

EXPLORING THE SPACES BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE:  
A FRAMEWORK TO INTEGRATE A STRUCTURAL APPROACH AND  
SOCIAL WORK ACTIVITIES

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation explores and examines the use of structural social work theory in practice, in order to better understand the processes involved in effectively integrating theory into practice. Structural social work theory was developed in Canada and has been in use for about 30 years. It is related to other progressive approaches such as radical, feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppressive and critical social work. The first chapter outlines the history of progressive social work and situates structural social work theory in this context. The literature review identifies issues and concerns with theory-practice integration specific to structural social work and other progressive social work theories, as well as theory-practice integration in general in the social work field. While the social work literature notes the problems with theory-practice integration, there are few studies examining the factors in the successful use of theory in practice. In addition, the literature tends to focus on individual factors in theory-practice integration, and there is limited research examining interactions between these factors.

In-depth interviews were conducted with social work practitioners who utilized a structural social work approach in their practice. Follow-up interviews, a questionnaire and the analysis of documents mentioned by participants provided additional data. The findings demonstrate that participants' use of structural social work theory in practice progressed through a series of six developmental stages. The stages began with the use of conventional social work activities, and moved to seeing the effects of structural oppression, forging alliances, encompassing structural goals into conventional social work activities, engaging in specifically structural activities, and culminated in adapting structural social work theory for use in practice. Participants' use of the structural approach and the development through the

stages were influenced by external contexts. The interactions between participants and the contexts, or structures, they encountered reflect the agency-structure dialectic found in structural social work theory.

## **PREFACE**

An adaptation of chapter two has been published in the following textbook: Peters, Heather I. (2010). Chapter Three: Situating Practitioners' Experiences in a Model of Theory-Practice Integration. In *Structural Social Work in Action: Examples from Practice*, S. F. Hick, H. I. Peters, T. Corner, & T. London, (Eds.). Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc. The published chapter is based on the ideas, information and format that came out of the literature review for this dissertation, but is not identical to the chapter in this dissertation. I am the sole author of this published chapter.

This research study was approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) and has met all of the criteria for research with human subjects. The BREB Certificate of Approval for this study is #H09-01862.

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## DEDICATION

*To all structural social workers, especially my participants.*

*And to my supportive family: Bruce, Mom, Dad, Crystal and Dave.*

## **CHAPTER ONE. SITUATING STRUCTURAL SOCIAL WORK THEORY**

There are two reasons for exploring the role of structural social work theory in practice. First of all, the theory was developed in Canada and has been a prominent theory in use at several Canadian schools of social work over the last three decades (Mullaly, 1997, 2007). Second, structural social work theory is the oldest social work theory which theorizes about the intersections of oppressions. Anti-oppressive practice began in the late 1960s and early 1970s but the theory was not prominent in academic social work circles until the late 1980s (Dominelli, 2002a). Although critical social theory predates structural social work, the move to articulate a critical social work theoretical framework has been a newer endeavour (Fook, 2002). In contrast, structural social work theory developed in the 1970s with a focus on the inclusion of various oppressions from its inception (Carniol, 1992; Moreau, 1979; Moreau & Leonard, 1989). This chapter will explore structural social work's antecedents and related theoretical contexts in order to explicate how the theory is situated in the social work discipline.

### **The Early Days of Social Work**

An individual-blaming approach to social work evolved out of the English Poor Laws of the 1500s, whereby poverty was addressed with punishment for the purpose of ensuring that people had the proper motivation to seek employment (Carniol, 2005). In the late 1800s, the Charitable Organization Society (C.O.S.) developed in Britain and quickly spread to North America (Carniol, 2005; Reynolds, 1963). However, the focus of these charitable and religious organizations, although more friendly than the original focus on punishment, continued to address poverty by fixing the individual and by distinguishing between

deserving and undeserving poor (Carniol, 2005; Finkel, 2006; Hick, 2002; Lundy, 2004).

The late 19th century also heralded the development of settlement houses in both Canada and the United States, with a shift in perspective that understood poverty as embedded in societal structures (Finkel, 2006; Hick, 2002; Lundy, 2004; Reynolds, 1963). Since this time, social work has been divided between two streams, the first of which focuses on assisting individuals in meeting their needs and coping with their environments (Lundy, 2004). The second seeks political and social reform to address the root causes of poverty and other issues (Lundy, 2004). The second stream is often referred to as a social justice or progressive social work perspective. It is important to note that the separation between the two streams of social work has never been completely clear-cut. For example, the settlement houses, in addition to addressing social structures, also sought to “reform the poor” (Finkel, 2006, p. 86). Other movements also encompassed social justice thinking to various extents, including the urban reform and social gospel movements (Guest, 2006). It is the focus on social structures that is connected to the current-day development of structural social work theory and various other social justice or progressive perspectives in social work.

## **Radical Social Work**

In spite of the social justice focus in some social work arenas in the early 20th century, the most significant swing to this perspective has occurred over the last 30 or more years with much of the writing beginning in the 1970s (C. Campbell, 2003d). The initial developments of radical social work were based in Marx’s critique of capitalism (R. Bailey & Brake, 1975b; Galper, 1975, 1980). Parallel developments occurred in social policy and social welfare discussions (Fox Piven & Cloward, 1971; Galper, 1976; V. George & Wilding, 1985). According to Galper (1980) Marx’s critique, in summation, states that

capitalism requires expansion and increasing profits, which are alienated from, and in contradiction to, social, environmental, and health needs of society. Society becomes divided into those who own the means of production, and therefore the profits, and those who sell their labour, although this dichotomy is a simplistic description of a more complex analysis. One of the results of capitalism is pressure to reduce labour costs by increasing efficiency and decreasing wages. Unemployment becomes a benefit to capitalism as the surplus labour assists in maintaining pressure on workers to keep wages low. The competition between labourers for work becomes a struggle for survival creating inequality among people with exploitation being higher among specific groups based on race, gender, age and sexuality, among others; this cycle perpetuates oppression and discrimination (Galper, 1980). Unemployment and discrimination are two of the various social problems that arise out of capitalist economic structures according to Galper.

The welfare state has developed in response to the capitalist economy and in the context of a liberal or conservative ideology (Galper, 1975). Although Galper (1975) differentiates between liberalism and conservatism, he states that they both have an overlapping interest in the perpetuation of capitalism and result in a welfare state, which ameliorates a minimum of social problems, so as not to interfere with capitalism's need for labour. The welfare state is more about supporting and subsidizing the economy than it is about addressing social problems, while functioning to conceal this relationship (R. Bailey & Brake, 1975a, 1975b; Galper, 1975). The provision of social services by social workers is compromised by this hidden mandate and so provides a minimum of support to people in need, focusing instead on moving people back into the work force (R. Bailey & Brake, 1975a, 1975b; Galper, 1975). Social workers become agents for social control to ensure that



clients fit into the roles assigned to them (Galper, 1975). Limited resources are managed carefully by creating stigma around accessing services and by strict eligibility requirements. The competition for resources “lead[s] to [an] exacerbation of tensions and divisions among sectors of the population” including between marginalized groups (Galper, 1975, p. 63).

According to Marx, capitalism is unsustainable and the resulting ongoing tensions, or internal contradictions, provide opportunities for social and economic transformation through class struggles (Galper, 1980; Leonard, 1975). It is at these points of tension where radical social workers can act to make connections between personal problems and social structures and facilitate the collectivization of people with common issues, which should eventually lead to social change (Galper, 1980; Leonard, 1975). Radical social work does not suggest specific roads to social change, pointing instead to processes of empowerment, collectivization and consciousness-raising to open up paths for social transformation (Galper, 1980).

## **Feminist Social Work**

Feminism’s second wave peaked in the late 1960s and 1970s, around the same time as the movement toward radical social work theories, focusing on an examination of women’s issues in the context of patriarchy (Featherstone, 2005; D. E. Smith, 1999). Feminism seeks to understand the inequalities faced by women in the context of societal structures and thus seeks social change to address sexism (Featherstone, 2005; Fook, 1993). Although feminism is diverse and fragmented there are some common elements among feminist perspectives:

Integrating the personal and political dimensions of life (Millet, 1969); respecting the diversity encompassed by women (hooks, 2000); seeking more egalitarian forms of

social relationships (Collins, 1991); and transforming the existing social order (Adamson et al., 1988). (Dominelli, 2002c, p. 3)

The diversity of feminist perspectives is expressed in the various categories described in the literature: liberal, radical, Marxist, socialist, Black (or womanist), lesbian and postmodern feminisms (Dominelli, 2002c; Henley, Meng, O'Brien, McCarthy, & Sockloskie, 1998; Williams, 1989).

In the 1970s and 1980s feminist and Marxist theories collided (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1983). One of the contested premises of traditional radical social work and Marxism is that all issues of oppression flow out of capitalism. In discussing feminist, anti-racist & ecological movements, Galper states: "It is useful to recognize that the problems which give rise to these movements are rooted in capitalism itself" (Galper, 1980, p. 50). The lip service to issues of sexism with a return to the focus on capitalism as the key issue has spurred feminists on to interrogate Marxism and seek to balance the two analyses (Marxism and feminism) while recognizing their interconnectedness. The discussion of how to integrate Marxism and feminism has a long history, leading to an uneasy truce that is fraught with tension (see, for example, Armstrong & Armstrong, 1983; Camfield, 2002; Sargent, 1981). The same argument that feminists levelled at Marxism, has also been returned to them by Black feminists who stated that feminist theorizing has focused exclusively on the experiences of white middle-class women and has subordinated experiences of racism to those of sexism (Dominelli, 2002c; hooks, 1984; Kline, 1991; Ng, 1991; Thornhill, 1991). Black feminist and womanist perspectives start with race in the examination of their oppression as women, and include an analysis of patriarchy as it is enacted in Black culture (Dominelli, 2002c).

Feminist social work theory developed out of the feminist movement and theorizing of the 1960s, coming to fruition later, in the late 1970s and 1980s (Dominelli, 2002c; Dominelli & McLeod, 1989; Featherstone, 2005; Langan, 1992; Langan & Day, 1992; Marchant & Wearing, 1986; Wearing, 1986). Early social work feminists were frustrated by the gender-neutral theories that obscured the gendered nature of social work, and they sought instead to make feminism a central component of social work practice (Dominelli, 2002c; Marchant, 1986; Wearing, 1986). As well, it was argued that radical social work's dismissal of casework as social control could be addressed with the use of consciousness-raising in feminist practice (Featherstone, 2005). Feminist social work seeks to place women at the centre of analysis and practice. One of the key concepts of feminist practice is to link the personal to the political in the process of redefining social problems, for both professionals and clients (Dominelli, 2002c). While feminism has become prominent in the social work profession, Dominelli (2002a) suggests that it continues to face challenges from more conservative quarters in professional, educational and research arenas.

## **Anti-Racist Social Work**

Anti-racism perspectives offered up critiques of Marxism that concurred with feminist critiques of Marxism and socialism: that is a questioning of the subordination of all other oppressions to capitalist analyses (Yee, 2005) just as Black women critiqued feminism for its exclusion of race (Dominelli, 2002c). Anti-racist theorizing includes analyses of immigration policies, theorizing about race and racism as well as early work examining Marxism and racism (for example: Bolaria & Lee, 1988; R. Brown & Brown, 1996; Cox, 1948; U. George, 2003; Henry & Tator, 2006; Matas, 1996). There was renewed work in anti-racist theorizing in the 1960s and 1970s in North America (Henry & Tator, 2006) due in

part to the various social movements in the US including large scale and effective civil rights activism during those years (Yee, 2005). Anti-racist theorizing in a social work context became more common in the 1980s (Dominelli, 2002a).

Anti-racist theory sees racism as central to social justice discussions, and states that race and racism are socially constructed (Dominelli, 1997; Muszynski, 1991), as are gender and class (Ng, 1991). According to Ng (1991) this is not in contradiction to seeing race, class and gender as social relations:

Gender, race/ethnicity, and class are not fixed entities. They are socially constructed in and through productive and reproductive relations in which we all participate. Thus what constitutes sexism, racism, as well as class oppression, changes over time as productive relations change. (p. 21)

Dominelli adds: “Racism is a socially constructed and reproduced historically specific phenomenon whose form changes in response to transformation occurring within society’s socio-economic base” and racism changes, in part, depending on the country’s need for imported labour (1997, p. 13).

Also key to structural analyses of racism are the concepts of colonialism and imperialism (Loomba, 1998; Ng, 1991; Thornhill, 1991). Loomba (1998) states that colonization is when a group of people take over control of the land, property and governing structures of another group, although the appearance of colonialism differs across time and place (Peters & Self, 2005). In anti-racism contexts, the understanding of structural analyses of race and racism will be different for various populations, including Aboriginal peoples (Henry & Tator, 2006).

A common understanding of racism is that it (and all oppression) happens on various levels: individual, cultural and institutional or structural (Henry & Tator, 2006; Mullaly, 2002). Anti-racist social work theory indicates the importance of addressing all three levels

of racism in practice (Dominelli, 1997; Mullaly, 2002). Addressing racism in practice also means acknowledging the role of racism in social work history, and changing individual practice means changing the profession as a whole, including social work education (Dominelli, 1997; Nyland, 2006; O'Neill & Yelaja, 1991; Tator, 1996).

## **Linking Oppressions**

Commonalities between anti-racist, feminist and radical social work include a focus on understanding the connections between personal lives and political or structural conditions. Yet, each of the separate threads of radical, feminist and anti-racist social work has been critiqued for isolationist perspectives that do not recognize the complex interactions. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, social work practice and policy theorizing moved toward an understanding of intersections of oppression and at the same time expanded to include other forms of oppression such as those based on age (young or elderly), sexual orientation and physical and mental ability (Dalrymple & Burke, 1995; Dominelli, 2002a, 2002b; Langan & Lee, 1989a, 1989b; O'Neill, 1999, 2003; Stainton & Swift, 1996).

Various terms have been employed to incorporate these intersections into social work discussions, such as: anti-oppressive practice, social justice, empowerment, and structural social work, among others. Social justice refers to an equitable distribution of resources in society, includes a commitment to human rights, and is a key social work value (Barker, 2003; Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 2002, 2007). Empowerment is about understanding inequalities in power and seeking to assist people who do not have access to dominant power structures in attaining power and control over their own lives, thereby creating social change themselves (Dalrymple & Burke, 1995; Hick, 2002; Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 2007).

Empowerment is a strategy by which to work toward social change within a progressive framework.

While the term radical social work has been expanded to include feminist, anti-racist and other anti-oppressive theorizing (Fook, 1993; Langan & Lee, 1989a, 1989b), its use has decreased and instead the term anti-oppressive practice has become more common (C. Campbell, 2003d). Anti-oppressive practice incorporates social justice and empowerment values and goals into its framework as well as an understanding of oppression and issues of power (Dominelli, 2002c). In addition, it seeks to integrate individual and structural social work practices in a complementary fashion in its goal of social change (C. Campbell, 2003d; Dominelli, 2002b). Dalrymple and Burke state that, in addition to these points, an anti-oppressive framework acknowledges the need for: personal as well as structural knowledge; knowledge of oneself as well as of groups different from self; information on how to address issues of oppression in both individual and systemic contexts; research; and action for social change (1995, p. 18).

At variance with the 1990s theorizing of the intersections of oppressions in social work is the much earlier (1970s) development of structural social work theory in Canada (Moreau, 1979; Moreau & Leonard, 1989). In addition to its earlier development, structural theory includes a more overt discussion of ideology and its connections to social relations as produced and reproduced by societal structures than do most descriptions of anti-oppressive theory (Moreau, 1979; Mullaly, 2007). Structural social work also has similarities with other anti-oppressive and social justice theories. A structural perspective also seeks to incorporate a broad understanding of the intersections of oppression into its framework (Carniol, 1992; Moreau, 1979; Moreau & Leonard, 1989; Mullaly, 2007). Like anti-oppressive practice,

structural social work seeks to address inequality at individual, cultural and structural levels (Mullaly, 2002, 2007) and it is informed by a variety of theoretical approaches such as Marxism, feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppressive, critical and postmodern perspectives (Hick & Murray, 2009; Murray & Hick, 2010). As structural social work theory is the focus of this research, it will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.

There has been some recent debate on choosing a term or framework around which to unify social work (C. Campbell, 2003a, 2003c; Tester, 2003a, 2003b). While it is useful to have common language in order to communicate, agreement on an umbrella term is unlikely, and the search for such a term may actually be divisive rather than unifying. None of the concepts just described adequately sum up a progressive approach to social change. *Social justice* describes what social work is working toward; *anti-oppressive* depicts what the profession is battling against; *structural* locates the struggle against oppression and for social justice in the heart of societal structures; and *empowerment* expresses the centrality of individual and group agency or power in the struggle for social change. Each term is necessary, but none is sufficient in describing progressive social work. Yet understanding the nuances inherent in each concept is important in understanding social justice, and in social workers communicating with and understanding each other. In this writing the various terms are used interchangeably at times to distinguish a progressive theoretical and practice framework from one that focuses on assisting individuals and families to change. However, the interchangeable use of the terms in no way suggests that they are synonymous; instead the intention is to acknowledge the differences while situating the perspectives as being *on the same team* and working toward similar goals. Other writers have adopted this perspective (Baines, 2007c, 2007d).

## **Concerns with Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Discriminatory Discussions**

There are two potential problems in theorizing about the intersections of oppressions: one is the difficulty in maintaining a deep level of understanding regarding each particular oppression, and the second is that individual oppressions can become lost in the integration. Baines (2003) identifies concerns around the lack of depth in understanding oppression with her research participants and their simplistic understandings of class and gender. The participants discussed issues of class as though it was a monolithic entity centering on the issue of poverty, suggesting that the way to address poverty (and thus issues of class) was for those in poverty to obtain middle-class employment (Baines, 2000, 2003). This is a far cry from the economic analyses upon which radical social work was founded. Baines suggests that working in a large, fast-paced bureaucracy with increased standardization of tasks contributes to social workers being less able to understand the complexities of class and gender (2003). However, there is also the suggestion that a surface-level focus on anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory social work frameworks have sterilized theoretical analyses to the point of eliminating an understanding of the structures that are the foundations of oppression. While “the rhetoric of anti-oppressive practice presents a politically correct code word” it may hide the reality that “these approaches have become co-opted into mainstream practices that reinforce the current status quo of focusing on the ‘other’ as opposed to truly challenging the power of the dominant and/or majority group” (Yee, 2005, p. 91).

Featherstone (2005) articulates the second concern, that individual oppressions can become lost in the integration process, when she describes how in the late 1990s feminist theory in social work was becoming less visible:



To conclude, by the year 2000, it was hard to find any explicit adherents to feminist social work although some issues such as child sexual abuse and domestic violence that had been promoted by feminists had been placed on a wider agenda, if often in ways that did not acknowledge their gendered dimensions. (Featherstone, 2005, p. 210)

She suggests that feminist thought “had become incorporated into and to some extent subsumed within a broader anti-discriminatory project” (Featherstone p. 208).

Structural analyses are also often lost in anti-racist theorizing: “the bulk of the theories embodied in the field of race relations focuses on descriptions of black communities and their inherent pathologies” (Dominelli, 1997, p. 14). Nelson and McPherson (2003) describe how the incorporation of race into social work practice has taken various forms. These rely on cultural awareness and sensitivity, which do not result in progressive practice if the structural analysis is missing (Nelson & McPherson, 2003). In addition, although identity is important in understanding oppression, using identity to exclude people (a process of *othering*) distracts social workers from the real issues of racism inherent in structural conditions (Dominelli, 2002b; Yee, 2005).

The lack of depth and the disappearance of individual oppressions as problems with theorizing about the intersection of oppressions do occur; however, not theorizing about the intersections is equally problematic. When individual oppressions are analyzed independently of each other, the ways in which the interactions between them exacerbate the oppression, become invisible. “The separation of class from race and gender resulted in understandings of both class and gender and, ... to a lesser extent, of race that were stripped of political and analytical content” (Baines, 2003, p. 61).

Yet there are examples of theorizing about the intersection of oppressions that is complex, where depth does exist, and where individual oppressions do not disappear (see for example: Dei, 2005; hooks, 1984; Kline, 1991; McMullin, 2004; Ng, 1991, 2005; Nyland,

2006; Stasiulus, 2005; Vorst, 1991; Zawilski & Levine-Rasky, 2005). Therefore, it is possible. It is as if it is necessary to alternate between zooming in and zooming out on the picture of oppressions. The zoomed out perspective presents a more accurate big picture of the intersections, but does not permit a detailed view of any particular piece. Close-up views of sexism, racism, capitalism, heterosexism, ageism and ableism in turn provide the detail and depth not seen in the big picture. Moving back and forth between these perspectives is what allows for a more accurate understanding of the complex interactions that take place, without losing the context of structural conditions.

## **Postmodernism and Poststructuralism**

Discussions of postmodernism and poststructuralism in the context of social theory and social work theory have added another dimension to ways that social workers view the world, social problems and professional practice. There are both differences and overlaps between the two terms (Huyssen, 1990). One distinction made by Huyssen is “that poststructuralism is primarily a discourse of and about modernism” and structures (1990, p. 259), and as such it is more closely aligned with modernism than postmodernism, although he continues the discussion by acknowledging that this distinction is itself simplistic (Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000). Yet writers such as Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, described at times as poststructuralist, are then also described as postmodernist or their ideas are incorporated into discussions of postmodernism (Agger, 2006; Harvey, 1989).

