exists alongside the potential for racism. Consequently, there is a danger that the significance of language in its own right becomes submerged in the broader issues of racism (Thompson, 2001a). For speakers of other minority languages (Welsh or Gaelic, for example), there is no direct link with racism, although the danger here is that language issues will be dismissed as insignificant, their importance not recognized due to the ideological dominance of English – English is normalized (in Foucault's sense) as the 'natural' language of the UK. Bellin (1994) gives an example of how this can occur in practice – and how it can be challenged:

[A] social worker in an area where very few people spoke Welsh was visiting a house and becoming frustrated in an interview with an adolescent. She had relied on English, not realizing that the family spoke Welsh. On getting up to leave, she heard the father say to the young man *'Gwed wrthi 'nawr, cyn iddi fynd'*. (Tell her now before she goes.) She resumed her seat and began again but this time in Welsh. The results were completely different. The reason for the difference was a complete realignment from the use of Welsh. There was a change of 'footing'. She was now aligned with the father's appeal, and much better placed to discuss problems.

(pp. 116–17)

It should be abundantly clear at this stage that language and discourse are very significant with regard to the operations of power. This, in turn, raises a number of significant issues to be addressed in and through practice:

- Language both reflects and reinforces inequality. There is therefore a need to develop a sensitivity to language and the ways in which it can contribute to discrimination and oppression.
- Language can alienate. Some forms of language use bring people together, but others can produce distance and alienation. A lack of awareness of language issues can therefore create barriers to effective practice.
- Language issues are often trivialized. The notion of political correctness has come to be used as a device to distract attention from issues of power, inequality, discrimination and oppression. It is therefore necessary to challenge such trivialization and reassert the significance of language.
- The choice of language is a key issue. For those whose first language is not English, it is important that facilities for communication through their first language are available if required. Without this, there is a very real danger that intervention will be oppressive.
- Emancipatory practice has to take on board issues of language. Forms of practice that are not attuned to the subtleties of language run the risk of (a) missing significant issues and (b) reinforcing or amplifying existing inequalities.

The task of incorporating linguistic sensitivity into day-to-day practice is not always an easy matter. However, the problems arising from approaches that lack an awareness of language issues make the investment of time, effort and energy a worthwhile commitment of personal resources.

Empowerment

Thomas and Pierson (1995) describe empowerment theory as being: 'concerned with how people may gain collective control over their lives, so as to achieve their interests as a group, and a method by which . . . to enhance the power of people who lack it' (p. 134). The term 'empowerment' is therefore a very important one in relation to understanding power and inequality.

However, it is also a term that has developed into a fashionable buzzword, and is often used loosely and uncritically (Gomm, 1993). It is therefore important to be clear about how the term is being used if it is to play a part in the development of emancipatory practice. Empowerment is also a term used by some right-wing commentators to promote a notion of self-reliance as part of a process of discouraging reliance on collective or state measures. As Fawcett and Featherstone (1996) point out, referring to the work of Baistow (1995),

empowerment has the potential to regulate as well as liberate. We therefore have to be very clear about the sense in which we are using the notion of empowerment. In view of this, I shall endeavour to clarify empowerment in the context of PCS analysis in order to give it a clear and explicit theoretical basis.

Empowerment can be seen to apply at each of the three levels:

- *Personal* Individuals can be helped to gain greater control over their lives in a variety of ways – for example, through the enhancement of confidence and self-esteem.
- *Cultural* Discriminatory assumptions and stereotypes can be challenged in an attempt to break down an oppressive culture in which the values and interests of dominant groups are presented as normal and natural. Empowerment at this level is therefore concerned with 'consciousness-raising', becoming aware of ideologies premised on inequality.
- *Structural* Power relations are rooted in the structure of society, and so empowerment at this level must involve the eradication, in the long term, of structured inequalities. This involves a collective political response, a concerted programme of action for social change.

Our actions can be very significant at the personal level, particularly in certain circumstances, such as when the individual we are working with is in crisis (Thompson, 1991a). In recent years there has been an increasing recognition of the part staff can play in challenging the cultural level, for example through rejecting discriminatory language and imagery. At a structural level, the extent to which staff and managers can influence the structure of society remains an open question. Two points, however, remain clear:

1. Change at a structural level is a much wider issue than professional practice. The role and influence of social policy are only a part of the much broader backcloth of the politics of radical social change (see the discussion of radicalism in Chapter 5).
2. Although the capacity to have an impact at the structural level is necessarily limited, the greater the degree of empowerment at the P and C levels, the greater will be the potential for change at the S level (see Figure 2.2).