One of the dynamics brought to the discussion by poststructuralism is a focus on discourse, with Foucault’s work being central in this context (L. Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). “Discourse analytical approaches take as their starting point the claim ... that our access to reality is always through language. With language, we create representations of reality that

are never mere reflections of a pre-existing reality but contribute to constructing reality” (L. Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 8-9). While language is central to discourse, discourse is more than just language (Chambon, 1999; Mullaly, 2007). “More than ways of naming, discourses are systems of thought and systematic ways of carving out reality” (Chambon, 1999, p. 57). Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) propose a broad definition for discourse: “there is no clear consensus as to what discourses are.... Let us ... propos[e] the preliminary definition of discourse as *a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)*” (p. 1) in order “to create a unified system of meaning” (p. 27).

Discussions of Foucault’s work on discourse suggest that knowledge is created and maintained through discourse (Mullaly, 2007; L. Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). Although there is often a dominant discourse, there are always multiple discourses underway simultaneously and these can either complement or compete with one another. The dominant discourse typically perpetuates the status quo, although Foucault argued that discourse is not just negative but also holds the potential for resisting and opposing the status quo (Mullaly, 2007; L. Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). Gavey (1997) argues that individuals are able to choose how to position themselves in the context of discourse and that they can challenge the dominant discourse. Discussions of discourse are relevant to social work practice where social workers rely on language throughout all areas of their work from writing reports and case notes to articulating policies and research problems, suggesting there is scope for workers to either reproduce or resist dominant discourses through their use of language (Mullaly, 2007; Rossiter, 1996).

Agger suggests that postmodernism is in some ways more encompassing than poststructuralism and a focus on discourse:

It is useful to disentangle the web ... composing what people usually call postmodernism into three themes or varieties: postmodern architecture, art, and design, ... ; postmodern literary and cultural theory, sometimes represented by the activity called deconstruction ... ; and postmodern social theory which relies on the other two varieties of postmodernism for historical antecedents and intellectual influences but is primarily concerned with analyzing society using tools afforded by the postmodern critique of society and existing social theory. (Agger, 2006, p. 35)

It is the focus on postmodernism as a social theory as described by Agger that is of interest here. The terms poststructuralism and postmodernism are often used interchangeably to refer to a position which challenges modernism's claim to universal and essentialist truths in the context of social theory (Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000). The term postmodern is used in this chapter and in the context of structural social work. It is intended to be inclusive of poststructuralism, although it is acknowledged that the descriptions given here of postmodernism, poststructuralism and the potential connections between them is not uncontested. As with the earlier discussion of various terms for progressive social work, it is not intended to imply that the terms are synonymous, but rather that they incorporate complementary perspectives which question modernity's universal truths and grand narratives and acknowledge diversity, polyvocality and multiple ways of perceiving the world (Agger, 2006; Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000; David Harvey, 1989; Mullaly, 2007).

Although postmodernism's valuing of diversity and difference corresponds with social work's move to better understand the intersection of oppressions, postmodernism has also been criticised for valuing diversity to the point of erasing modernist's grand narratives of structural oppression (Agger, 2006; Brotman & Pollack, 1997; Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000; Mullaly, 2007). Brotman and Pollack state that the focus on diverse perspectives and voices negate such narratives as feminism's critique of patriarchy. This could also be said of the potential to negate the narratives of radical social work regarding capitalism as well as anti-racist critiques of colonialism and imperialism. Brotman and Pollack argue that one

potential outcome is that societal injustice cannot exist in a context where every voice speaks the truth and there is no overarching way of perceiving social problems; thus it perpetuates the status quo rather than supporting a goal of social change.

Critiques of both modernism and postmodernism suggest that truth is not just a result of discourse (as with postmodernism), nor is truth an overarching essentialist grand narrative that explains all social relations (as with modernism) (Smith, 1999). The concerns with postmodernism are not ignored by others, who argue instead that there are diverse understandings of postmodernism (Agger, 2006; Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000; Mullaly, 2007). Mullaly (2007) states that there are a variety of “versions of postmodernism ranging from a nihilistic and individualistic form on one end of the continuum to a critical postmodernism on the other end” (2007, xvi). Agger (2006) states that universal truths espoused by modernism have not solved society’s problems: crime continues; homelessness has increased; the economy swings wildly; inequality, racism and the gap between the rich and the poor have all worsened. Capitalism has not been the panacea purported by modernity, nor has Marx’s vision of socialism come to pass. Instead it is suggested that postmodernism is one stage of modernism, and that postmodernism’s inclusion of diversity, polyvocality and multiple truths contains within it the seeds for change, much as Marx suggested that capitalism contains within it the seeds of socialism (Agger, 2006; David Harvey, 1989). Rossiter (1996) adds that postmodernism’s articulation of social construction through discourse offers social work an understanding of people as both producers of culture as well as being affected by it (p. 31). In this sense these writers are aligning postmodernism with critical theory.

Some feminist postmodernists and feminist postmodern social workers have also made this connection and suggested ways in which postmodernism advances feminist and social work goals and activities (Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000; Rossiter, 2000). Rossiter states that postmodernism has challenged social work's modernist knowledge base as well as creating "a crisis of identity" (2000, p. 24), both of which open up opportunities for positive changes in social work. She states that postmodernism advances social work's analyses of power beyond "good/bad binaries" which itself opens "up new space for understanding and celebrating difference" (2000, p. 35). Yet she also incorporates critical analyses: "the necessity for a post-Marxist political project requires uniting postmodern feminism with political goals" (Rossiter, 2000, p. 35).

## **Critical Social Theory**

The previous connections of postmodernism to critical social theory lead the chapter to this next discussion. Critical social theory is an important component of discussions of social justice or progressive social work theories for two reasons. First of all, theorizing about social justice and injustice is inevitably linked to the history of critical social theory, and in many cases flows out of critical social theory, at least in part. Second, social work is demonstrating a renewed interest in critical theory and many social justice theorists are moving toward a discussion of critical social work theory as a framework for social work practice which acknowledges the theoretical context of structural analysis while incorporating broad anti-discriminatory analyses (Fook, 2002; Hick, Fook, & Pozzuto, 2005; Hick & Pozzuto, 2005; Ife, 1997; Pease & Fook, 1999).

Delaney states: "The roots of critical theory are directly in the creation of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and a number of social thinkers who promoted the idealism

of Karl Marx” (Delaney, 2005, p. 231). Although the Frankfurt school was created for the purpose of exploring and developing Marxist theory, from the beginning “the critical theorists drew upon a variety of intellectual currents” (p. 23) such as Kant, Hegel, German idealism, Nietzsche, and others including, later on, Freudian psychoanalysis as a potential explanation for the connections between the individual and society (Held, 1980). From the inception of the school to a current description of critical theory, a common thread of the approach is its value of interdisciplinarity (Agger, 2006; Held, 1980).

Critical theory has never been static. “Critical theory, it should be emphasized, does *not* form a unity; it does not mean the same thing to all its adherents” (Held, 1980, p. 14). Held states that there are two branches of critical theory, one which flows out of the social research institute founded in Frankfurt and the second from the work of Habermas. A third branch in critical social theory has come out of the cultural studies approach that is connected to the Birmingham School at the University of Birmingham (Agger, 2006). The underpinning of critical theory is Marx’s description of political economy and critique of capitalism combined with an understanding that social relations are dialectical (Held, 1980), although contemporary Frankfurt School theorists add a more multidimensional approach (Delaney, 2005).

Agger (2006) describes critical theory as a cluster of theories with seven defining features. The first feature, and most central component of critical social theory, is an opposition to positivism. Positivism is based on Comte’s desire to create a social science that is patterned after natural sciences’ empirical search for laws that describe how the world does, and will always, work. Agger suggests that in the social sciences this search for laws that exist outside of historical conditions would result in freezing “the present into

ontological ice, portraying such historical patterns as capitalism, racism, sexism, and the domination of nature as inevitable and necessary” (2006, p. 6).

Yet the rejection of positivism is not a rejection of rational thought, empirical research or even objectivity. According to Agger, “Marx was a social analyst who addressed the world objectively *and* critically” (2006, p. 6). Held writes about the Frankfurt School critical theorists: “It is also an error to imply that they pursued these issues without regard for empirical research. They have contributed extensively to empirical inquiry” (1980, p. 25). However, empirical inquiry is seen as only one of many methods of research that should all be employed in understanding social conditions. The various forms of research employed all need to be grounded in a theoretical framework: “But empirical work, Horkheimer emphasized, is not a substitute for theoretical analysis. For concepts like society, culture and class, indispensable to all inquiry[, ] cannot be simply transcribed into empirical terms. They require theoretical elucidation and appraisal” (Held, 1980, p. 34). Empirical research is useful, but is not the end to which all knowledge must be subjected. A researcher can engage in empirical research while understanding that the results are subject to historical, economic and social contexts.

Agger’s (2006) remaining features of critical social theories flow out of the first. The second feature is that oppression exists in society both in the past and present, but that social change is possible and desired in order to create a future where oppression does not exist. There is a connection here to the rejection of positivism. Purported neutrality is seen to evade the reality that social relations are mediated through science and technology (Delaney, 2005) and thus research ‘neutrality’ that does not acknowledge its assumptions serves to



perpetuate the status quo. Critical theory seeks to identify oppression, challenge the status quo, and facilitate societal change.

The third feature of critical theory is that oppression is structural. “That is, people’s everyday lives are affected by larger social institutions such as politics, economics, culture, discourse, gender, and race” (Agger, 2006, p. 4). This point incorporates Marx’s theory of political economy as well as addressing one of the criticisms of traditional Marxism, which is the lack of inclusion of other forms of oppression. The fourth feature of critical theory holds that oppression and domination continue, in part, because the structures which perpetuate these also create a false consciousness in the people who are oppressed by use of “ideology (Marx), reification (Georg Lukacs), hegemony (Antonio Gramsci), one-dimensional thinking (Marcuse) and the metaphysic of presence (Derrida)” (Agger, 2006, p. 5).

The fifth feature states that society can change, and that change begins with people in their everyday lives. The sixth feature is that structural change is based in Marx’s interpretation of the dialectic where structures shape people at the same time that people shape structures: “Following Marx in this sense, CST [critical social theory] conceptualizes the bridge between structure and agency as dialectical” (Agger, 2006, p. 5). History does not end in an unchanging utopia, but rather people make and remake history through their interactions with each other and societal structures, while these same structures in turn continue to shape people. This allows people to be the agents of their own ongoing change. The final feature of critical theory for Agger is that there is an inherent responsibility of all people to be aware of their actions, to not perpetuate oppression and to contribute to movement toward liberation.

The features of critical social theory provide a logical starting point for the development of social justice practice theories, such as those found in social work. Features of critical social theory pertinent to these theories include an interest in social change, the starting point of people's daily lives and the centrality of the agency-structure dialectic (Agger, 2006). Agger states that the cluster of theories he includes in critical social theory include feminism, postmodernism and cultural studies, while others include structural and radical social work theories (Hick, 2005; Ife, 1997) as well as anti-oppressive practice (Healy, 2005). It is important to note that there is no consensus in the literature on the clustering of critical theories, and Agger acknowledges the diversity of interpretations of each of these theories, including, for example, postmodernism with its strand of absolute relativism that is considered to be in opposition to critical thought (Agger, 2006; Mullaly, 2007). In addition there is a recent articulation of the theoretical framework described as critical social work which has critical theory as its foundation and includes the various social justice perspectives and theories discussed here, including structural social work (Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005; Hick, 2005; Ife, 1997). Mullaly (2007) states clearly that critical social theory is the foundation for his articulation of structural social work theory.

## **Structural Social Work Theory**

Structural social work theory was developed as a practice theory in the 1970s at the Carleton University School of Social Work (Moreau & Leonard, 1989). This section outlines the components of structural social work theory. The connections and disjunctures between theory and practice are discussed in the next chapter. Structural social work in its inception sought to incorporate feminist and Marxist analyses while incorporating an understanding of all types of oppression without prioritizing one over the other (Moreau with Leonard, 1989).

“Rather, it is an analysis which places alongside each other the divisions of class, gender, race, age, ability/disability and sexuality as the most significant social relations of advanced patriarchal capitalism” (Moreau with Leonard, 1989, p. 1). In the context of feminist and Marxist analyses, structural social work also sought to explain the role of the dominant societal ideology in the development and perpetuation of oppression (Moreau, 1979; Moreau with Leonard, 1989).

An additional key element of structural social work theory is its adherence to the dialectic in both analysis and practice. “The concept of dialectic is an essential component of structural social work theory” (Mullaly, 2007, p. 237). Mullaly suggests that a dialectical analysis is present in a variety of forms in a structural perspective and it challenges false dichotomies or dualisms in many different ways.

For example, the welfare state has both social care and social control functions, it contains both liberating and oppressive features, and it represents both the fruits of the struggles of oppressed people and a mechanism used by the dominant group to ‘cool out’ the powerless. (Mullaly, 2007, p. 238)

The dialectic between individuals and social structures is particularly relevant to this research, and Mullaly states that “such structures consist of boundaries, barriers, expectations, regulations, and so on” (2007, p. 252). Although structural social work has been critiqued as being focused on the role of structures over the potential of individual agency (Rossiter, 1996), this critique does not reflect the actual stance of the theory (Mullaly, 2007; Murray & Hick, 2010). Structural social work theory instead focuses on the interaction between agency and structures. “The individual is both the creator of the social world and is created by the social world” (Mullaly, 2007, p. 237). It is the dialectic between agency and structures that offers up the opportunity for structural change and opens up the

potential for social work practice that is truly emancipatory (Mullaly, 2007; Murray & Hick, 2010).

Mullaly (2007) begins his description of structural social work theory by discussing the notions of paradigms and ideologies, describing paradigm as a commonly accepted way of viewing the world. This is consistent with Agger's (2006) fourth feature of critical social theory, which posits that structures are maintained in part by the creation of a false consciousness through methods such as ideologies and, in this case, described by Mullaly and others as paradigms. Paradigms exist in many realms, but in the context of structural social work, the focus is on social, economic and political ideologies that exist at a societal level. Although there are often several competing paradigms at any given time and place, there is typically one that is dominant or more commonly accepted.

Mullaly adopts four main paradigms (neo-conservative, liberal/neo-liberal, social democratic and Marxist) each of which are composed of an ideology leading to a particular understanding of social problems, an ideal welfare state, and thus a prescription for social work activities that fit with the paradigm. Mullaly (2007) states that there has been a relatively recent shift from a liberal paradigm of an institutionalized welfare state to a neo-conservative or neo-liberal paradigm that includes a retrenchment of the welfare state. This perspective fits with Galper's (1975) statement that conservative and liberal ideologies, although different, both support a welfare state only to the extent that it does not interfere with the functioning of capitalism. Liberalism typically supports slightly more of a welfare state than conservatism (Galper, 1975), but the recent shift from a liberal institutionalized welfare state to neo-liberal ideology in the context of globalization is a shift to less of a

welfare state with increasing overlaps in ideological perspectives between neo-liberal and neo-conservative thought (Mullaly, 2007).

An understanding of ideology and political paradigms is important for several reasons, one of which is because “ideology largely determines the nature and form of social work practice” (Mullaly, 2007, 41). The discussion of ideology is based in a Marxist perspective that “ideology is, in Marx’s words, ‘a material force’, a significant arena of political struggle within which social workers practice” (Moreau with Leonard, 1989, p. 1).

Mullaly (2007) examines each of the four main paradigms in light of the ethical framework found in the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 1994). One of the main arguments of the theory is that the dominant societal ideology will direct the understanding of social problems and implementation of social work activities, and that without an understanding of the underlying ideology and knowledge of alternative paradigms and ideologies, social work will maintain the status quo rather than identify other directions to address social problems. In order to identify alternatives, Mullaly (2007) utilizes professional social work values as articulated in the *Code of Ethics* as a framework for determining which perspective of social problems and the welfare state best addresses social issues. Mullaly suggests that it is the social democratic paradigm that has the best match, concurring with radical social work perspectives that a socialist democratic perspective is best suited to addressing the root causes of social problems (Fook, 1993; Galper, 1975, 1980).

However, structural social work theory does not stop here, as did the original version of radical social work. Radical social work analyses of political, social and economic ideologies were void of any discussion of other issues of oppression. Structural social work

theory incorporates understandings of feminism, anti-racism and the broader anti-discriminatory analyses that also address issues of oppression based on sexual orientation, age and ability (Moreau, 1979; Moreau & Leonard, 1989; Mullaly, 2007). In addition, Mullaly places structural social work theory in the context of critical social theory, stating that this serves as the foundation for the articulation of the specific dynamics of structural social work theory and practice. The integration of critical theory, the socialist paradigm, and anti-discriminatory analyses in the context of a shift to globalization as the new face of capitalism means that the old socialist basis of radical social work is “reconstructed to accommodate these critiques” (Mullaly, 2007, xvii). As well, Mullaly’s newest description of structural social work theory incorporates postmodernism. He argues that constructing modernism and postmodernism as binary opposites is inaccurate and that connecting critical theoretical perspectives (including structural social work) with postmodern analyses augments critical thought. Thus structural social work integrates the benefits of both modernism and postmodernism such that the theory “retain[s] ideals of social justice, emancipation, and equality in a way that respects difference, diversity and inclusion” (Mullaly, 2007, p. 209). This is comparable to the work of many critical and feminist postmodern theorists.

Finally, Mullaly (2007) expands radical social work’s examination of capitalism by incorporating Harvey’s (1990) analysis of postmodern conditions of current day society. Fawcett and Featherstone (2000) distinguish postmodernism as a set of “theoretical positions” and postmodernity as referring “to a broad set of changes which characterize contemporary Western societies” (p. 8), which is the understanding that is used here. Harvey describes postmodernity as one stage of modernity that continues to be based in and

understood through the social relations of capitalism. However, he argues that the visible so-called shift from modernity to postmodernity is based on a shift within capitalism.

Modernity is premised on the belief in a logical, rational, scientific and orderly search for an essentialist truth, and capitalism is presumed to provide the foundation for a stable society.

However, underneath the surface of this picture Harvey argues that capitalism is actually composed of boiling tensions, such as those between labour and capital. The Fordist-Keynesian economy of modernity saw a truce between labour, capital and the state, which gave the appearance of stability but in reality, was precarious.

According to Harvey, (1990) this truce collapsed in the post-1973 era after the collapse of the Bretton Woods agreement and, at this point in time, capitalism shifted from a Fordist-Keynesian economy with the illusion of balance and stability to an economy based on flexible accumulation and globalization with its accompanying chaos. Social relations shifted from the appearance of a stable truce between labour, capital and the state and its visible icon of a strong middle class, to the weakening of the power of labour and unions and the resulting increase in the gap between the wealthy and those living in poverty. While some suggest that market economies have moved from capitalism into something new, Harvey argues that the new relations continue to be directed by capitalism, albeit in its new cloak of flexible accumulation. Social work practice today takes place in the context of postmodernity which still includes capitalism but with greater depths of inequality and in a newer form that is more unstable, fast-paced and chaotic, making structural issues more difficult to challenge than before (Agger, 2004; Harvey, 1990; Mullaly, 2007).

## **Situating Structural Social Work Theory**

Critical social work, anti-oppressive and structural social work theories are arguably three of the most common frameworks currently in use in Canadian social work that seek to understand the complexities of social justice and the intersections of oppression. Structural social work theory is less well known outside of Canada. Commonalities across the frameworks are: the inclusion of all forms of oppression and the intersections of oppressions; and an understanding of oppression at individual, cultural and structural levels and the interactions between these. The incorporation of postmodern theorizing also occurs in the context of these frameworks, although this is still often contested. Structural social work theory situates itself as having critical social theory as its theoretical foundation and thus as a type of critical social work theory. In addition, Mullaly states that addressing oppression is “the primary focus of structural social work” (2007, p. 252) and that an anti-oppressive approach to practice is a major element in practicing structural social work theory (p. 249). Thus anti-oppressive practice is identified as a practice approach that is a component of structural social work theory, and potentially of other theories.

There are many who would disagree with this contextualization; for example, Campbell (2003a, 2003b) has argued that anti-oppressive theory or practice should be seen as an umbrella framework for social work’s social justice theories. As discussed earlier, debating which term should be used to describe or incorporate all progressive social work theories leads to divisions, rather than to cooperative understandings that all perspectives, while distinctive, are on the same team and working toward similar goals, although at times walking down different, though related, paths. Thus, while this chapter uses structural social work theory as a starting point, it also acknowledges that works described in other terms



(such as feminist postmodernist, critical social work, or anti-oppressive) are partners on similar roads with social justice as a primary goal.

## **CHAPTER TWO. A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON THEORY-PRACTICE INTEGRATION**

Difficulties in bringing together social work theory and practice have been described in the literature by many different authors (R. Bailey & Lee, 1982; Lewis, 2003; Mullaly, 2007; Payne, 2005; Pilalis, 1986; Reynolds, 1942, 1963; Secker, 1993; Sheldon, 1978).

These issues have been ongoing through the history of social work and are raised in the context of a broad picture of all social work theories (Healy, 2005; Pilalis, 1986; Reynolds, 1963; Secker, 1993), as well as issues specific to particular theories, such as structural and critical theories (Hick & Murray, 2009; Moreau & Leonard, 1989; Mullaly, 2007; Murray & Hick, 2010; Payne, 2005; Peters, 2010). These authors suggest that some of the challenges in connecting theory with practice are common to social work theories in general, however, it is expected that some of the challenges are specific to structural social work theory or the broader critical social work theories.

Although the focus of this chapter is to explore the literature on the integration of structural social work theory into practice, with a primary interest in research literature, the limited literature on this topic means that research, and non-research, based literature from related fields is also included where relevant. Given the compatibility of structural, critical and anti-oppressive social work theories (articulated in the previous chapter), literature discussing the integration of these theories into social work practice is also included in the discussion. One of the commonalities of social justice theories is the current concern with the intersection of oppressions. Therefore research studies which examine only one thread (such as the use of feminist theory or anti-racist theory in practice) are not the focus, however such studies are included where they add to the discussion, as is ~~some of the~~ literature on

social work theory-practice integration in general. It is also important to note that critical, structural and anti-oppressive theoretical frameworks are in wide use across a variety of social work fields, for example: young offenders and street involved youth (Haines, 2002; Romilly, 2003); group work (Dominelli, 2002b; McNicoll, 2001, 2003; Sullivan, Mesbur, Lang, Goodman, & Mitchell, 2003); mental health (D. Bailey, 2002; Beaulieu, 2003; Morley, 2003); aging (Neysmith, 1997, 1999; O'Connor, 1999, 2003); child welfare (H. C. Brown, 2002; Dumbrill, 2003; Pinkerton, 2002; Spratt & Houston, 1999); community development (Dominelli, 2002b; Lane, 1999); and disabilities (Sapey, 2002; Stainton, 2002) among others (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2002; Shera, 2003). In addition, as social work is both a professional and academic discipline, most social work research includes implications for practice as a part of the discussion, even if theory-practice integration is not specifically the point of the study. To include all such research would be unwieldy and potentially tangential to the discussion. Thus the focus is on research studies, and related theoretical literature, which examine or discuss the integration of social justice theories with practice, although literature that explores questions related to theory-to-practice (or knowledge and practice) in general is also included where relevant.

It is suggested that the gap between theory and practice is a common challenge in the social work discipline (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Harre Hindmarsh, 1992; Hearn, 1982; Lewis, 2003; Pilalis, 1986). Students often experience difficulties in integrating various theories with practice when they begin fieldwork (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Vayda & Bogo, 1991) and social work programs struggle with how to assist students in making this link (Boisen & Syers, 2004; Reay, 1986). Two related dilemmas that are common in discussions of theory and practice integration are, first, the debate over the usefulness of abstract theory in practice

settings (Lee, 1982; Mullaly, 2007; G. Smith, 1971) and, second, the debate over eclecticism versus choosing a theoretical approach (Mullaly, 2007; Payne, 2005; Poulter, 2005; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1999); both of which are issues in disciplines other than social work as well (Harre Hindmarsh, 1992).

In the first debate, the division is typically between academics and direct practice social workers where the former focus on theory and the latter believe that social work experience should guide one's practice (Lee, 1982; G. Smith, 1971). Since human nature is to look for patterns which then guide future actions, it is argued that all practitioners create and utilize their own practice theories, whether they are aware of it or not (Mullaly, 2007; Reay, 1986). However, such experiential theories, if they are not subjected to conscious analysis and research, can result in a practice that is chaotic and contradictory at the least and possibly damaging to one's clients (Loewenberg, 1984; Mullaly, 2007; Reay, 1986; Robbins et al., 1999).

The second debate is over the use of one theory versus the use of aspects of many theories. An eclectic approach to theory is also problematic as mixing and matching bits of various theories is often due to a superficial understanding of theory and can result in the potential misuse of theory in a practice setting (Mullaly, 2007; Payne, 2005; Robbins et al., 1999). Payne suggests that it is not a simple choice between one theory or eclecticism, rather "a cautious, coordinated and planned approach should help to overcome the problems with eclecticism" (2005, p. 32). In this perspective, social workers are expected to thoughtfully consider the benefits of different approaches, whether or not they work together effectively without debasing the theories, and which best meet client needs (Payne, 2005). An

understanding of the factors involved in integrating structural theory and practice should be useful in developing a more effective integration of the two (Peters, 2010).

One criticism of discussions of theory and practice is that the terms themselves are often vague and undefined with both being used in a variety of ways in the social work discipline (Hearn, 1982; Pilalis, 1986). Theories specific to the discipline of social work may be about: (a) what the discipline entails and why, (b) what the practice of social work looks like, or (c) theories of human behaviour used by social workers in guiding their practice (Pilalis, 1986; Timms & Timms, 1977). It is the latter definition that is relevant to this discussion with a focus on the use of structural social work theory specifically or critical social work theories in general in social work practice.

Pilalis (1986) defines practice in three ways: “general professional purpose or intention; an ethical deed; and technical act” (p. 87). For the context of this paper all three definitions are included in the term social work practice as all are components of social workers’ activities. Most important is the argument that theory and practice are not simply two distinct terms that exist independently; instead it is argued that the two are so closely intertwined that the ongoing interaction of the two result in a relationship that is continuously changing (Hearn, 1982; Pilalis, 1986; Reay, 1986). It is the process of this interaction in the context of structural and critical social work theories that is explored in the literature review presented here.

## **Framing the Literature Review**

One difficulty in making sense of the literature is that often the concerns about theory-practice integration are discussed, one at a time, in isolation from other potential concerns. Yet a review of the literature suggests that there are a number of different

concerns, all of which may hinder (or facilitate) theory-practice integration. It is clear from the literature that theory-practice integration takes place in a variety of contexts and is affected by a number of factors that can be organized into groupings for clarity. In order to make sense of the varied nature of the literature on this topic I have utilized Maxwell's (p. 47) idea of a concept map to develop a visual picture of the literature on theory-practice integration (Maxwell, 2005; Peters, 2010). In the process of reviewing the literature and thinking about the idea of a concept map I realized that theory-practice integration is often assumed rather than explicated. I decided that a visual explanation of what I wanted to do was to tease theory and practice apart and explore what came between them. The elements between theory and practice would, conceivably, act as both barriers to and facilitators of theory-practice integration. In doing this and in organizing the literature into groupings, I visualized these categories in abstract ways as spaces between theory and practice. The concept of spaces reflected what I found in the literature, which was a number of contexts, each containing a variety of factors, in which theory-practice integration occurred and which affected the activity of integration.

The literature review explores the spaces between abstract structural theory and the point of social work practice where social work practitioners put social justice transformation into practice. The convergence of theory and practice in social justice contexts is referred to as praxis. Factors within these spaces may be either barriers or supports to the implementation of structural social work theory by practitioners. The concept map provides a descriptive framework that organizes the literature on structural social work theory-practice integration, allowing for an understanding of the big picture and the integrated ways in which these factors affect practice (Peters, 2010).

## **Reviewing the Literature Relevant to the Spaces Between Theory and Practice**

### **Educational space**

Social work education is a common starting point in the literature for examining theory-practice integration and related issues (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Boisen & Syers, 2004; C. Campbell, 1999, 2002, 2003d; Lam, 2004; Marchant, 1986; Rossiter, 1995, 2001; Vayda & Bogo, 1991; Walden & Brown, 1985). Some suggest that it is not just about bringing theory and practice together, but that it is a three-way process and that “anti-oppressive practice must connect education, practice and theory” (Massaquoi, 2007). The educational space is a logical entry point since social work education has the responsibility and mandate to teach social work theories and to guide students in utilizing those theories in practice. Several factors within the educational space have been identified in the literature as being relevant to the theory-practice integration discussion.

The first factor is that of social work field placements. Boisen & Syers (2004) in their literature review suggest that theory-practice integration has often been left to field placements and thus to field instructors at the agencies in which students are placed. There are several potential problems with this, one of which is that given current cuts to funding combined with increasing workloads, many field instructors simply do not have the time necessary to assist practicum students with their learning process (Boisen & Syers, 2004). One study found that field instructors did not agree that theory was an important component of their teaching responsibilities in the placement or that theory was even relevant to practice (Barbour, 1984). Another study indicated that in spite of the importance of the role of agency-based field instructors, the turnover rate of people willing to supervise practicum students was problematic (Bogo & Power, 1992). Yet a study of social work students shows

that the role field agency supervisors play is crucial in student development of a practice approach and the integration of theory into their practice (Secker, 1993).

A second factor is the use of seminars alongside field placements. Authors suggest various models for use in field seminars or other courses to train students in methods to reflect on their practice as well as to incorporate theory into practice. These models often involve the use of self-directed learning via reflective thought in combination with practice scenarios and discussions with peers and the field seminar educator (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Boisen & Syers, 2004; Lam, 2004; Noble, 2001; Reay, 1986). Studies suggest that such reflective models are useful in improving theory-practice integration for students (Boisen & Syers, 2004; Lam, 2004; Noble, 2001). Although reflective models often do not concentrate on any particular theory (Boisen & Syers, 2004; Lam, 2004) there are also critical reflection models (Noble, 2001).

Structural and critical social work theories are discussed in the literature in the context of social work field education and field seminars, although much of this literature is theoretical rather than research-based. Social justice theorists state that field instruction must explore and address issues of power and should create a sense of community for field instructors and students in order for students to integrate these concepts into their practice (Bertrand Finch, Bacon, Klassen, & Wrase, 2003). However, these authors do not ground these sentiments in research. One example of a structural approach within a field placement is the creation of an organization in Nova Scotia with the goal of promoting Gay/Straight Alliances in schools (Brown, Richard & Wichman, 2010). The organization was developed by a social work student in her field placement and with the support of her faculty supervisor for the express purpose of challenging homophobia and heterosexism. While these authors



demonstrate that structural social work theory is applicable to practice in the context of this example, they do not offer research into the process of theory-practice integration. Razack (1999) used student surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of field placement seminars. She found that it was important that field placements, seminars, and field instructors address anti-racism and diversity issues as an important component of student learning regarding anti-oppression principles (Razack, 1999).

A third factor in the educational category specific to the integration of critical social work theories into practice focuses on pedagogy and teaching methods when delivering theory or practice courses. One issue may be that educators in social work programs teach the theories at an abstract level, but do not make the connection to skills and practice. Within this context Rossiter discusses her personal intellectual development and challenges as she worked to change her skills course from a traditional theoretical foundation to one that incorporates a critical theoretical foundation (Rossiter, 1995). Razack suggests that faculty members and social work departments have crucial roles in moving the social work profession toward a critical approach to practice and theory in the educational context (Razack, 2002). For example, research found that students valued discussions of oppression in the context of field seminars, but that only 35% of students surveyed had this opportunity (Razack, 2002).

Teaching styles and processes are also important in the delivery of courses and connections between theory and practice (Secker, 1993). Several articles suggest that to effectively teach empowerment and anti-oppressive practices to students, the pedagogical processes must be consistent with the theoretical perspective being taught, and these authors also suggest strategies educators can use in this process (C. Campbell, 1999, 2003b, 2003d;

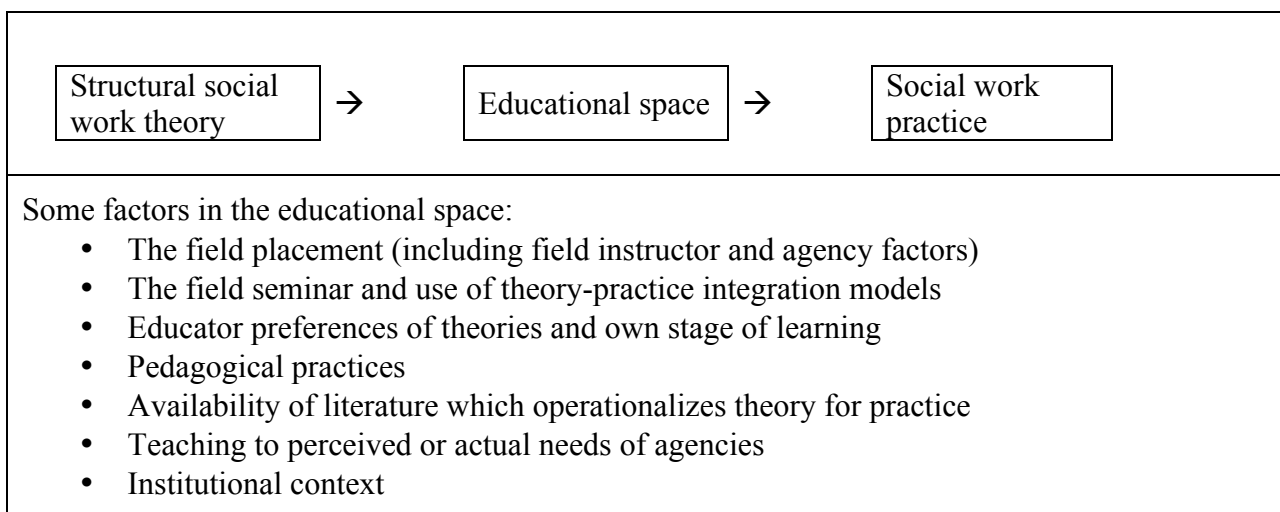
Wehbi, 2003; Zapf et al., 2003). Educators in the field of group work are encouraged to utilize group work processes in teaching students how to link personal problems with public issues (Berman-Rossi & Kelly, 2001). Students learn how to analyze the connections between private and public issues via group work in the classroom, while also developing group work skills that incorporate critical theoretical analyses that they can utilize in their practice.

Pedagogy is not only important in educating students about anti-oppressive practices in general, but also when educating students about specific issues of discrimination. One study found that teaching processes are important in educating students on heterosexism (Woodford & Bella, 2003). Dore's (1994) theoretical work suggests that a feminist pedagogy is important in social work courses, especially where the majority of students are female. She suggests that the use of feminist pedagogy builds community, develops leadership abilities, and teaches empowerment by empowering students. As well, the use of empowerment improves students' ability to learn, including their ability to understand and take in new theoretical perspectives (Dore, 1994). Pedagogical factors are also important in teaching anti-racism and multicultural social work as illustrated by his review of a teaching video clip of a therapist's interaction with an African-American client (Nyland, 2006).

While the literature reviewed in the context of the educational category is useful, there is only limited research connecting these topics to theory-practice integration, especially pertaining to critical and structural theories. The relevance of teaching methods and pedagogy to connecting critical or anti-oppressive theories to practice was demonstrated by literature based in educators' personal experiences, theoretical writings and at times research studies. However, these were not specific to structural social work theory. Studies

into the teaching effectiveness of educators and the link to theory-practice integration are lacking. Studies on the role of field placements and related field seminars is primarily about general theory-practice integration and is not specific to structural or critical theories, with the exception of Razack's (1999, 2000) work. In addition, Noble (2001) and Razack (2002) both suggest that, in spite of the important role of field placements in social work education, academic literature examining the effectiveness of field placements and seminars is limited.

**Figure 1. Educational Space**



There are many factors at play in the educational space as identified here, and there are likely others. (See Figure 1 for an overview of the educational space factors). The larger institutional context may or may not be supportive of diversity, which has repercussions for both social work practice and education (N. MacDonald et al., 2003). As well, there may be an interaction with another space between theory and practice, the theoretical space (to be discussed later); practice theories may not adequately operationalize critical theoretical concepts, in which case it is difficult to teach what has not yet been articulated in enough depth in the literature. Razack suggests this is accurate for anti-racist and anti-oppressive literature (2002, p. 78). Another barrier may be that social work instructors are teaching to

the perceived (or actual) needs of the agencies in which students are completing field placements and to which they will be applying for work. This leads to the second space between theory and practice, which is the organizational space.

### **Organizational space**

The second category relevant to theory-practice integration is the organizational space. Agencies and organizations in which social work students complete field placements and social work practitioners work, are also locations which are potential barriers or supports to structural social work practice. The organizational space overlaps with educational space as organizations are the locations of field placements for students. Field instructors who do not see theory-practice integration as a part of their student supervision work (Bogo & Power, 1992), who are too busy and do not have the time to discuss theory with the student (Boisen & Syers, 2004), or who do not encourage the use of theory (Barbour, 1984) are issues for students. These issues may also be relevant for supervisors of new graduates and even mature social workers who are seeking support to apply theory to practice in their work.

Researchers in Hong Kong interviewed social workers on their use of theory in the context of the agency within which they worked (Chan & Chan, 2004). They found that workers chose to utilize theories actively encouraged by the agency. The agencies, in turn, chose theories that could be learned quickly by new workers. “The agency has the tendency to select those theories which are practical and easy to learn and follow.... Other theories ... are not popular because the practitioners need more time to learn them” (Chan & Chan, 2004, p. 552). Social workers commented on the time pressure in their positions, stating “the time and space for integrating theory and practice were inadequate, thus rendering their practice

very pragmatic” (p. 552). This study examined theory-practice integration in general and was not specific to critical theories.

The organizational space can be problematic for the use of critical social work principles in particular (Harre Hindmarsh, 1992). In his study into what supports or undermines social workers in applying the structural perspective, Moreau found that agencies have an important role to play (Moreau & Leonard, 1989). Some agencies were found to have regulations that contributed to client difficulties and worked against a structural approach to client casework. Another issue with organizations and the use of structural or critical theories is that critical social work theories are relatively new (Fook, 2003). It is possible that many social work professionals are not familiar with critical social work theories, and thus, may not be able to assist students or new practitioners with putting critical concepts into practice. In her theoretical discussion of group work McNicoll (2003) identifies two barriers to social justice group work that are applicable to the organizational context. The first is that the medical model, as a common approach within social service and health care organizations, typically does not have the time, or interest, required for effectively implementing social justice activities (McNicoll, 2003). The second is that isolation from other social justice-focused professionals or peers can be problematic for social justice practice in the field of group work, particularly when the work is difficult and there is no one else to go to for support (McNicoll, 2001, 2003).

However, the organizational space can also at times be supportive of a structural approach. In Moreau’s research, two of the most important factors in supporting the use of the structural approach to practice fall into the organizational space: (a) support from management for the approach; and (b) support from peers in the agency or the larger

community (Moreau with Leonard, 1989). Although their work is not research-based, the following authors give examples from their social work practice of the ways in which organizations can support a structural approach. Colleagues and peers who understand a structural perspective can support each other in their work (J. E. MacDonald & Friars, 2010). Managers or organization funders who come from a structural perspective can create organizations with mandates that are structural in nature and which therefore intrinsically support and encourage structural practice (M. Brown, Richard, & Wichman, 2010; Burrill & Peters, 2010; Thomas Bernard & Marsman, 2010). The physical space within an office can also open doors to and set the stage for a structural approach (Carniol & Del Valle, 2010).

Mullaly (2007) and Carniol (2005) both discuss the relevance of organizations to structural practice. Their theoretical discussions suggest that some grassroots or alternative agencies (such as women's organizations) often openly operate from a social justice stance while others, such as centralized government bureaucracies, may be more likely to operate from a traditional paradigm (Carniol, 2005; Mullaly, 2007). Child welfare, for example, has been identified as a bureaucratic field of work in which it can be more difficult to engage in social justice-focused practices according to this theoretical discussion (Strega, 2007). Barnoff and Coleman's (2007) study explored practices of women working in feminist organizations in Toronto. The participants articulated that the support they received from the agency for their anti-oppressive work was very important in order for them to be able to successfully utilize the approach (Barnoff & Coleman, 2007). George and Marlow (2005) presented a case study of an Indian grassroots and structural organization developed to work with the Dalit people considered by the Hindu caste system to be *untouchable*; this status "results in their extreme social exclusion" (George & Marlow, 2005, p. 10). In addition to

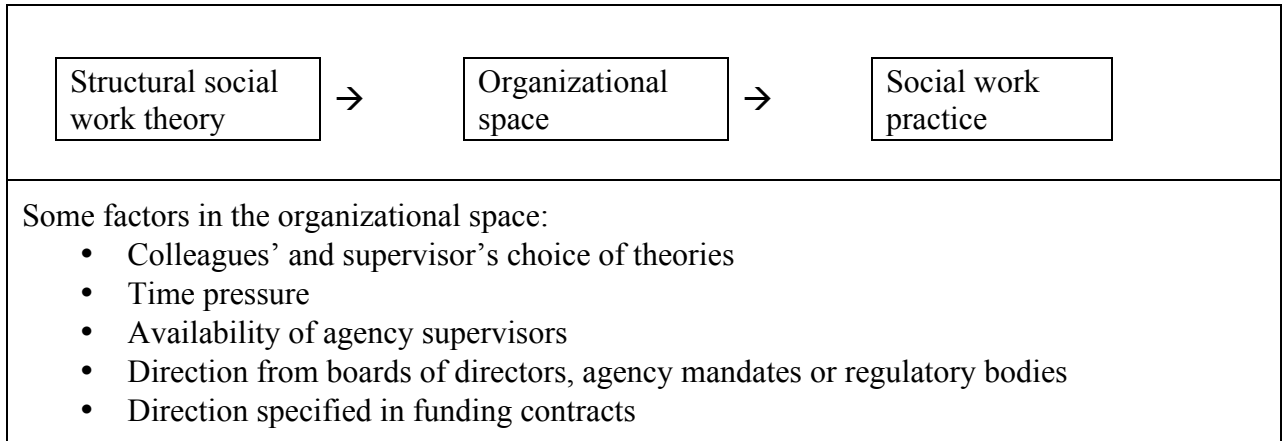
offering support services to the Dalit people, the organization also engages in consciousness-raising and has successfully challenged government decisions to deny Dalit people access to education (P. George & Marlowe, 2005). The organization demonstrated the successful use of a structural approach (P. George & Marlowe, 2005).