These two points, in turn, identify the need to establish a balance between the two extremes of, on the one hand, a naïve approach that

Low level of empowerment
=
Structures continue
unchallenged

High level of empowerment
=
The potential for structural
change is increased

Figure 2.2   The relationship between personal empowerment and structural
change

assumes professional practice can bring about radical social change in its own right and, on the other, a defeatist approach which abandons any attempt to influence the contemporary social order. Both extremes are highly problematic and bring with them a number of dangers and difficulties, and are therefore significant barriers to empowerment. A naïve approach will tend to alienate potential supporters of empowerment because they reject the uncritical reductionism on which such an approach is based (Sibeon, 1992, 1996). At the other extreme, a defeatist approach will tend to miss opportunities for making a positive contribution towards breaking down the walls of oppression. A positive contribution, however small, is far preferable to defeatism, for, as I argued in Chapter 1, if we are not committed to being part of the solution, we become part of the problem.

Empowerment is a complex process, and one that requires a great deal of further analysis and research if its full potential as a strategy for countering inequality, discrimination and oppression is to be realized. It is a theme to which I shall return at various points in the chapters that follow. As Dalrymple and Burke (1995) recognize, empowerment is a key issue in relation to power and inequality:

> An empowerment perspective which assumes that issues of power and powerlessness are integral to the experience of the service user enables us to move away from pathologizing individuals to increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations. Within the existing models of social care practice there is a focus on the individual – problems are individualized (blame the victim syndrome). Interventions often focus on assisting individuals to cope with or accept a difficult situation rather than changing the situation on a structural level.
>
> (p. 52)

A further aspect of empowerment worthy of comment is its relationship to the capacity for social change. Central to the notion of empowerment, as used in the context of emancipatory theory and

practice, is the potential for social amelioration, a belief in the possibility and value of people working towards a more just and equal society. Fiske (1996) captures this in the following comment, where he identifies a core element of empowerment:

> The people are neither cultural dupes nor silenced victims, but are vital, resilient, varied, contradictory, and, as a constant source of contestation of dominance, are a vital social resource, the only one that can fuel social change.
>
> (p. 220)

Empowerment, then, involves seeking to use this potential, this fundamental resource, as the basis of emancipation from oppressive practices, assumptions and structures.

◀ PRACTICE FOCUS 2.7 ▶

Rashid was a relatively inexperienced youth worker. He felt reasonably confident in what he was doing but was well aware that he still had a lot to learn and that he was making too many mistakes. One night, after finishing a groupwork session with a group of boys, he started to take a greater pride in his work. After working with the group for a little while, he was now able to see the changes emerging, to see how the boys were developing and were taking a lot more responsibility for themselves – he was witnessing empowerment in action, and this in turn made him feel more empowered, more positive about making a difference to young people's lives.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored a range of important issues that relate to the distribution of power and its impact on professional practice. In some ways, this is a counterbalance to traditional approaches which have tended to neglect or minimize the significance of power (Hugman, 1991).

By exploring the nature of power and competing theoretical explanations of power issues, I have sought to emphasize both the complexity and the significance of power as a factor in working with people and their problems. In one chapter it has not been possible to address all aspects of power – it is such a major topic that even a whole book would not do full justice to the subject.

The question of power will arise at various points in the ensuing chapters, as it will be a recurring theme in our attempts to understand, and respond to, inequality, discrimination and oppression. In addi-

tion, Chapter 6 addresses the organizational context of professional practice, and here again power can be seen as a crucial issue in terms of understanding organizational structures, cultures and dynamics. The close of this chapter, then, is by no means the end of our considerations of the question of power. It is far too important, wide-ranging and fundamental a subject to be restricted to one specific chapter.

'People work' necessarily involves a range of interactions, and it is through such interactions that power so often manifests itself. As Sibeon (1992) comments:

> Power is *emergent*, in the sense of being an *outcome* of social interactions: power, to paraphrase Law's (1986, p. 5) definition, is an *effect* not a *cause* of strategic success achieved by actors during their interactions with other actors in particular situations or in a series of situations. Actors may become more powerful, or less powerful: this is because their capacity to shape events or to obtain their objectives is not a structurally bestowed, predetermined or 'fixed' capacity. Actors contingently grow or reduce in size: they have no structurally predetermined 'size' (Callon and Latour, 1981, p. 280).
>
> (p. 35)

'Actors may become more powerful, or less powerful' is a key issue here, as this is where empowerment comes to the fore. The actions of staff and managers can help people become more powerful (empowerment/emancipation) or can reinforce their sense of powerlessness (disempowerment/oppression). It is for this reason that an understanding of power issues is necessary in order to increase the likelihood of a positive, empowering outcome.

Having explored power at a generalized level, it is now time to consider more specific examples of the use of power as it relates to issues of discrimination and oppression. This is the subject matter of Chapter 3 in which the focus of attention is on processes of discrimination, forms of oppression, and the interrelationships between the two.