Politics and ideology are also important in theory-practice integration as governments typically fund social service organizations. When the ideology of the government in power shifts, the new ideology is often passed on to social service organizations via funding contracts (Razack, 2002). In a neo-liberal climate, non-governmental organizations may be pressured to provide services and programs within a traditional paradigm instead of a critical paradigm (Razack, 2002). A research study in Ontario documented that government funding cuts there have resulted in feminist organizations putting their efforts into agency survival thus reducing their time and effectiveness in anti-oppressive activities (Barnoff, George, & Coleman, 2006). Others also point out that, based on their practice work, funding cuts can create problems for structural practice (Carniol & Del Valle, 2010; Wright, Sayani, Zammit & George, 2010).

The literature reviewed here in the organizational context contains a mix of research studies, theoretical discussions and examples from the authors' experiences. The only research that specifically explores social workers' integration of structural theory into practice is that of Moreau (1989, 1993). While the Chan and Chan (2004) study explored theory-practice integration it was not specific to structural or critical theories. The other studies are indirectly relevant to the topic, but they do not actively focus on the process of theory-practice integration (Barnoff & Coleman, 2007; Barnoff et al., 2006; P. George & Marlowe, 2005; Razack, 2002). It is clear that the context of organizations influences the use

of theory in practice, but that research in this area is limited, particularly as it relates to structural social work theory. See Figure 2 for a summary of factors in the organizational space.

**Figure 2. Organizational Space**



## **Personal space**

A third space between theory and practice contains factors related to the personal context of social workers (see Figure 3). Some of the research relevant to this space comes out of critical psychology, suggesting a gap in the social work literature, and again much of this work is theoretical in nature rather than based in research. One of the contributions from critical psychologists is the suggestion that practitioners need to begin with their own personal growth in order to work effectively from a social justice perspective (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Pitner and Sakamoto (2005) state that critical consciousness by the practitioner (a knowledge of one's own biases, stereotypes and issues of power) is necessary for multicultural practice as practitioners will not be able to effectively address issues of power and oppression in their work with clients if they have not addressed these in their own lives. Speaking from their own experiences social work authors



agree, suggesting that without this structural self-awareness social workers risk simply perpetuating power imbalances with clients (Feehan, Boettcher, & Quinn, 2010).

Practitioner anxiety about their own abilities or personal development may induce a cognitive and affective response which has the unintended effect of entrenching stereotypes as well as one's status and power: "when service providers have a negative self-image, they feel disempowered. In such situations, they may be more likely to use their professional role to gain a sense of power." (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005, p. 688). Therefore, practitioners' levels of critical consciousness and self-awareness of power and bias will influence their ability to work effectively from a critical theoretical foundation.

There are a number of social work authors who discuss the importance of personal growth and development to structural and anti-oppressive practice, based on their own experiences in practice. Structural and critical theory social workers also describe how personal growth, critical consciousness and self-awareness are all important attributes in order practice structurally (M. Brown et al., 2010; Feehan et al., 2010; Kumsa, 2007; Lysack, 2010). Olivier's description of his structural social work practice includes a description of how he grapples with whether or not his work is truly structural (Olivier, 2010). Ideology is also a component of structural social work theory and Carniol and Del Valle (2010) indicate that a personal awareness of ideologies is important to structural practice. Self-awareness in the context of a structural perspective does not occur without time and effort and it is important that social workers do the personal work on this in order to practice effectively (M. Brown et al., 2010; Feehan et al., 2010). It is also important for structural workers to be aware of what does and does not work in anti-oppressive work, and for Baines this involves learning on the job as well as learning from others (Baines, 2007a).

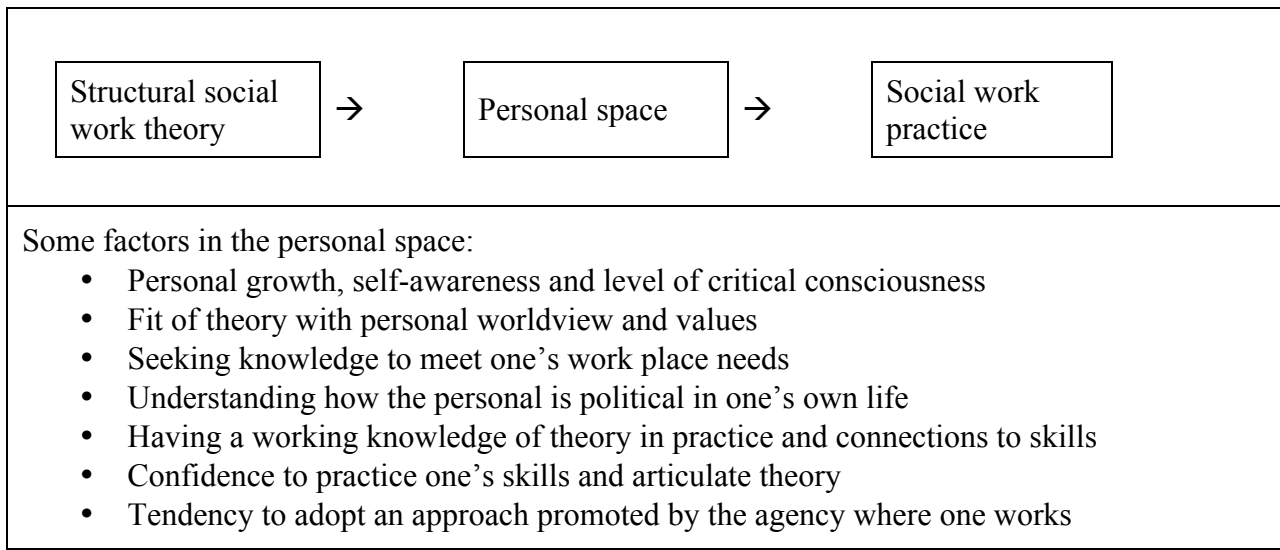
Other factors are also important in the personal space. Fook et al. (2000) conducted research to study the journey of social work students through their degree and first 3 years of practice examining how professional social workers develop practice skills over time (Fook et al., 1994, 2000). These authors drew on and added to the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model (1986 in Fook et al., 2000), which identifies how practice skills are acquired over time and in a series of steps (Fook et al., 2000). The authors suggest that the use of theory for a novice is initially rule-based, culminating in a more flexible, creative and self-reflective use of theory for practitioners who develop expertise in the field over time. Although it was a small component of the study, the primary focus of this research was not on theory-practice integration. In addition, the study was examining the development of social work skills in a broad sense and did not focus on structural or critical theoretical skills.

Chan & Chan (2004) found that social workers engaged in micro-level practice tended to be interested in developing practical knowledge, more so than theoretical knowledge, as they believed it would be more directly useful to their practice. In addition, these workers used not only theory to guide their practice but also relied on their values, beliefs and past experiences (p. 550). One participant suggested that personal values should be involved in choosing a theory for practice and several others suggested “that the selection and application of theories should match personal character and experience” (Chan & Chan, 2004, p. 551). Social workers, after learning about a variety of theories, will eventually seek out a theory that fits with their worldview and their clinical interests (Barbour, 1984; Chan & Chan, 2004). Moreau (1989) identifies the congruence of structural theory with one’s personal worldview as one of the top three factors in the utilization of structural theory in practice. His study demonstrates that social workers practicing from the structural approach

have an understanding of the connections between the personal and political in their own lives, and use appropriate levels of self-disclosure in sharing these experiences with clients (Moreau with Leonard, 1989).

Students and practitioners have also stated that the use of a theoretical framework seems cold, unfeeling and inconsistent with the value of caring about clients (Barbour, 1984; Loewenberg, 1984; G. Smith, 1971), thus leading to a reluctance to use theory. Another factor relevant to practitioners at a personal level is an incomplete understanding of structural or critical theory and its application to practice, according to other social work research (Baines, 2000, 2003). Baines (2000) illustrated “that while critical social workers demonstrate a fairly good understanding of critical social work theory, in practice they employ an unstable *potpourri* of liberal, descriptive, and critical, analytic notions and interventive techniques” (p. 10). Likewise, Razack suggests that social work students have a difficult time integrating structural components into anti-discriminatory practice understandings, indicating that students are afraid of voicing these connections in case they get it wrong (2002, p. 20). McNicoll suggests that the residual approach to social work which permeates the group work field not only opposes the use of social justice approaches, but also results in social workers unconsciously accepting this perspective such that a residual, rather than critical, approach becomes a habit for workers (2001, 2003). At this point there is, again, interaction between the various spaces. For example, a lack of use of structural or critical theories may be connected to a workers’ incomplete knowledge of theory, to the educational process which did not explicate the theory-practice connection thoroughly enough, or to pressure from an agency or funder. Figure 3 provides an overview of the personal space.

**Figure 3. Personal Space**



Much of the literature discussing personal factors in the use of critical theories in practice comes out of authors' personal experiences, reflection and examples. There is limited literature that is based in research and less yet that speaks specifically to the utilization of critical theories. Only Moreau (1989, 1993) is interested in structural social work theory. The lack of research in this area suggests the need for more study.

### **Client space**

The fourth category of factors affecting theory-practice integration is that of clients. The application of theory to the practice setting with a client (or clients) is not a one-way process. Social workers indicate that they will tailor or adapt their theories and skills as appropriate with various groups of people, and in one study social work students indicated a reluctance to use theory to guide practice as that was seen to be disrespectful of the uniqueness of each client (Barbour, 1984). Chan and Chan suggest that theories are adapted based on age-appropriate interventions as well as an understanding that clients' views of

what they need are important to integrate into the practice setting (2004). “The clients’ needs and feedback acted as a guide for the social workers” (Chan & Chan, 2004, p. 553).

In addition, an empowerment approach suggests that it is important to work with clients in making decisions that will affect them as they are the experts on their own lives (Feehan et al., 2010; Payne, 2005). Client empowerment is a key component of structural social work (Moreau, 1990; Mullaly, 2007), as well as other critical theoretical practices (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002), and thus clients should have direct and ongoing involvement in the development of their work with a social worker, even if that results in clients rejecting a critical approach.

Critical approaches are not for everyone. While mainstream mental health services have often not been helpful for disadvantaged client groups, we recognize that some clients might be better served by more mainstream approaches. All clients should have a range of services and supports from which to choose. (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002, p. 91)

Others suggest, based on their social work experiences, that it is unlikely that clients will oppose being empowered and treated with equality, as are consistent with a structural perspective, but that they may disagree with a structural analysis of their issues (Feehan et al., 2010; Peters, 2010). It is important to give clients time to think about attempts to reframe issues within a structural framework and allow them the space to make up their own minds on the analysis (Carniol & Del Valle, 2010; Feehan et al., 2010).

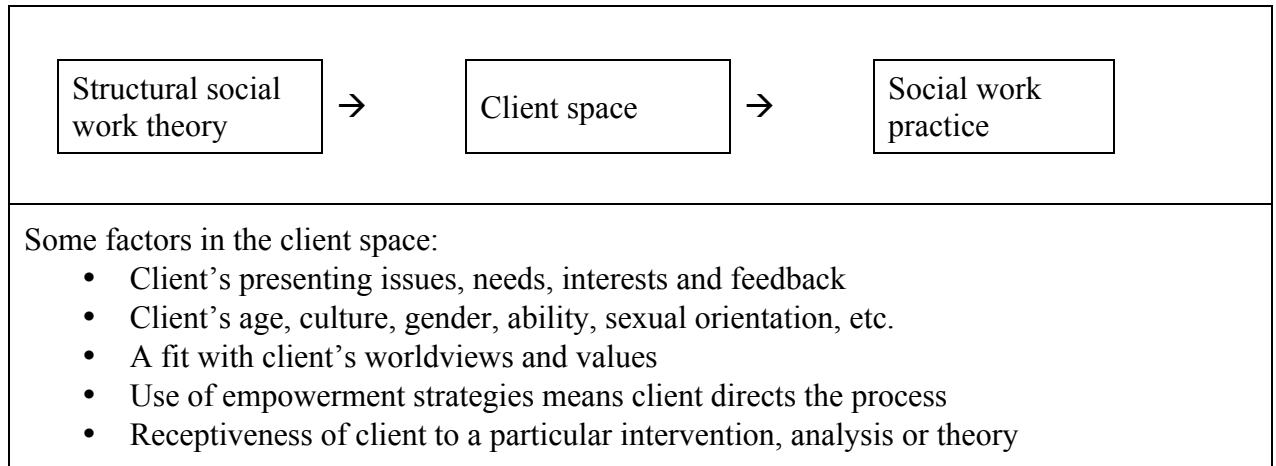
On the other hand, clients can also be conducive to encouraging a critical or collective approach to practice. For example, in McNicoll’s work, a group of Vietnamese people rejected attempts to individualize their experiences and instead sought out a collective approach to the group work process (2001, 2003). One example of client-directed practice at a governance level is the Youth Project, which seeks to create a safe and supportive place for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirited, queer, or intersex youth (M. Brown et al.,

2010). In this organization there are two equal boards of directors, one of which is a youth board where all directors must be under the age of 26 and must “represent the diversity of experiences and identities surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity” (M. Brown et al. 2010, p. 162). In this organization, the youth who participate in the organization also direct its activities, which is consistent with a structural perspective and the value of empowerment.

In his second major study of structural social work as utilized in practice, Moreau (1993) found that the use of social analysis in direct practice with clients was determined in part by the stage of the intervention, the receptiveness of the client to such an analysis and the gender and age of clients. However, Moreau also found that characteristics of the clients were not as important in the implementation of structural theory as were other factors, such as those found in the organizational and personal spaces (Moreau, 1993).

Although factors in the client space are important (see Figure 4 for a summary), research into how clients affect the use of theory in practice is extremely limited. Chan and Chan (2004) explore this question, although they do not look at the use of critical theories in particular. Moreau’s work (1989, 1993) is the only research exploring the effects of clients on the use of structural theory in practice, suggesting the need for more research in this area.

**Figure 4. Client Space**



### **Theoretical space**

It is the theoretical space in particular that allows for an analysis of distinct theories and the potential barriers or supports to theory-practice integration that will be unique for each theory. Pilalis (1986) states: "it is overly simplistic to talk about the relationship between theory and practice in social work without identifying which type of theory and of practice one is referring to at that particular time" (p. 89). The theoretical space offers more scope for a closer scrutiny of structural social work theory itself.

It is commonly understood that there are various levels of theory that are interconnected (Martindale, 1988; Turner, 1991). Theories range from grand or meta-theory, which examines constructs in an abstract and broad form, through mid-range, to those which are specific and concrete, with various levels in between (Martindale, 1988; Turner, 1991). Critical social work theories are more specific and are an attempt to operationalize broader critical theory at a social work practice level, or to link the more abstract grand level of critical theory to the concrete level of everyday practice. The desire to link broader theory with everyday practice realities fits with Agger's fifth feature of critical theory, which is that

social change as proposed by critical theory begins in the context of people's everyday lives and activities (Agger, 1998, 2006). One of the barriers that may be considered a possible concern with any theory is that a theory may be inadequate in its attempts to operationalize concepts from the grand or mid-range levels to the practice level (Pilalis, 1986). This concern may be relevant to implementing critical social work theories, including structural social work theory, although there is no research that asks this specific question and it is difficult to study.

The only studies that directly investigate the integration of structural social work theory into practice by social workers is the work by Moreau (Moreau et al., 1993; Moreau & Leonard, 1989). Moreau (1989) surveyed structural social workers on their use of the theory in practice and asked participants what they saw as the benefits and limitations of the theory. The benefits of the structural approach include its broad and holistic analysis, the importance of social change at a structural level, and the focus on reducing client blame and empowering clients to actively participate in solutions to their problems. Limitations of the approach included agency and client resistance (which fit with previous spaces of theory-practice integration). Additional limitations were specific to the theory: a lack of emphasis on the need to assist clients in making personal changes, and a lack of connection and interaction between theory and skills. In discussing these findings, Moreau suggested that the focus on teaching structural theory during the early years of this approach at Carleton University School of Social Work resulted in the neglect of teaching skills and how to use traditional skills in a structural way. While it makes sense that theory develops slowly and over time, the results of Moreau's research suggest that the theory developed at a faster pace than did the application of the theory to practice.



Other criticisms of various critical social work theories have been advanced over the years, although most of these critiques are grounded in theoretical discussions and do not come out of research studies. One analysis of radical social work suggested that radical theory can create false divisions between various working class populations by being selective about which group is deserving of support (Means, 1979). Means suggested that instead of dividing the working class, radical social workers should seek to mediate conflict and unify the population. Another criticism was that radical social work risked neglecting clients by desiring everyone to become empowered to solve their own problems, when some were damaged to the extent that this was not be possible (Clarke, 1976). Structural social work has also been accused of having a vague and abstract goal of social change with few to no guidelines on how to achieve such change, including the lack of practice methods (Cabrera, 2009).

Structural theory is also criticized for addressing structural causes of individual issues, but ignoring individual responsibility and power (Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Manful & Manful, 2010; Rossiter, 1996). Rossiter (1996) suggests that:

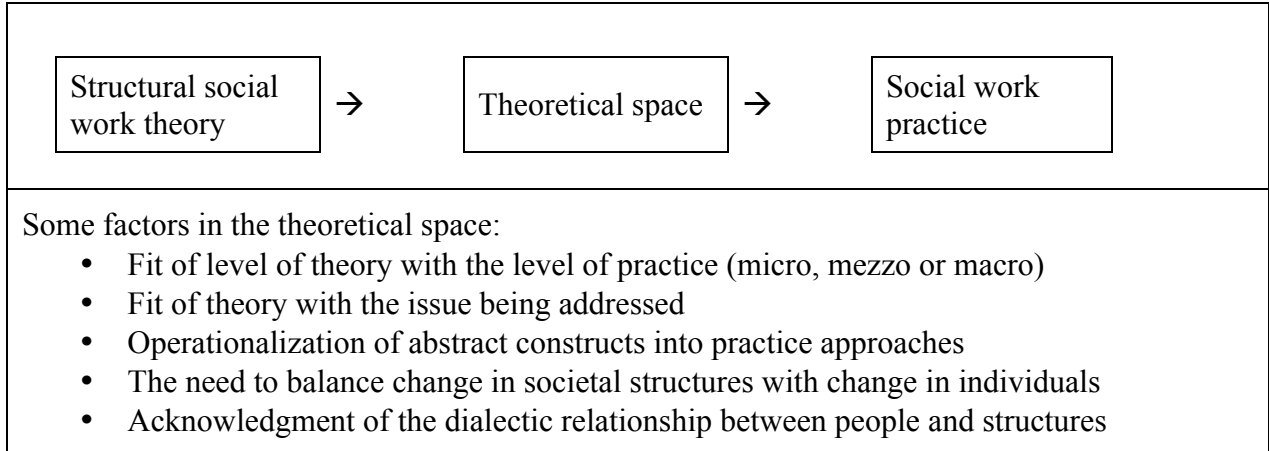
If the individual/social dichotomy is left untouched, we inevitably end up with social work theories that either focus on the individual, and hold the oppressed responsible for their victimization, or focus on the social, giving social work practitioners no space to think about complex, agentic people. (p. 26)

Mullaly, on the other hand, states that structural theory's foundation in critical theory means the dialectic between structures and people is a key component which acknowledges the importance of both structure and agency and the interactions between them (Mullaly, 2007; Mullaly & Keating, 1991). Yet perhaps the criticism is that this dialectic as a component of the theory has not been adequately translated into practice; however, there is no research exploring this question.

It is important to note that there are social workers who can give compelling examples of how they are actively using structural theory in practice in ways that challenge the above critiques. Feehan et al. (2010) describe carefully and respectfully balancing the dialectic of agency and structures in their work with victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Others, using examples from their practice, describe ways in which they actively translate theory into practice activities and skills daily in their work with individuals, families and groups (Baines, 2007a; Burrill & Peters, 2010; Hemingway, Johnson, & Roland, 2010; Schwartz & O'Brien, 2010). In a recent edited book, authors of various chapters identify the utilization of numerous anti-oppressive practice skills (Baines, 2007b). The criticism of the difficulties in actually achieving social change are also challenged by some who can articulate ways in which they have challenged the system and succeeded with policy, legislative and community shifts (Bernard & Marsman, 2010; Burrill & Peters, 2010; George & Marlowe, 2005; Reza & Ahmmed, 2009).

In summary, the theoretical space contains factors that can either support or challenge the implementation of theory in practice. (See Figure 5 for a summary of the factors in this space.) While the literature offers thoughtful academic critiques of structural social work theory, as well as examples from practitioners that challenge those critiques, there is very little research that actually explores how structural social workers understand and engage with the theory.

**Figure 5. Theoretical Space**

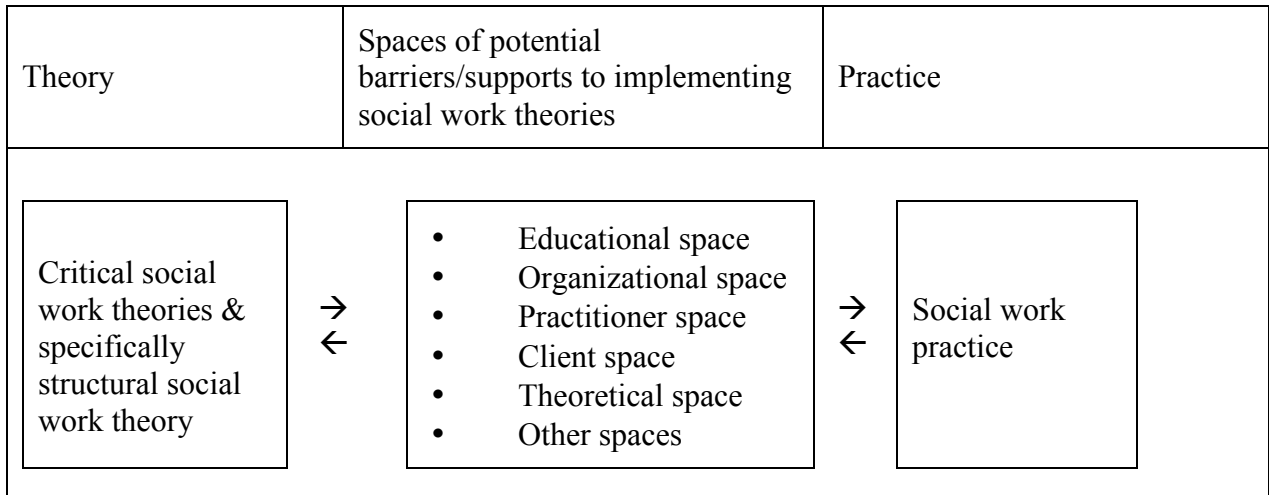


### **Other spaces and comments**

There is one final category in the spaces between theory and practice, called *other*, which acknowledges that there may be other categories and factors not noted here. In spite of the heavy emphasis in the literature on the problems with theory-practice integration, it is important to note that there are practitioners who *are* successfully integrating theory into their practice. In order to challenge the barriers to integration, it is important to identify sites and practices that facilitate the integration; however, there is little research that actively seeks out information on what renders theory-practice integration successful.

One final point about the figures presented in this chapter is that the arrows are actually bi-directional (see Figure 6). Just as theory influences practice through the spaces in between, so does practice influence the development and refinement of theory through the same spaces. However, the purpose of this paper is to examine the movement from theory through the spaces to its integration into practice, so the arrows in the preceding figures (Figures 1 through 5) focus on that direction only.

**Figure 6. The Spaces Between Theory and Practice**



### **Summation of spaces between structural social work theory and practice**

All of the spaces or categories have factors that may work as both barriers or supports to the integration of structural theory into social work practice. The educational and organizational spaces are ones in which the largest amount of research has been completed. The practitioner space describes research from the early days of teaching structural social work theory (Moreau & Leonard, 1989), as well as more recent research on the use of critical theories in general (Baines, 2000). There is less research relevant to the role of clients in the use of theory (Chan & Chan, 2004; Moreau et al., 1993; Moreau & Leonard, 1989), although it is logical that clients will influence the choice of interventions by social workers. Moreau's research (1993) suggests that clients do not have as much effect on the use of structural theory in practice as do factors found in some of the other categories. The theoretical space is extremely limited in terms of research on how the articulation of structural theory affects structural social work practice.

It is important to note that much of the research and literature described earlier in this chapter is about the integration of theories generally into practice, or about social justice

focused theories (such as critical social work or feminist theories), rather than about structural social work theory specifically. While this information is still relevant to the discussion, the dearth of research on structural social work theory in the context of practice suggests that this is a timely research topic. In addition, research and discussions of theory-practice integration tend to focus on what the problems are, rather than exploring what elements contribute to successful integration; thus the focus on what works is also a gap in the current research and literature.

## **Potential Complexities of the Spaces**

### **Spatial overlap**

Although the spaces are described separately, I suggest that it is impossible for a person to operate in only one space at a time with no regard for the factors in other spaces. While examples of the overlap of spaces have been given throughout the discussion so far, one last example will be identified here. If a new social work student is followed through her or his degree and into the workforce, paying attention to all of the contexts of which he or she is a part, it is possible to see all of the spaces and factors playing out in that person's life and work. The person is influenced in her or his choice of theories and how she or he links them to practice by the educational institution and what was taught. The worker is influenced by personal values and is likely to look for theories that fit with her or his worldview. Personal factors in choice of theories may even be determined in part by this student having missed the class in which a particular theory was reviewed. After graduating and entering the workforce, the use of theories will be influenced by the agency mandate as well as by the person's supervisor and peers to whom she or he turns with practice questions.

Clients will also influence the person's work. In addition, the development of the theory itself and the individual's perception of its applicability to her or his work are relevant.

Although it is logical that there is interplay between these spaces and factors, the research presented here typically examined only one or a few of these elements at a time. Thus, there is no research on how or if these, or other, elements work together in an interactive way to affect social workers' use of theory in practice, including structural social work theory.

### **Agency-structure dialectic**

Marx's agency-structure dialectic is an important component of critical social theory (David Harvey, 2004; Ollman, 2004), and therefore should be a factor in the integration of theory and social work practice. Individuals are not only affected by larger contexts (as in the example in the previous paragraph), they can influence and change these contexts. It is logical that a practitioner who becomes a manager may choose to develop an organization that supports or discourages the use of structural social work theory, which is an interaction of personal and organizational spaces. Thus, the interaction between structures and the agency of people is important in the development of factors as both barriers and supports to the theory-into-practice process. Individuals influence the development of structures at organizational, governmental and societal levels, which in turn influence the use of theories in practice settings. For example, a person involved in developing government policy to govern the funding of non-profit programs can create a policy that allows only work that addresses individual behaviour change, or conversely, can create a broad policy that allows for a program to address structural factors inherent in a social issue. People influence policy

development, and the policy influences the creation of programs and guides the direction of the social work practitioners' practice (Wharf & McKenzie, 2004).

It makes sense that the dialectic would complicate the categories or spaces between theory and practice. The dialectic is not static and not essentialist; it does not happen in one particular way for all factors in a space or for all spaces. Each individual is unique and each organization (composed of unique individuals) is also distinctive. In the same way, each space has the potential, in large part due to the agency-structure dialectic, to be different from other spaces. While critical theory may identify trends or generalizations, these are complicated by the agency-structure dialectic. For example, Mullaly (2007) and Carniol (2005) state that, in general, grassroots organizations such as women's centres are more social justice-focused and thus more open to critical and structural approaches. Yet, one women's centre in northern British Columbia, located in a conservative community and developed under the guidance of a conservative board of directors, emerged with a mandate and programs that are business-focused with a primarily neo-liberal agenda (Anonymous, Personal Communication, 2006). This demonstrates how the agency-structure dialectic can take different turns with different actors in varying locations.

The repercussions of agency-structure dialectic were not a component of the research literature discussed here. The research tended to focus on either how practitioners used theory or on the external factors which influenced them, but not on an interplay of these elements. An examination of the role of the agency-structure dialectic in the context of theory-practice integration is nonexistent in the research literature.

### **A modern/postmodern view which incorporates general trends with diversity**

Although Mullaly (2006) and Carniol's (2005) comments may still be accurate *in general*, or for most women's centres, the understanding of the agency-structure dialectic as a component of each of the spaces acknowledges that there is room for great diversity alongside general truisms. Thus, the spaces where structural social work practice is encouraged and supported may have some similarities that can be identified, but they will not necessarily be the same in all circumstances. In addition, the agency-structure dialectic is ongoing, which ensures that all spaces are constantly changing. This is consistent with critical postmodern approaches that acknowledge both individual diversity as well as general structures (Ife, 1997; Mullaly, 2007).

### **The larger contexts of ideology and oppression**

Both Mullaly and Lundy discuss the importance of a set of beliefs or values, described as ideologies, to social work practice (Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 2002, 2007). This is consistent with Agger's (2006) description of critical theory, which states that oppression is maintained by creating a false consciousness in a number of ways, including the use of ideology. Lundy states that all theories or models have an inherent ideology that may or may not be stated overtly. Mullaly states that "ideology largely determines the nature and form of social work practice" (Mullaly, 2007, 41). Ideology not only determines the way practice is carried out, but it underpins the process of translating theory into practice, and so is relevant in all the spaces where factors of the theory-into-practice processes are located. Thus, ideology is not only a component of structural social work's theoretical analysis, but structural theory and practice are necessarily located in spaces infused with ideology.

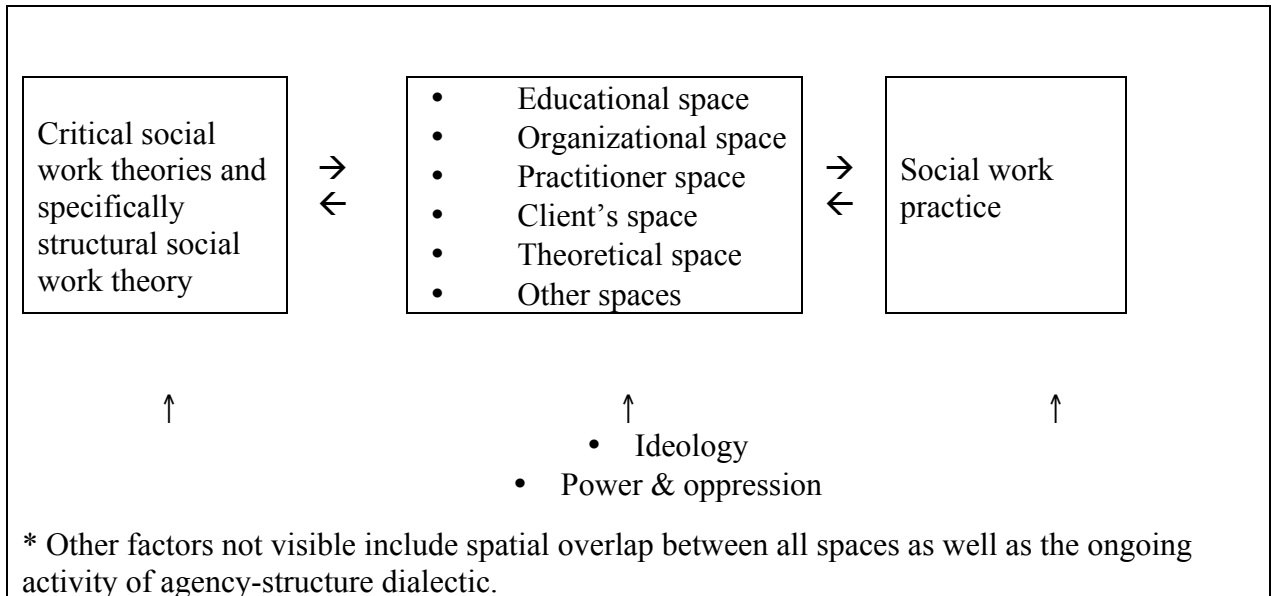


Indeed, all theories and practices exist in an ideological context that may support or undermine any number of theories, not just structural social work theory.

Although the prevailing ideology may change over time, it is commonly accepted that neo-liberalism is the current ideology dominating thinking and societal structures in Canada today (Lundy, 2004). Structural social work theory takes a decidedly *left* stand on ideology (Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 2007). To teach and practice structural social work theory, which compares with a socialist ideology, in a societal context of neo-liberalism creates a larger problem with the translation of theory into practice. The dominant ideology itself currently contributes challenges to the theory-into-practice processes across all five spaces: theoretical, educational, organizational, client and personal (see Figure 7).

One example of the direct impact of ideology on the organizational space came after the election of Harper's Conservative government in 2006 with federal government cuts to organizations engaged in advocacy work in areas such as women's issues, human rights and immigration (Hughes, 2011). Several grassroots, non-profit organizations (such as women's centres and disability organizations) were informed that they would not be eligible for funding if they continued to state (in mission statements, etc.) that their organization would engage in advocacy work on behalf of clients. To ensure continued funds, many agencies dropped the word 'advocacy' from their official documents (Anonymous, Personal Communication, 2007). Such work either goes underground or disappears, but either way this intervention is significantly weakened. Advocacy is an integral part of structural and critical theories, and thus, this is a clear example of the power of ideology and government to dictate the use of theoretical frameworks and interventions to organizations.

**Figure 7. Theory-Practice Integration**



Hooper (2001) conducted research in the infiltration of the neo-liberal ideology of what he terms enterprise culture into social work settings through public policy. He chose to base his research in community development settings as these settings have traditionally developed out of social movements in a critical theoretical grassroots context as a way of addressing issues of inequality (Hooper, 2001). These are the organizations that have traditionally resisted market approaches to social issues. Hooper used critical discourse analysis to examine the infiltration of enterprise culture through the use of language. The research found that the community development organizations and workers had shifted in their use of language to discourse appropriate to an enterprise culture, although such a shift may have been coerced or strategic. He did not find any practitioners who rejected enterprise-culture discourse. The findings of this study underscore the reality that the larger ideological context in which organizations and practitioners exist does effect change in both the agencies and the social workers (Hooper, 2001). Other studies echo the influence of

governments and ideology on organizations (Barnoff et al., 2006; Razack, 2002). A study of social work students' use of theory as students and then as new practitioners found that popular ideology influenced students' theoretical understandings of practice situations both early on in their studies as well as in their later work (Fook et al., 1994, 2000).

Issues of power and oppression are also key components of structural social work theory (Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 2002, 2007), as they are in other applications of critical theory (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Similarly with ideology, it is believed that power and oppression also play out to differing degrees and in different ways in all five spaces between theory and practice. While there is some research on the effects of ideology and issues of power on the ability of organizations and workers to engage in social justice activities (Barnoff et al., 2006; Hooper, 2001; Razack, 2002), the research is limited on the effects of these on structural theory-practice integration. As these are important concepts in structural theory, it suggests that this is a relevant area for investigation.

## **Literature Gaps and Research Questions**

The literature exploring the use of theory in practice is based in a combination of research studies, theoretical discussions, and personal experiences. The only two studies that focus explicitly on the use of structural social work theory in practice by social workers are those by Moreau (1989, 1993) from about 20 years ago. Structural social work theory has changed and grown since this time and there are more schools teaching it with more diverse methods of teaching and applying the theory, suggesting that Moreau's work is likely dated and possibly not as pertinent today. In addition, Moreau's research focused on the skills, techniques and activities used by structural social workers, rather than inquiring about processes involved in theory-practice integration.

The other research that is particularly relevant is that of Fook et al. (1994, 2000) and Chan and Chan (2004). However, there are limitations to these studies as well. The work by Fook et al. focuses on the development of skills more so than theory-practice integration. Chan and Chan focus on theory-practice integration, but their research along with that by Fook et al. are about skills and theory in a general sense, and not structural or critical theories in particular. In addition, studies by both of these research teams have an interest in some, but not all, of the categories and factors described in the literature review.

While the studies by Moreau (1989, 1993), Fook et al. (1994, 2000) and Chan and Chan (2004), and some others, ask social workers directly about their experiences in practice, not all do this. Some of the studies reviewed in this chapter are with social work students who are new to the practice field (Boisen & Syers, 2004; Lam, 2004; Noble, 2001; Razack, 2002). Other studies are on the outcomes of structural organizations as a whole rather than with social workers specifically (P. George & Marlowe, 2005), or are with social work student agency-supervisors (Bogo & Power, 1992).

Finally, the literature review reveals that there are many factors that can be organized into a number of categories, all of which have an impact on theory-practice integration. However, the majority of the research is piecemeal at best, often studying only one, or a small number of, factors at a time, such as the benefits of a particular field seminar teaching model that improves the use of theory for students in a practicum placement (for example, Boisen & Syers, 2004; Lam, 2004; Noble, 2001). In addition, much of the literature is based in personal experiences and theoretical musings rather than research studies. There is no research that examines or seeks to understand the ways in which all of these categories and factors work together in influencing theory-practice integration for any theoretical focus

including critical or structural theories. As well, research on developing the use of theory in practice does not explore questions around agency-structure dialectic, ideology, power or oppression, all of which are components of structural social work theory.

In addition to the gaps in the literature, I have a personal interest in the topic. My interest developed out of two areas in my life where I also identified concerns with the integration of structural theory into practice. The first is my own effort to utilize the theory in the context of the various social work positions I have held over the years and the challenges I experienced during this time. The second is my experience teaching structural social work theory to social work students in a way that makes both theoretical and practical sense. My experiences, and my discussions with students and social workers using the theory, suggest that the implementation of the theory at the practice level is fraught with problems that have not yet been explored or even articulated. These experiences led to my interest in developing this study.

The purpose of the research, which has come out of gaps in the literature and my personal interest, is to better understand the integration of structural social work theory and practice from the perspective of social workers whose practice is informed by this approach. There are two main objectives of the research. The first is to discover and explore the processes involved in structural theory-practice integration for practicing social workers. The focus is on a holistic understanding of theory-practice integration that explores the complexities of the process rather than studying only one or two factors. The starting point is one of exploring the ways in which theory-practice integration is successful, rather than focusing on the negative (the ways in which the integration of theory into practice is problematic); however, it is expected that the two are related and that both will appear in the

data. The second, though related, objective is to understand the ways in which structural social work theory does (and/or does not) work at the operational level, that is, in social work practice, and the barriers and supports to structural practice. Again, the focus is on the ways in which it does and can work, more so than the negative.

The research questions are closely connected to the research objectives. How do participants' experiences offer insights into the processes involved in theory-practice integration? How do social workers think and talk about structural social work theory and the ways in which it informs their practice? What are the processes that support or discourage practice being informed by structural theory, as identified directly by participants or indirectly through their stories of practice?

## **Conclusion**

The literature review is an important step in articulating and exploring the factors that affect the integration of structural theory into practice. The figures throughout the chapter visually display the literature review, demonstrating the diverse context of theory-practice integration. The literature indicates that there are various categories of factors that affect the integration of structural theory and practice, including organizational, educational, client, personal and theoretical spaces with the potential for others. Ideology and oppression infuse each of the spaces. The diagram belies the complexity of these categories, which also include interactions or overlaps between the spaces, the ongoing agency-structure dialectic, and a coming together of modern and postmodern thought by understanding general trends while leaving room for diversity.

The literature review also highlights the limitations of and gaps in knowledge specific to the topic. Most importantly, the literature review and related diagrams are descriptive and

not theoretical or explanatory in nature. Related to this, the existing research typically examines only one or a few factors at a time related to theory-practice integration, with no research that explores a holistic sense of this integration or any understanding of how these categories and factors may work together in their effects on theory-practice integration. The discussion here does not in any way articulate an understanding of how the process of theory-practice integration takes place or the relationships between the spaces. As well, categories have been developed out of the literature and it is unclear as to whether or not they are relevant or complete for practitioners in the field. Lastly, the literature review demonstrates that much of the research on theory-practice integration has focused on the barriers to this process, with little information or research on the ways in which to integrate the two successfully. While the literature review provides a starting point for the development of the study, it leaves a number of questions unanswered.

## CHAPTER THREE. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The literature review revealed numerous limitations with the current research on theory-practice integration, particularly for structural social work theory, suggesting this as an important area for study. There are several reasons for an interest specific to structural social work theory. First of all, the theory was developed in Canada in the 1970s and has been a prominent theory in use at several Canadian schools of social work over the last three decades (Mullaly, 1997, 2007). Second, although related to other critical or progressive theories and approaches such as feminism and anti-racism, it has “more potential for integrating various theoretical concepts and political practices because it does not establish hierarchies of oppression but is concerned with all oppressed groups” (Mullaly, 2007, p. xiii). Structural social work theory also supports social practice taking place both “inside ... [and] outside the existing social welfare system” (Mullaly, 2007, p. 211). Lastly, Mullaly identifies the importance of the role of the dialectic, ensuring that it “does not get trapped within false dichotomies or binary opposites” (2007, p. xiii). Thus, structural social work theory is a strong practice framework, which has developed within the framework of critical social theory and the Canadian context.

Given the strengths of the theory, its relevance to Canadian social work, the criticisms of the gap between structural theory and practice, and the limitations of the research literature to date, this study has the potential to illuminate new and unique information that is relevant to social work practice and education across Canada. Finding a way to bridge the gap between structural social work theory and practice could change the face of social work in Canada and elsewhere. Grounded theory, because of its focus on actions and processes, is a logical starting point in order to identify ways in which participants actively and successfully



incorporate structural social work theory into practice. This chapter provides a description of the research methodology as well as details of the study design.

## **Overview of Methodology**

### **Research paradigm/framework**

Unsurprising perhaps, given the substantive focus of the research, a critical perspective will guide decision-making. It is important for all aspects of the research to be harmonious and connected (Maxwell, 2005), and utilizing a critical theoretical framework as a thread through the substantive topic and research framework will lay the foundation for a consistent focus. This section identifies how the use of a critical theoretical paradigm will guide and inform the development of the research methodologies and data analysis. Other related threads important in the research paradigm include the importance of language and an anti-oppressive perspective.

Critical theory identifies links between social issues and societal structures, with the purpose of challenging and eliminating structural oppression (Agger, 2006). Critical theory holds to the belief that change occurs in two directions: that people are shaped by society and structures, but that people also have the agency with which to shape and change social conditions. This is in contradiction to a positivist search for laws that dictate permanent and unchanging social realities (Agger, 1998). Kincheloe and McLaren's (2005) discussion of the interconnectedness of facts and values parallels Agger's discussion that there is no objective empirical truth that is outside of history and interpretation: "facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 304). A critical theoretical framework for research acknowledges that the research and results will evolve in the context of current realities and

understandings and will be interpreted by a researcher living in these same realities. Thus, while the research will provide a unique and new perspective on the topic, it will be understood in the context of current conditions and a particular analysis. This does not diminish the value of the research and results, but places the research in a position of a larger context, rather than suggesting that it will provide an objective and neutral delivery of facts (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) add a discussion of language to their overview of critical theoretical components. They suggest that the use of language, with which to describe and locate objects and events, is itself socially constructed and “mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption” (p. 304). This adds another layer of interpretation to the historical materialist perspective, as language becomes a site for exploring and understanding power imbalances as well as a potential site for challenging dominant views. Discourse analysis has a focus on connecting knowledge to meaning and language (Agger, 1998; Carroll, 2004; Gavey, 1997). Through critical discourse analyses it is understood that the reproductions of oppression at the structural level can be identified through an exploration of language. The use of language is one way in which dominant groups maintain power by ensuring that their construction of reality is the one that is reproduced in conversations and texts, both formal and informal. Again, the Marxist dialectic is important as Gavey (1997) acknowledges that the influence of language as a way to maintain power and privilege is not the only direction in which influence flows. “Individuals are not passive, however. Rather they are active and have ‘choice’ when positioning themselves in relation to various discourses” (Gavey, 1997, p. 54). Thus the use

of discourse analysis, used in this thesis as a secondary method, can identify the reproduction of power and oppression, as well as challenges to these.

An additional element of the research context is that of anti-oppression. Structural social work theory has at its core an anti-oppressive approach to practice as well as an approach to understanding oppression that links personal issues with structural contexts, which is consistent with critical thought. Overall, women are engaged in social work in higher numbers than men, both as social workers and as clients. In addition, other marginalized groups (such as people of diverse cultural backgrounds and people living in poverty) are more likely to be clients and to face numerous structural barriers in their lives. Given the importance of an anti-oppressive perspective to structural theory, analysis of the research results includes an exploration of privilege and oppression and the ways in which this pertains to participants in the context of theory-practice integration.

In summary, the research is grounded by a critical theoretical framework, as described by Agger (2006). Critical theory is the thread that runs through the research design, ensuring that the research is planned and developed in a coherent fashion, where the design “components work harmoniously together” so that the research is “efficient and successful” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 2). Complementary threads throughout the research include an interest in language and an anti-oppressive perspective.

## **Research approaches**

In addition to being grounded in critical theory and incorporating the threads of language and an anti-oppressive perspective, this study draws upon Charmaz’s (2006) interpretation of grounded theory as its primary research approach, supplemented by ideas related to the use of critical discourse analysis. Charmaz’s constructivist interpretation of

grounded theory provides the foundation and context of the research and seeks to understand the processes that inform theory-practice integration. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) suggests a view that incorporates an analysis of ideology in the language used by the participants and in relevant texts. CDA also reminds the researcher of the dialectic of structure and agency and to look for the ways in which power is resisted. These research perspectives are not foreign to each other as both share a critical theoretical perspective that includes an interest in discourse, power and the agency-structure dialectic. Thus, it is not that there are two distinct pieces in the research approach, but rather the methodologies have overlapping perspectives which complement and interact with each other for a unique exploration of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The following discussion describes grounded theory and CDA separately and acknowledges their differences. However, throughout the research process they will be woven together and utilized in a complementary fashion (O'Connor, 2001). Each methodology or tool will allow a different perspective of the data. The windows of methodology open onto the same scene, but each suggests a slightly different, although overlapping perspective of the view. O'Connor (2001) states: "All lenses will necessarily allow some aspects to be seen while simultaneously hiding others" (p. 153). In relying on both of these perspectives, and grounded in the research paradigm as described above, the research design and analysis will allow for a unique combination of viewpoints of the data in order to best address the research question. The main approach is grounded theory that is expanded with the additional use of critical discourse analysis; these are described in more detail next.

## **Grounded theory as the primary focus of the research approach**

The overarching approach for the research design and data analysis is that of grounded theory. Grounded theory has a focus on actions and processes, which guides the researcher to inquire about and analyze the activities of participants. This makes it a logical approach to use in the examination of social work practice and the actions participants take in their daily work, including actions to incorporate theory into practice.

Grounded theory consists of a set of flexible methods with the purpose of developing new theories grounded in the data. Grounded theory at its inception was reacting to positivist research methodologies that tested existing theories but did not provide scope for developing new ones (Charmaz, 2006; Cooney, 2010; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It is an abductive approach, which combines inductive and deductive reasoning and relies on the pivotal method of constant comparison. The goal of the analysis is to do more than simply identify a list of themes or patterns found across the data. Through the process of constant comparison, categories develop which are then constantly compared with each other and with the data. As data accumulates and becomes richer and more complex, the researcher deepens the analysis with the inclusion of sub-categories. Rather than stopping here with what is essentially a set of themes, grounded theory researchers then move to identify relationships between sub-categories and categories (in a vertical manner) as well as between categories (in a horizontal manner). It is the focus on actions, processes and relationships between categories that moves the analysis from a set of themes to a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

The development of grounded theory came out of work by Glaser and Strauss beginning in the 1960s (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Although their work was innovative in its day and promoted qualitative research during a positivist era, by the 1990s it

was critiqued as being too positivist itself, a feature of research to which it had originally been in opposition (Charmaz, 2005, 2006). Glaser and Strauss themselves eventually moved in different directions in their interpretations of grounded theory, and others have added their interpretations to the grounded theory discussion (Cooney, 2010; Kelle, 2007). Thus, when discussing grounded theory it needs to be recognized that there is no single version of grounded theory, and elements of the research process will vary depending on which interpretation is being used.

It has recently been suggested that there are three general forms of grounded theory in use today (Hunter, Murphy, Grealish, Casey, & Keady, 2011). The first is classic grounded theory carried on by the work of Glaser and most closely aligned with the original work by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This version has been critiqued as identifying with a positivist perspective (Charmaz, 2006; Cooney, 2010). The second is Straussian grounded theory, carried on by Corbin and Strauss (2008). It is “aimed at making GT more transparent to researchers” by creating a more detailed and structured analysis process (Hunter et al., 2011, p. 6). However, this version has been critiqued as being too structured, complex and potentially rigid (Hunter et al., 2011).

Charmaz (2006) has developed her own version, which is the third type of grounded theory, and it encompasses the concept of social construction (Ghezeljeh & Emami, 2009; Hunter et al., 2011). Her version includes a focus on addressing issues of power, between the researcher and participants specifically, and at a societal level generally (Hunter et al., 2011). Research is seen as a collaboration with participants, one where the researcher’s place in the research context is identified and acknowledged.

Although grounded theory was not originally developed with critical perspectives in mind, and therefore has been criticized for not recognizing issues of power, Charmaz is clear that this is a weakness of researchers using the approach and not of the approach itself (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2005) states that grounded theory is consistent with a social justice or critical theoretical framework in that the method can be used to explore conditions of injustice as well as suggest future actions for social change. She also suggests that combining grounded theory and social justice “enhances the power of each” (2005, p. 529). The compatibility of Charmaz’s version of grounded theory with a critical theoretical orientation makes it a logical choice for this research.

### Elements of Charmaz’s grounded theory relevant to this study

The first element of grounded theory that is important to note is a focus common to all versions of grounded theory. It is the admonishment that the guidelines for the research process are flexible and should be utilized in a manner that is most effective for each researcher and study (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Charmaz writes, “I emphasize flexible guidelines, not methodological rules, recipes and requirements” (2006, p. 9). Thus, variations in application can differ not only between versions of grounded theory, but also within versions and from study to study.

A second element of grounded theory is the iterative process to data generation, analysis and interpretation. Analysis begins with the first interviews and continues throughout the processes of data collection and writing the results. As analysis suggests findings the researcher returns to previously analyzed data for continued analysis regarding the new finding or returns to re-interview participants. Thus, the analysis process goes back and forth, time and again, between the different steps of analysis and between the stages of

data collection, analysis and writing, which can blur the lines between the steps of analysis. Grounded theorists describe the methods and steps of analysis as flexible, not as required, and thus the analysis process also morphs as the analysis deepens so as to be relevant to the research in ways that may be unique (Charmaz, 2006).

The third element of grounded theory is the emphasis on the use of constant comparative methods as a core tool of the analysis process (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Constant comparison occurs at all stages of data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Initially, this process is used to compare data and codes with other data and codes. As analysis progresses codes are grouped into categories and categories deepen with the development of sub-categories. Categories are constantly compared with other categories while sub-categories are compared with other sub-categories; both of these happen in a horizontal fashion. In addition, categories are compared with sub-categories in a vertical fashion. It is the use of constant comparative methods that deepens the analysis process and grounds the developing theory in the data. (Charmaz, 2006)

The focus on actions and processes during the analysis is the fourth element of grounded theory with particular relevance to this study. The focus on actions begins with the initial coding of data where, rather than summarizing the data, coding should focus on the actions of the participants, although it continues throughout the analysis process. Charmaz writes:

I have stressed using gerunds [action verbs] in coding and memo-writing. Adopting gerunds fosters theoretical sensitivity because these words nudge us out of static topics and into enacted processes.... If you can focus on *actions*, you have ready grist for seeing sequences and making connections.... Thus, I suggest renewed emphasis on actions and processes, not on individuals. (2006, p. 136)



It is the focus on actions and processes rather than themes that moves the developing analysis from mere description to that of theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006). This element in particular makes grounded theory a compelling choice of approach for this study.

The combination of inductive and deductive logic is the fifth element of Charmaz's grounded theory important to this study. Grounded theory developed in reaction to the positivism and deductive focus of the day, and so there is often an assumption that grounded theory is only inductive. However, Strauss states that this was never intended and that the approach was always supposed to incorporate both deductive and inductive logic (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This may begin with the literature review, which some identify as having the potential to identify the starting point, albeit not the end point, of the research (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, the analysis process inductively identifies codes and categories in the data, then returns to the data to find out if there is any confirmation of the findings. Charmaz interviewed one grounded theory researcher on this interplay between inductive and deductive reasoning and the person said:

You're inductively developing theory and then you're at least trying out your hunches here continuously.... We can call it an abductive method.... I wouldn't say we are exactly testing theory, depending what you mean by testing, but we are testing our hunches. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 104)

Charmaz does not describe grounded theory as a process to test theory. However, she does describe this interplay between inductive and deductive processes and locates grounded theory as an abductive reasoning process (Charmaz, 2006).

The sixth element is the role of the literature review. The role of the literature review in grounded theory is, at times, contested in the literature (Charmaz, 2006). However, there can be a lack of understanding in the significant differences in the role of the literature review between classic and newer interpretations, such as Charmaz's (2006) version, of

grounded theory (Dunne, 2011). Although classic grounded theory typically encourages limited interaction with the literature prior to conducting grounded theory research, Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory as well as Corbin and Strauss' (2008) interpretation both acknowledge that it is not possible for a researcher to approach the data from a perspective of a blank slate.

Not only is having prior knowledge a reality, but also many authors argue that a review of the literature is beneficial to the grounded theory process (Charmaz, 2006; Dunne, 2011; Lempert, 2007; Urquhart, 2007). Dunne (2011) describes how conducting a review of the existing literature can strengthen a grounded theory study in many ways including by: "provid[ing] a cogent rationale for a study," ensuring that the research "has not already been done," "orient[ing] the researcher," and assisting the researcher to "become aware of, rather than numb to, possible unhelpful preconceptions" (Dunne, 2011, p. 116). Lempert states:

Additionally I argue for on-going researcher familiarity with the literature of the substantive area of study and its applicable theories. Engaging the literature provides the researcher with knowledge of the substantive area in sufficient depth to understand the parameters of the discourse and to enter into the current theoretical conversation. (2007, p. 261)

Rather than avoid the literature, Urquhart (2007) suggests that researchers need to ensure self-awareness in their use of the literature to avoid "'stifl[ing]' the coding" (p. 351).

Corbin and Strauss list several ways in which the literature review can guide the research. In describing the uses of the literature review they state:

- It can provide questions for initial observations and interviews.
- It can be used to stimulate questions during the analysis.
- It can suggest areas for theoretical sampling...
- It can be used to confirm findings, and just the reverse, findings can be used to illustrate where the literature is incorrect, simplistic, or only partially explains a phenomenon. (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 37)

All of these are ways in which the literature review has been used in this project. Therefore, it is apparent that a literature review can guide the research design, including the development of research questions, theoretical sampling and interview questions. As such, it also means that the literature review may be reflected in a variety of ways in the findings, as the literature can confirm the findings, and the findings can reject or build on the literature. It is important, however, to ensure that the literature is not imposed on the data, but rather that the findings come out of the data itself (Charmaz, 2006). Steps were taken to ensure that this was the case here, and these are described later in this chapter. The use of the literature review as a starting point in the research design is consistent with Charmaz's (2006) interpretation of grounded theory.

### Critical discourse analysis as a thread within the research approach

In keeping with the dialectic of critical theory, discourse is a place where power and oppression are demonstrated, but is also a place where power can be challenged, offering a fit with the research paradigm and analysis process in this study (Carroll, 2004; Gavey, 1997; Parker, 2004). There is no single definition of discourse, although Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) suggest that a starting point is to describe it as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (p. 2) in an attempt “to create a unified system of meaning” (p. 27). In discourse analysis, language is not seen as a neutral reflection of reality, but rather it produces, reproduces and creates meaning, while at the same time offering a space in which to use language to challenge these preconceived meanings (L. Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). Discourse is more than just verbal or written communication between people. “‘Discourse’ refers to much more than simply printed text but to the full

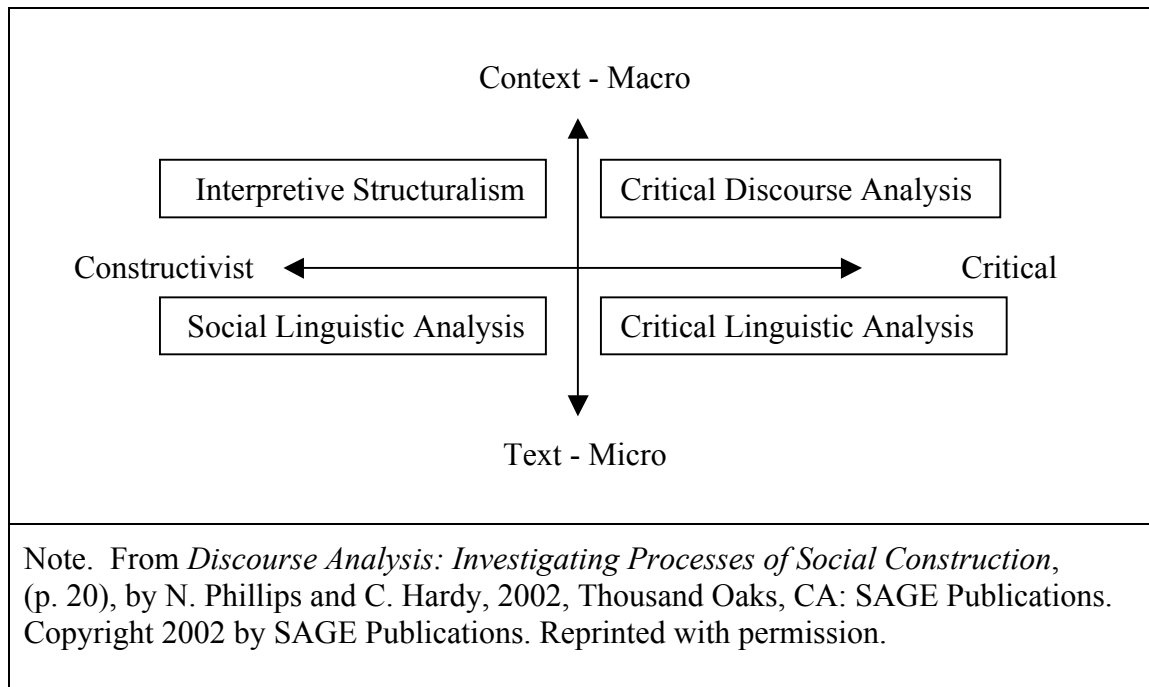
range of practices, structures, and media that saturate our world and ourselves with meaning” (Carroll, 2004, p. 225).

In this research, I have utilized critical discourse analysis as a thread throughout the data analysis process, including analysis of transcripts as well as texts identified by participants. Through the use of critical discourse analysis, I have sought to locate and explicate dominant discourses related to incorporating theory into social work practice, and the ways in which these dominant discourses are being challenged. Discourse analysis will add depth to the exploration of theory-practice integration, looking for both the ways in which language and other means of communication can support or challenge theory-practice integration.

There are various approaches to discourse analysis. In 1998, Phillips and Ravasi organized these approaches along two continuums, which Phillips and Hardy (2002) organized into the following graph in Figure 8 (Carroll, 2004; N. Phillips & Hardy, 2002). The first dimension, of context and text, describes the possibility of focusing on a microanalysis of a text or texts (at the bottom of the axis) or focusing on the larger context that surrounds the discourse being examined. The second dimension articulates a continuum between examining the construction of social reality (on the left) as one perspective and a critical focus on “dynamics of power, knowledge, and ideology that surround discursive processes” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 20). These extremes on the continuum are not in conflict with each other; “this is a continuum not a dichotomy” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 20) and so critical theory and a constructivist approach can be used in concert (Charmaz, 2006). For the purposes of this research, I have utilized a critical discourse analysis

approach, as Phillips and Hardy indicate in the upper right portion of Figure 8. Critical discourse analysis is consistent with the critical framework encompassed in grounded theory.

**Figure 8. Approaches to Discourse Analysis**



Critical discourse analysis brings a unique perspective to the data analysis. One such addition is its focus on language as a way to understand issues of power and ideology. Critical discourse analysis allows for an examination of the ways in which power and ideology are present in the research texts (both interviews and written documents), as well as the ways in which they influence the context surrounding the texts and the participants.

One more unique piece that a critical discourse approach brings to the analysis is a view of discourse as not only a demonstration of institutionalized power, but also as a location of resisting or challenging the status quo. For example, practitioners may be trying to work from a progressive structural social work theoretical framework in their practice, but within the confines of traditional organizations that actively discourage this approach. A

critical discourse analysis looks for evidence of ways in which the social worker resists and continues with a structural framework, perhaps in a hidden way. Grounded theory and critical discourse analysis work together, adding depth to the research analysis in a complementary process.

## **Research Design**

### **Participant recruitment**

Participants were recruited during the initial sampling based on the research question. I used a broad approach to recruitment including emails to social work organizations across Canada, switching to snowball and purposeful sampling as recruitment progressed, as is consistent with a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Emails with posters and information on the project were sent to schools of social work, faculty members and professional associations, asking for the information to be either forwarded to social workers they knew or included in a newsletter to their members or students (Appendices A and B). Purposeful sampling occurred at the same time by sending emails to specific individuals known to be interested in a structural perspective, inviting them to consider the project or forward the email to others they knew. A few initial participants identified others through a snowball approach. Each of these approaches resulted in additional participants for the study. Only one person was excluded from the study, due to his description of training in structuralism from sociology, not structural social work theory. An overview of the participants is presented in the next chapter.

Most of the participants were at a significant distance from the researcher and so, while two were interviewed in person, the remaining were interviewed over the phone. It was not as difficult to conduct interviews by phone as I had initially wondered about. I spent

additional time building rapport at the beginning of phone interviews, and once this had been established, the interviews progressed with as much depth and richness as the in-person interviews. The phone interviews may have allowed for an even greater sense of anonymity or confidentiality than face to face interviews for participants. The only limitation of phone interviews was when a participant was distracted by children or other situations. However, these situations were very rare and participants quickly returned to the interview and remained engaged in the discussion.

### **Participant sampling and definitions of theory**

Participants were practicing social workers, with a BSW and/or MSW, who self-identified as engaging in social work practice that is informed by a structural perspective. It was important to ensure the potential participants had an adequate understanding of structural social work theory, consistent with the description in chapter one. Yet asking participants to define structural theory up front as a screening tool had the possibility of alienating potential participants for fear that they were not academic enough, and thus potentially losing valuable information. Therefore, to identify relevant participants, there was an initial discussion with potential participants which included questions about what a structural perspective meant to them; this discussion was kept brief so as not to alienate them, while seeking to ensure that their perspective fit the broad parameters of the research definition. This likely resulted in a range of definitions of structural theory that differed slightly at times, but all participants did have common ground in their understandings of a structural perspective that fit with the broad research definition. Exploring the range of understandings of structural theory presented by participants yielded useful data relevant to understanding theory-practice integration.

Consistency in definitions was determined by comparing participants' descriptions of structural social work theory with core concepts as identified in the structural social work literature. According to the literature (Carniol, 2005; Moreau, 1979; Mullaly, 2007) the following concepts are seen as fundamental to the theory. First, there is a link between personal or social issues and societal structures. That is, societal structures (such as institutional practices and power; popular beliefs and worldviews; current political, social and economic ideologies; and social policies) create, maintain, and exacerbate social problems faced by individuals, groups and communities. Second, and related to the first, is that anti-oppressive practice is a necessary aspect of structural social work. This is combined with an understanding of oppression and the interactions of individual, community and institutional levels of oppression. Challenging oppression at all three levels is a component of anti-oppressive practice in the structural tradition.

### **Participant selection**

As structural social work theory integrates micro, mezzo and macro levels of practice, it was expected that the participants would work in or across at least one and possibly all three of these fields. Initial selection of participants sought people from across all three levels of practice (micro, mezzo and macro) in order to reflect the use of theory in practice from all types of social work, not just one area. Since the focus of the study was on the successful use of theory in the field, participants were expected to have at least two years of social work practice experience post social work degree so that they would have had time to gain confidence in their work.

Theoretical sampling is a technique that is an important part of a grounded theory study. In grounded theory, data analysis does not occur in a linear fashion after data



collection is complete, but rather it is an ongoing process that should begin as soon as the first interview is completed (Charmaz, 2005, 2006). As categories begin to emerge from the initial analysis, the researcher identifies areas where more data is needed to flesh out the categories. Theoretical sampling guides the researcher to seek out participants for the purpose of acquiring data to address gaps in the developing theory (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical sampling also leads the researcher to focus on categories which need more data not only by seeking participants with experiences in that area, but also by asking more questions on that category to future participants (Charmaz, 2006; Morse, 2007). A limitation to this sampling method is that it is not random and results are not generalizable. However, as this is exploratory with the focus on generating an initial grounded theory, generalization is not the goal at this time. The strength of the sampling method is that it allows the research to focus directly on a small segment of practitioners (those using a particular theory) who may not be adequately represented in a random study. The sampling methods used here are more likely to move the analysis to the level of the theoretical.

Saturation is another important part of grounded theory research that is related to sampling. In grounded theory research, the researcher interviews participants until she or he determines that there is saturation of the theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz states: “categories are ‘saturated’ when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories” (p. 113). The focus on theoretical saturation means the exact number of participants in the study is unknown at the outset. Participant selection continued until the researcher was convinced that the theoretical categories were thorough and complete.

There are no set standards for numbers of participants or observations in qualitative research, generally, nor in grounded theory, specifically (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Patton, 2002).

There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources. (Patton, 2002, p. 244)

Yet it is possible to have a sample size that is too small (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Sandelowski, 1995). "Inadequate sample sizes can undermine the credibility of research findings" (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 179). On the other hand, it is also possible for sample sizes to be too large to allow for an in-depth analysis of the data (Sandelowski, 1995). One suggestion regarding sample and observation size is between 30 to 50 observations, again with the caveat that size be determined by theoretical saturation (Morse, 1994), although Charmaz (2005 & 2006) does not suggest a target number of samples or observations. The term *observations* does not equal numbers of participants, but can refer to a number of interviews with the same participants as well as other types of data such as texts, documents, questionnaires, and the like (M. Campbell & Gregor, 2002; Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; N. Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Sandelowski, 1995).

In this research, there was a goal of between 10 and 15 participants in the study, with a final total of 14. Initial interviews, in particular, were lengthy and in-depth, lasting approximately 2 hours on average and ranging from 1 to 2.5 hours. Follow-up interviews also lasted from 1 to 2.5 hours. Three participants (John, Shanks and Annie) were only interviewed once. Three participants were interviewed three times each (Sophie, Billy and Melissa), and the remaining eight of the participants were each interviewed twice, for a total of 28 interviews and approximately 42 hours of recorded interview time. Some participants

were also contacted by email with follow-up questions, and it was made clear that responses to email questions would form a part of the research data. There were 12 email responses that contributed to the data collection. Each participant completed a socio-demographic questionnaire (see Appendix F), and there were 15 texts or documents generated for analysis. Interviews, emails, questionnaires and texts combined resulted in a total of 69 observations for data analysis. Thus, the sample size falls well within Morse's suggested minimum parameters (1994), and is even on the larger size.

### **Informed consent and ethics approval**

People who indicated an interest in the study were provided with a brief description of the research and expectations of participants (see Appendix C). Those who were interested in the study were also given an informed consent form to sign before participating in the project (see Appendix D). All participants were adults capable of providing informed consent and the study was deemed to have minimal risk. The project was reviewed and approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board and met all of the criteria for research with human subjects (Certificate of Approval #H09-01862).

### **Data collection**

Data was collected in a number of ways, as described above. The primary research data consisted of the interviews, although all of the various forms of data were useful.

#### **Data collection: Interview data**

The interviews consisted of open-ended, semi-structured questions with room for participants to take the interview into areas relevant to them. The ideas identified in the literature review suggested a starting point for interview questions, in conjunction with the

overarching guiding role of the research objectives and questions. Interview questions explored stories, actions, examples and thoughts of participants about a structural perspective in the context of their experiences. However, there was a broad enough scope to the interview questions that participants could direct the discussion into other areas or challenge previous categories. Indeed, the analysis demonstrated that the categories from the literature review were superficial and descriptive and did not adequately do justice to the processes involved in theory-practice integration of participants. The interview guide can be found in Appendix E.

There was a desire to not alienate or scare off potential participants and so language was chosen carefully, with less focus on questions asking directly about theory and more focus instead on activities, what people did at work, and stories or examples from their work and personal lives. Interview questions as well as recruitment posters and emails asked about social work practice that was *informed* by a structural social work approach (rather than asking about the *use* of structural social work theory). Participants were asked about a structural approach or perspective, and the word ‘theory’ was used less often. This did seem to have the intended effect of calming some participants somewhat, in that they were not expected to have a textbook definition of theory on the tip of their tongues, and they were not expected to be following a strict definition of structural social work.

Interviews are intended “to explore, not to interrogate” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 29). Grounded theory interviews are semi-structured and Charmaz describes them as “open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” (2006, p. 28). The goal is to explore the participants’ life experiences and daily activities, as they relate to the research topic, in a way that uncovers implicit meanings and assumptions that may be hidden in the

context of daily activities (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz states, “I *generate* data by investigating taken-for-granted aspects of life” (2006, p. 34). The goal is not to understand an individual’s reasons for actions, but rather to better understand larger processes that are actively influencing people’s daily activities. Therefore, although the interview questions explored people’s activities and stories, the goal was to move beyond description, beyond the individual and toward an illumination of actions, relations and processes. The interviews included questions to participants about their social work practice, their understanding of a structural social work perspective, the ways in which they learned about theory, and how they choose which theory (or theories) and interventions to use in their work. Participants were asked to share examples from their social work practice as well as stories from their personal lives, educational experiences, upbringing and other areas as they were relevant to the topic. As with other types of qualitative methods, the interviewer and questions in grounded theory were flexible in order to follow up on themes, ideas and activities as they emerged in each interview. Topics were explored as they came up in the conversation, and so the interviews often differed from each other in terms of how they were structured and organized, sometimes appearing as if the topics were jumping all over the place, as was noted by a few participants.

Grounded theory begins to narrow and focus the interview topics as more interviews are completed (Charmaz, 2006). This is due to the focus on developing and pursuing emerging theoretical categories as identified in the initial analysis of the first interviews. As theoretical categories emerged in the initial analyses, these topics were pursued in future interviews, in addition to being open to new directions and categories (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz advised to be aware of disagreements among the data and to not ignore these but to

find out how they fit within the data. Another grounded theorist describes using a process of convergent interviewing where disagreements or exceptions among the data are then probed further in the interviews in order to understand and explain the differences (Dick, 2007). In addition to exploring emerging categories during the following interviews, findings and data in disagreement with previous data or categories were also pursued with additional questioning. Charmaz (2006) also indicates that there is a rhythm to the interview process. Interviews should start at a safe or surface level of conversation, moving into deeper or potentially more difficult (emotionally, etc.) material as the participant indicates that he or she is comfortable. Rather than ending the interview abruptly, the interviewer should move the discussion back to a surface conversational level before closing. I drew on these understandings of the data generation process for the development of the interview process and structure.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants were invited to choose a pseudonym, which was then attached to the transcriptions and used in the writing process. Actual names of participants were not attached to transcriptions, data or analyses. Where participants' names appeared in the transcriptions, (a few of them spoke of themselves in the third person on occasion), the names were replaced by the pseudonym. The first few interviews served as an opportunity to pilot the interview questions and determine if they were accomplishing the intentions of the research. Initial interviews were spread out over approximately 7 months.

The initial and ongoing coding and categorizing guided the development of the interview questions for the next participants. As interviews progressed, it was clear that participants' examples from practice were providing important information for two newly

formed categories in the theoretical framework, so questions specific to these emerging categories were the focus more often in later interviews. Analysis also led to the inclusion of interview questions requesting examples related to the topic from other areas in participants' lives, such as examples of their experiences with oppression, or examples of learning about a structural approach in school or from friends. A few additional wrap-up questions for the end of the interview also came out of this process. Questions were not necessarily asked with the same wording or in the same order with every participant. Interviews flowed according to the information the person was sharing, although most interviews ended up covering similar concepts, albeit sometimes in different ways. While several new questions were added over time and some questions were reworded to make more sense to participants, there was not a dramatic shift in the interview questions overall, and so the initial participants did not have to be completely re-interviewed with new questions, as was a possibility at the outset. However, records were kept of follow-up questions to be asked of earlier participants based on the emerging data. This process is consistent with the grounded theory guidelines for theoretical sampling, data analysis and the ongoing development of interview questions to pursue areas of emergent theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interview guide reflects the initial questions as well as those developed as analysis progressed.

In grounded theory research, it is not necessary to conduct a follow-up interview with each participant, but such interviews may take place based on the principles of theoretical saturation and sampling (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The original research plan suggested the potential for three distinct and separate interviews with each participant: (1) the initial interview; (2) a follow-up interview for clarification or to

ask new questions based on emerging categories; and (3) a final interview to review and request feedback on the results. While all of these types of interviews occurred, they did not normally occur in a set of three distinct interviews per participant. There were several reasons for this.

First, as categories emerged the interview questions for the next participants were revised and so, particularly for the later participants, there was often little need for follow-up interviews for clarification or to address new categories, as this had been done in an ongoing fashion. Second, all of the interviews including the initial ones were very thorough and so, as categories emerged during analysis, the first step was to return to the earlier transcripts to analyze them again with a fresh perspective (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Many times, the new categories or coding were also present in the earlier transcripts, but had not been identified during the first analysis. Third, these types of interviews were sometimes combined such that the second interview of a participant often included both follow-up and clarification questions, as well as requesting feedback on the emerging theoretical framework.

Finally, the principle of theoretical sampling guided the choice of which participants to return the results to for feedback. The core of the newly developed theoretical framework includes stages of development of structural practice (described in chapter six) and this is where feedback from participants was the most important. It was clear from the initial interviews that only certain participants had progressed through all or most of the stages, and so feedback would be most pertinent and relevant from these people. Thus, the principle of theoretical sampling helped me to identify which participants to return to for the final interview. Prior to the last interview, participants were sent the summary charts on the



theoretical framework (found in chapters five, six and seven). A few of the participants who expressed interest were also provided with a rough draft of chapter six. These findings were then discussed in the final interview, contributing to the concept of interpretive rigour where efforts are made to ensure that the researcher's interpretations fit with the participants' experiences (Cooney, 2011).

#### **Data collection: Socio-demographic questionnaires**

Participants were asked to complete a socio-demographic questionnaire before the interview. Surveys and questionnaires have been utilized as adjuncts to grounded theory research at times (Currie, 2009). Participants were told that completion of this was voluntary, and that the interview could proceed without it, if they preferred. All of the participants completed the form. Given structural theory's focus on anti-oppressive understandings and the desire to explore data in the context of oppression and privilege, participants were asked in the questionnaire to indicate whether or not they identified with a marginalized population. The form asked for their job title, a description of their employer, and a description of work activities, including linking each activity to a specific level of practice (micro, mezzo or macro). They were also asked to estimate what percentage of time at their current position was spent on activities at each level, and for the same estimate of percentages over their social work career. The form also had questions on how long they had been in their current position, levels of education, location of education, whether or not they were taught a structural approach at school, and when their degrees or certificates had been completed, which allowed for an understanding of how long they had been practicing since their first social work degree. These questions were useful to the data analysis process and responses are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

## Data collection: Textual data

Textual (or written) as well as verbal (or interview) data are components of data collection in both critical discourse analysis and grounded theory (M. Campbell & Gregor, 2002; Carroll, 2004; Charmaz, 2006; Parker, 2004; N. Phillips & Hardy, 2002; D. E. Smith, 1987, 1990, 1999). While grounded theory authors typically distinguish between written and verbal data (M. Campbell & Gregor, 2002; Charmaz, 2006), discourse analysis researchers often describe all data (verbal, written, symbols, pictures, etc.) as text (Carroll, 2004; N. Phillips & Hardy, 2002). For the purposes of this research, I have established a distinction where verbal data is described as interview data, and the term textual data refers to written or visual documents.

According to grounded theory, participants themselves may refer to texts which have an influence on their experiences or which guide, expand or limit their practices or interpretations of their worlds and activities (Charmaz, 2006). When participants identified texts as having an impact on their work and experiences, they were asked if it was possible to share a copy of the text for analysis as a way of offering additional depth to the research. Many participants mentioned texts, often more than one, and several of them were able to share these for analysis. Eight participants shared texts and a total of 15 texts were analyzed. Texts were typically related to the participants' work such as program mandates, job descriptions, agency mission statements, and forms they were required to fill out. More unusual texts were also identified, such as government reports and, in one case, a person's Facebook page. More details on the types of texts and the contexts in which they existed are described in the results chapters.

## Data analysis tools: Field notes, memos and diagrams

Field notes, memos and diagrams are useful tools by which the researcher can record thoughts and ideas about the emerging categories and theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006). These written records become another type of data to use during analysis, and also are a way to document and spur on current analyses; thus, these tools can be both data and a process of analysis, although in this study they were used more to assist with the analysis. These written records, along with analysis notes, can also serve as a type of audit trail to demonstrate the quality, depth and transparency of the research (Bowen, 2009).

Charmaz (2006) suggests that although ethnographers use field notes the most extensively, field notes can be valuable even when the research focuses on the use of interviews. Covan (2007) states that there are three types of field notes: (1) simple descriptions, (2) comments on methodology, and (3) and theoretical observations. In this research, my field notes included elements of all three of these as well as notes on my experiences as they related to the research. According to Charmaz, grounded theory has a particular interest in processes and actions, and these are to be reflected in the field notes (2006). In my field notes I commented on the use of language by participants and on points that appeared to be important or troublesome. They were also useful to me in the development of coding, categories and the theoretical framework.

Memo-writing is considered to be different than field notes (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), although there is an overlap with theoretical field notes (Covan, 2007). Charmaz describes memo-writing as a tool to assist in data analysis and the development of categories and a theoretical framework. This is where researchers write about theoretical connections between emerging categories and patterns (Lempert, 2007). Memos in this

research were typically notes on initial insights about the developing categories and theoretical framework, so as not to lose them for later writing.

The lines between field notes and memos eventually blurred in this research, and trying to separate them became confusing rather than useful, so eventually I combined the two into one ongoing document. Memos and field notes were reviewed several times during the course of data analysis and this proved useful to the analytic process as earlier ideas, upon review, often spurred analysis on to more complexity. As I began writing the chapters on results, the use of field notes and memos slowed. Instead of using formal memos or field notes as much, I instead wrote about emerging analytic ideas and new insights, and incorporated these directly into either the data analysis document or an outline of the results chapters so that they were visible to me as the work progressed.

The tool that proved the most useful to me during the analysis process was that of diagramming (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Diagramming places codes and categories into a visual display for the purpose of assisting in organization of categories, highlighting gaps, and explaining or extrapolating the relationships between and within categories. Diagrams are connected to theorizing in various ways and as such are important to the analysis process (Lempert, 2007). Diagramming was very useful in thinking through the relationships between the categories and in understanding the stages of development in the practitioner space, as is consistent with the literature (Charmaz, 2006; Lempert, 2007). I developed the diagrams from initial simplistic ones to the later more complex charts used in chapters five, six and seven. Diagrams initially demonstrated gaps in the findings and spurred my analysis to greater depth, while the final charts provide an overview of the findings and the theoretical framework.

## **Steps to ensure rigour and to move the analysis beyond the literature review**

A number of actions were undertaken in order to ensure that the findings were coming out of the data, the ideas from the literature review were not imposed on the data, and the research moved beyond the parameters of the literature review. The line-by-line coding as the first step in the analysis process was one valuable tool in ensuring that the codes were coming out of the data. However, in addition to that analysis step described later in this chapter, there were six additional actions taken to ensure analysis rigour.

The first action to separate the analysis from the literature was a time lapse of approximately 3 years between the completion of the literature review and the beginning of data collection and analysis. Charmaz encourages this use of a time lapse: “you can let this material [literature review] lie fallow until after you have developed your categories and the analytic relationships between them” (2006, p. 166). As is suggested, I did not revisit the literature review until after the analysis was largely completed.

The second action I undertook to prevent the imposition of the literature review on the data was to maintain a sense of self-awareness about this potential and to consciously focus on the data itself during analysis. “There is no reason why a researcher cannot be self aware, and be able to appreciate other theories without imposing them on the data” (Urquhart, 2007, p. 351).

The third action to prevent the imposition of literature on the data is to “consider treating extant concepts as problematic and then to look for the extent to which their characteristics are lived and understood, not as given in text books” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 166). During analysis I remained open to data that disputed the literature review as well as data that expanded or changed the ideas found in the literature, or came at the information from a new perspective based in participant experiences. In her description of the analysis process

Charmaz (2006) exhorts researchers to ensure that each line of coding is included in the developing analysis, even if initially it does not seem to have relevance. Thus a piece of data cannot be ignored if it does not seem to fit. This concrete guideline, while frustrating at times, proved to be very useful in ensuring that the analysis remained true to the data, resulting in numerous findings with significant differences from the initial literature review.

The fourth action to demonstrate how the analysis remained true to the data is that of an audit trail (Bowen, 2009; Cooney, 2011). Written records in the form of coding, field notes and on-going analysis were not only useful to the analysis process, but these records also serve to provide a concrete link between the developed categories and the data itself. As the analysis deepened, each version of the analysis was filed electronically by date. I reviewed these documents periodically and could see how the analysis developed over time, while monitoring to ensure continued connections to the data.

The fifth action with the purpose of ensuring that the findings are true to participants' experiences is to share the results with participants and ask for their thoughts on the findings (Cooney, 2011). I conducted follow-up interviews with participants to check out emerging categories and the developing framework with them. Participants provided thoughtful insights that added to the depth of the analysis, while enthusiastically supporting the developing framework.

The sixth set of actions not only demonstrates a strong connection between the findings and the data, but it also reveals how the overlapping data collection and analysis process guided the developing interview questions to address new categories suggested in earlier interviews. A number of actions are relevant here including: preliminary findings from early interviews were discussed and confirmed with later participants, codes used

language from the participants' interviews wherever possible, and information from earlier participants guided the focus of the interview questions in new directions for later interviews as categories emerged. All of these connections to participants' experiences and interviews are tools to ensure rigour of the study and to ensure that the findings are grounded in the data (Cooney, 2011). These actions also ensured that the emerging findings moved well beyond the ideas found in the literature review and actively pursued the new ideas coming out of the interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

Data collection, data analysis and the writing of the results were intertwined throughout the research process, as is expected with grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006). Data analysis began after the second interview was completed, and interviews were spread out over several months to allow time for initial analyses to inform later interviews. Researchers are expected to examine the methods in the context of their research and use components flexibly, as relevant to each study (Charmaz, 2006). As the analysis began I chose to remain quite close to the methods outlined by Charmaz in order to become comfortable with the process, and to better understand how it worked and the possibilities it offered. Over the course of several analyses I had a much better grasp of the analysis process and thus how to use it more effectively and efficiently. The process became quicker but without compromising the findings.

Consistent with Charmaz's (2006) suggestions, analysis took place in a series of four steps. As is also consistent with grounded theory methods, the steps blurred into and overlapped with each other as the analysis deepened; however, they are described separately here to assist in articulating the process. The first step was to conduct line-by-line coding

with a goal of developing codes that describe processes and actions. At this step literally each line of the transcript is coded. Interviews varied from 1 to 2.5 hours each with lengthy transcripts, so upon completion of coding for one transcript I would easily have 800 to 1,000 lines of codes. Charmaz (2006) suggests that line-by-line coding keeps the researcher close to the data ensuring that codes and categories come out of the data rather than being forced on the data by the researcher. Similarly, Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe this step of analysis as “open coding” (p. 160) which consists of “break[ing] the data into manageable pieces” (p. 160), by relying on “natural breaks in the manuscript” (p. 162). Where the transcripts described a particular event or incident over several lines, then incident-by-incident coding could be used instead. In my analysis, it was line-by-line coding that was the most useful to the analytic process, although incident-by-incident coding occurred occasionally when the data offered discrete incidents by which to do this.

It is vital at this initial coding stage to not just summarize the transcripts, but to move the codes to the level of action. Each time I coded a line I would ask myself, “What is the action taking place here? What is the participant *doing*?” I would review codes often as well. Initially I found myself simply summarizing the participant’s statements and I would have to go back, think about the actions the person was taking in that line, and re-code for actions rather than summaries. The initial coding process was very time consuming and drawn out, particularly for the earlier transcripts. Charmaz (2006) acknowledges that this step fragments the data into parts, but writes that this is a deliberate process to create the bones of the research and to set the stage for reassembling the data into a coherent whole (Charmaz, 2006).



The second step of analysis is focused coding, which is about organizing similar initial codes into groups or categories (Charmaz, 2006). At this stage, as analytic trends become visible, the researcher revisits previously coded interviews to review both interviews and the codes to see if the trends can be found in these other interviews as well. This is when the researcher begins to organize codes into categories and then works to elucidate the properties of each category (Charmaz, 2006). There is an emphasis on ensuring that the evolving categories are grounded in the data, which is strengthened by the process of line-by-line coding from the first step of analysis (Dey, 2007). After the first two or three interviews and analysis of transcripts, and a comparison of codes and interview data, I began to see categories emerge naturally from the codes. At this point I began a new electronic document into which I copied and pasted codes from each coded transcript, putting them into groups that eventually became categories. This was the start of my focused coding, and this process continued throughout the analysis.

Axial coding is the third step in data analysis. The purpose of this level of coding is to further develop the categories that came out of the previous step and identify subcategories (Charmaz, 2006). The codes are grouped together as being either a main category or a related subcategory contained within one of the main categories. It is at this step that the categories begin to develop into more complex forms. As my analysis progressed, steps two and three, focused and axial coding, began to occur concurrently. New categories developed while I continued to flesh out existing ones with more detailed subcategories. At times, a category and related sub-categories developed quickly, while other times I struggled with categories and codes for a longer period. As well, the initial development of codes, categories and sub-categories changed over time as the analysis went on with additional

interviews. As is expected during the process, categories or codes expanded sometimes, while on other occasions they were eliminated or merged with others (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Dey, 2007; Kelle, 2007).

At this point I was going back and forth between the analysis of the current transcript to previous codes and transcripts in order to identify similarities and differences in codes and categories so that codes were grouped in the most effective way. This use of constant comparative methods was essential in the organizing and reorganizing of codes, categories and subcategories. Comparisons on a horizontal plane include comparing codes with codes, data with data, and categories with categories. At the axial step a vertical comparison of codes with subcategories, and subcategories with categories was added to the analysis process. This continued through the final step of analysis.

The final step of analysis in grounded theory research is theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006) or integrating categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). At this stage it is the focus on the relationships between substantive categories that moves the analysis to the level of the development of a theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Charmaz emphasizes attending to actions and processes of participants as a starting point in moving toward understanding the connections and interactions between categories, which is crucial at this stage. At this point the analysis moves from static, descriptive themes, to interactive categories that have movement between them; this is theoretical coding that moves the analysis into the development of a theoretical framework.

Within the analysis of the first two or three interviews, new categories and a greater depth to categories began to emerge that directed the development of future interview

questions. Questions were revised in order to assess the accuracy of the categories and to flesh them out to the greatest extent possible, as is expected in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The initial questions asked participants about supports and barriers in their lives and work that affected their use of a structural social work perspective. As the interviews and analysis progressed, emerging categories led to focusing questions more on participants' experiences and examples from their work and personal lives. One of the guiding factors in this decision was Charmaz's (2006) encouragement to focus on the actions and processes of participants in order to move from a descriptive to a theoretical level of analysis. Initial questions led participants to describe the context of their work and lives, while later questions focusing more on their experiences led them to talk about the unique ways in which they interacted with these supports and barriers. This added new dimensions and depth to the analysis.

Throughout the analysis of the interviews, the perspective of critical discourse analysis provided an additional perspective by exploring the language of the participants or the texts and the context for these. In my analysis of texts and documents I examined the role of language in overtly or covertly supporting or challenging a structural perspective. In particular, I used critical discourse analysis to examine the way language was used to resist challenges to the use of a structural approach. To do this I paid attention to the ways in which participants talked about their work, how they described talking to others about their structural social work activities, and how the language they used was, or was not, useful in opening doors to a structural approach.

## **Ethical dilemmas**

During the interviews I asked participants to discuss their use of theory in practice and give examples of activities from their practice as well as related personal examples. As such, the interviews involved little to no risk to the participants. One potential ethical concern identified prior to the research was around ensuring the confidentiality of participants' clients as they discuss their social work practice, and so participants were reminded that the research was not looking for identifying information about their clients. However, the reality was that participants talked about their own activities, examples, feelings and thoughts around client situations, and so sharing of client information was minimal and never risked identifying a client. As well, I took steps to maintain confidentiality of the participants by assigning an identifier, not the participants' name, to the interview transcripts and by keeping consent forms, transcripts and any other potentially identifying information in a locked cabinet.

There was also the possibility that participants, when discussing their social work practice, may disclose past activities that are considered to be unethical by professional guidelines or which have the potential to cause harm. The consent form outlined the researcher's responsibility to report any information that is required to be reported by either social work ethical guidelines or by legal authorities. This did not occur during the research.

One final potential ethical issue involved the use of various methods of data analysis, which may have resulted in my interpretation of the participants' words in a way with which they disagree, or in a way that attributes an undesirable trait or behaviour to the participant. Given that the analysis focused on the development of theoretical categories that are relevant across several participants, it is not possible to attribute one category to any one participant. Therefore it is more likely that if a participant disagrees with a particular category that they

will not connect that category to their interview, but attribute it to other participants, which may very well be accurate. However, the possibility of participants disagreeing with portions of the analysis was discussed with the participants when reviewing the informed consent, and they were given a chance to respond to the initial analysis to share their thoughts on whether or not the points reflected their experiences. Actual disagreement with findings did not occur, although participants at times indicated that a finding, category or question did not make sense to them personally, or they added ideas that fleshed out the findings. In one instance a participant expressed concern that a quote of hers may be too revealing, so I removed the one piece of information that was of concern.

## **Validity**

The final component of the research design, according to Maxwell (2005), is that of validity. Qualitative researchers are clear that the term validity is not used in the same sense as in quantitative or positivistic research, and that validity does not mean to infer that there is one objective truth that the research seeks to prove (Maxwell, 2005). The concept of validity as a way of demonstrating the “credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 106) in qualitative research is taken a step further with the use of the term crystallization (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Richardson and St. Pierre suggest that reality is multi-faceted with many different faces and depictions. When a light shines on a crystal, it does not show its one self more clearly. Instead the light passes through the crystal and refracts into many different interpretations and views of the one object. Thus crystallization enables the researcher to see the many diverse perspectives of the topic under study. The goal of this research is to explore various processes involved in supporting or challenging the use of structural social work theory at a

practice level. Crystallization as a form of validity is reflected in the numerous perspectives of the participants and textual documents, all of which contributed to, and came together in, the findings. Thus the richness of perspectives identified throughout the research is itself a form of rigour or validity.

Charmaz (2006) and Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest additional criteria to ensure that grounded theory research is of a high quality, although they do not use the term validity. Charmaz suggests a series of questions to ask of the research in order to ensure that the research is credible, original, useful, and that the analysis resonates with the data and with people's experiences (2006, pp. 182-183). In order for the findings to be credible, Charmaz examines the familiarity with the topic, sufficiency of the data and observations, ongoing comparisons throughout the analysis, links from the analysis back to the data and a sufficiency of evidence to support the claims. Questions around originality examine the potential importance of the work as well as the uniqueness of the findings. In examining resonance, Charmaz looks at whether or not: categories are full, hidden as well as overt meanings are represented, links are drawn between individuals and larger structures, and the findings make sense to the participants. The final questions from Charmaz are around the usefulness of the work, including whether or not it offers ideas for further research, offers something that people can use in their daily lives, and the ways in which it adds to current knowledge and improving the world. Charmaz does not list these areas as requirements, but as criteria to consider in the development of grounded theories. I revisited these criteria several times over the research process in order to maintain a high standard of research quality and credibility.

## **Positioning of the researcher**

One more point of agreement between grounded theory (as Charmaz articulates it, 2005 & 2006) and critical discourse analysis (Parker, 2004), is the understanding that the researcher is not neutral and objective, as claimed in positivist research, but that the researcher is a participant or a subject in the same world that he or she seeks to research. The process of conducting research itself is also not neutral. A critical approach to research seeks to address inequities in the world and move toward social justice and social change (Carroll, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In this section I am articulating my interest in, and possible biases toward, the topic in order to acknowledge my position in the research.

I have utilized structural social work theory as a practitioner, and have also taught the theory to students. While I have an obvious bias toward wanting the theory to work, given my investment in it, my experiences suggest that an understanding of the theory at an abstract level does not necessarily translate into an understanding of what that means for daily practice decisions, activities and interventions. Watching myself and students struggle with the implementation of the theory suggests that there are problems with the operationalization of structural social work theory that have not yet been identified.

Although my experiences in teaching and working with structural theory influenced the development of the research topic, it was important to ensure that they did not impose biases on the analysis of the research data. One of my potential biases is my own understanding of structural social work theory and my successes and challenges in practicing from a structural perspective. Everyone has their own interpretation of theory as well as their own encounters with theory in a practice setting. What I perceive of as a problem in theory-practice integration may, for others, be non-existent; and others may encounter challenges or successes with theory and practice that I had not considered.

The experiences of participants as they interpreted, understood and worked with structural theory was an important piece in understanding theory-practice integration. As such, I actively maintained self-awareness of my thought and analysis processes to ensure that I did not impose my definition of structural social work theory on participants. I remained open to hearing about theory-practice integration experiences, challenges and successes that were different from my expectations. The actions I took, described earlier, to ensure methodological rigour and to keep the analysis closely connected to the data, also served to oppose potential bias by constantly focusing my attention on the data.

## **Conclusion**

According to Maxwell (2005), the components of qualitative research design are to be consistent and complementary. Throughout the study implementation, the research paradigm provides a connecting thread that weaves the design together in a coherent whole. A final point is that of a desired potential outcome of the research, which brings the chapter back, full-circle, to the starting point of structural social work theory. One of the main hopes of this research is that it will inform the continued development of structural social work theory, including the ways it is articulated, operationalized, taught and practiced. This is consistent with critical theory and dialectics. Ollman suggests that the dance of the dialectic seeks to understand the present by understanding its inception in the past, and thereby is able to change the future by understanding how the future is contained in the present. Thus, Marx's phrase: "we wish to find the new world through the critique of the old (1967: 212)" (Marx in Ollman, 2004, p. 135). This is indeed my wish in doing this research.



## **CHAPTER FOUR. RESULTS I: DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION**

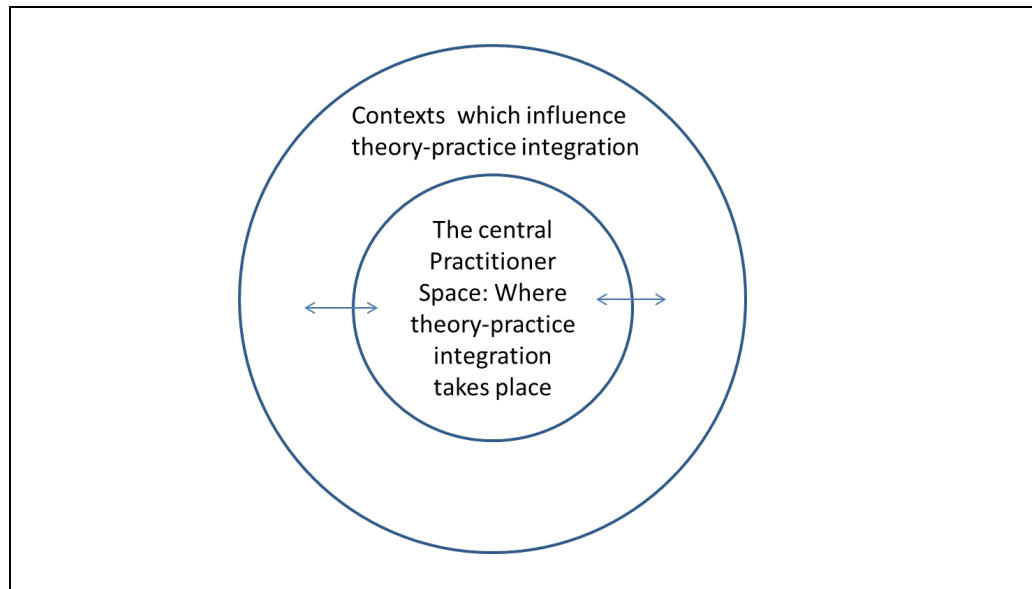
Analysis of the interview data identified rich and detailed information on the successful use of structural social work theory in practice. Findings have been divided into three chapters. The presentation of results begins in this chapter with an overview of the findings and then the descriptive information. The categories in chapter five are the contexts that the participants work and live within. The findings discussed here make up the structure side of the agency-structure dialectic. Within these contexts participants face either supports or barriers to their structural practice. Chapter six contains the heart and fundamental core of the findings. The core findings consist of the processes and actions of the participants as they actively work to integrate structural social work theory into practice. These activities are the agency side of the agency-structure dialectic.

### **Overview of Findings and How They Are Organized**

While the literature review supports most of the categories found in the analysis, all of these categories changed considerably over the course of the analysis, including a significant increase in depth and complexity for each one. In addition, two new categories were identified. One of these categories, called the practitioner space, was not identified in the literature review. It is this category that has developed into the fundamental core of the findings and the new theoretical framework. In the development of the practitioner space, it became apparent that the categories of structural theory-practice integration are not all equal, as inadvertently implied in the literature review. Instead, the practitioner space is central and is essentially where the action of the theoretical framework, and of theory-practice integration, takes place (see Figure 9). The other categories are the contexts that surround

the practitioner space; it is within these contexts that the actions of the participants take place. While the contexts influence participants' actions, participants in turn react to, anticipate and influence the contexts.

**Figure 9. The Core and the Contexts of Structural Theory-Practice Integration**



There are six categories or contexts within which the activities of the practitioner space take place, and they are described at times as the *external spaces*, while the practitioner space is called the *internal space*. The external categories consist of factors that either support the use of a structural perspective, or put up barriers to the approach. These categories are a way of organizing the context which surrounds and influences participants as they work toward theory-practice integration. Five of these external categories were identified, in a broad way, in the literature review, and one is new. These categories include: (a) organizational, (b) client, c) other organizations and professionals, (d) educational, (e) personal, and (f) theoretical. The new category is the one called other organizations and professionals, and includes organizations, associations, governments and people from outside the organization in which participants work. Examples of factors in this category include

colleagues from other organizations that participants worked with or referred clients to, associations participants belonged to, and government bodies that influenced participants' workplaces in various ways. These categories are external to the participants, but have a profound effect on participants' social work practice and use of structural theory.

The practitioner, or internal, space is unique and stands apart from the others. This is the point at which the social worker pushes back against the barriers, or actively looks for, utilizes, and even creates supports to a structural approach. Thus, this category contains the actions and activities of structural social workers, which is the agency side of the agency-structure dialectic. It is these findings that have particular interest, as structural social workers do not just passively encounter supports and barriers to their work, but they actively resist, manipulate or work around barriers while seeking out, expanding and even creating the supports that assist them to do their work. It is the actions, processes and activities of the participants in the practitioner category that brings the theoretical framework to life and moves it from one of simple description to one of grounded theory.

Although the practitioner space is the fundamental heart of the findings, the external categories are discussed first (in chapter five) in order to lay out the contexts which participants live and work within. This lays a foundation for understanding why participants act and react in the ways they do in chapter six. The current chapter starts with descriptive information, including participant demographics, the development of theoretical saturation and the texts uncovered during interviews. The chapter closes with a comment on the use of the terms spaces and categories.

## Participant demographics

Fourteen people were interviewed for the research and all completed a socio-demographic questionnaire prior to the interview. This information is summarized here, with the exception of information that may serve to identify individuals. Table 1 provides an overview of the descriptive demographics.

Table 1. Participant Demographics		
Gender	Female	10
	Male	4
Age Range	18-29	2
	30-45	8
	46-64	4
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	13
	Bisexual	1
Ethnicity	Aboriginal	2
	Asian-Canadian	1
	Jewish	2
	Euro-Canadian	9
Disability	Yes	1 (learning disability)
	No	13
Current Location	BC – Lower Mainland	4
	BC – outside of Lower Mainland	7
	AB	1
	ON	2

Ten of the participants are female and 4 are male. The majority of the participants (8) are from 30 to 45 years in age, with 2 being from age 18 to 29, and the remaining 4 from age 46 to 64. Thirteen of the participants identified themselves as having a heterosexual orientation, and 1 identified as having a bisexual orientation. Nine of the participants

described their ethnicity as Euro-Canadian, 2 as Aboriginal, 2 as Jewish, and 1 as Asian. The woman who described herself as having an Asian ethnicity also identified that she had immigrated to Canada several years earlier. One person had a disability, which he described as a learning disability. The participants with ethnicities that were not Euro-Canadian were also all women. During the interviews these participants sometimes referred to the intersection of gender and ethnicity in their lives, and these are discussed in the results.

On the socio-demographic questionnaire, participants were also asked about their work and education. Questions included the number of years in their current social work position, the field and level of practice (micro, mezzo or macro), what degree(s) they had obtained, year of graduation and whether or not they received instruction in a structural perspective during their studies. Table 2 summarizes this information. Participants had worked an average of 4.8 years in their current position (ranging from 2 to 11 years), and had worked an average of 10.2 years since receiving their Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree (with a range of 3 to 21 years). All participants had completed a BSW, with 13 indicating that they had learned about a structural perspective during this degree. Six people had completed a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree, and 4 were currently enrolled in an MSW degree. All but 1 of those participants said that they had learned or were learning about a structural approach during this degree. Six participants had completed other education including general university courses or another bachelor degree, certificate or diploma, with 3 of these people reporting that a structural perspective had been taught in these contexts. In total, participants attended 13 different educational institutions across Canada and 1 person had completed some education in another country. Two participants said that they had not learned about a structural approach during one of their social work

degrees, but that it had been taught during another social work degree at a different institution.

<b>Table 2. Participant Education and Work Experience</b>		
Number of years in current position	Average	4.8 years
	Range	2 – 11 years
Number of years since first social work degree	Average	10.2 years
	Range	3 – 21 years
Education	BSW	14 completed
	BSW - structural	13
	MSW	6 completed 4 in progress
	MSW - structural	9
	Other	6
	Other – structural	3
Current position incorporates how many of the three levels of practice	All 3 levels	5
	2 levels	6
	1 level	3
Primary level of practice in current position	Micro	9
	Mezzo	1
	Macro	5
Secondary level of practice in current position	Micro	2
	Mezzo	8
	Macro	3
Social work career to date includes how many levels of practice	All 3 levels	9
	2 levels	4
	1 level	1

In the questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate how much of their time in their current position (as a percentage) was spent in each of the three levels of practice: micro, mezzo and macro. The questionnaire also gave an option for *other* in this section.

Most participants (11) indicated having a broad range of practice that crossed two or three of the levels of practice. Five participants said that their current positions included activities from across all three levels of practice, while 6 said they worked across two levels of practice. Three participants said they worked in only one level of practice: 2 in macro (conducting research) and 1 in micro. A few of the participants said they worked equally in two levels of practice for either their primary or secondary work focus, thus, the numbers in these two sections in Table 2 do not add up to the number of participants. For example, 1 participant's current position included 45% of her time in micro work, 45% in mezzo work, and 10% in macro activities. So her primary level of practice is both micro and mezzo and thus is counted twice in that section of Table 2. Micro and macro activities were listed the most often as people's primary work activities, with mezzo being most likely to be listed as the secondary focus for most people who worked across two or three of the levels of practice.

The varied work activities encompassing two or three levels of practice may reflect the move toward a generalist approach by the social work schools and professional bodies over the last two decades. However, it may also demonstrate the use of a structural approach by participants as the linkage across the three levels is intended to be explicit when working from this theory. This is emphasized even more when looking at the how many levels of practice participants worked in over their careers to date. Eight participants indicated working in all three levels of practice, 4 worked in two levels of practice, and only 1 had worked in only one level of practice, over their social work careers. The person who had worked in only one level of practice to date was also at the beginning of his social work career. He was in the youngest age range and had graduated with a BSW only 3 years earlier.

Another interesting point is that only 1 participant gave the mezzo level of practice as the primary work focus, although 8 participants identified it as their secondary focus of their work. All of these participants were able to speak to this area of work in the context of the interview questions, so the findings here do come from discussions of work activities across all three levels of practice. That the mezzo level is primarily a secondary focus for people's work may also speak to the movement of the profession toward a generalist approach combined with cuts to social services and programs, which have been happening to varying degrees across Canada since the 1980s. When one person is doing both micro and mezzo level work, mezzo activities such as community development and education, may take a back seat to work with individuals, groups and families, particularly if there is a crisis with a client.

Two people described a portion of their work activities as other, and not at the micro, mezzo or macro levels. Both of these participants described these other tasks as work with Aboriginal people, including spiritual or cultural components such as working in healing camps with residential school survivors or participating in cultural or spiritual ceremonies. Other activities these 2 participants identified as being outside of micro, mezzo or macro levels included taking clients on social outings and actively seeking to create awareness of structural issues with colleagues.

The above discussion indicates a potential complicating factor when participants self-identify levels of practice in their work. Although participants are the ones with the most intimate knowledge of their own work, there is the potential that different participants have less clarity around definitions of micro, mezzo and macro, specific to some circumstances. Thus, having the participants identify the levels of practice included in their current work



activities may result in categorization that is not entirely consistent between participants, or that does not reflect the researcher's definitions. Yet it is important to note that these differences in descriptions of micro, mezzo and macro activities were relatively minor. For the most part, the participants' descriptions of activities at each level were consistent with the understanding that micro level activities include work with clients such as individuals and families, mezzo activities include education, awareness raising and work at the level of community, and macro activities include things such as policy development and analysis as well as research.

The difficulties around attributing social work activities to a particular level were specific to a small number of situations. The example above is of 2 participants who categorized work that involved Aboriginal spirituality and cultural contexts as other rather than including it in any of the three levels of practice. This may simply be due to the lack of discussion in the social work profession or educational institutions about the place of cultural and spiritual activities in the context of practice, thus reflecting uncertainty regarding this specific situation rather than a divergence of opinion on how levels of practice are defined. This may be the same reason why 1 of these same participants also described recreational or social activities with clients as other. However, the majority of practice activities described by the 2 participants uncertain about the placing of cultural, spiritual and social activities were consistent with normative understandings of micro, mezzo and macro practice.

In the final example of differences in illustrating levels of practice, 1 participant described her work as the executive director of a moderately large organization. In such a context, I assumed the executive director would be involved in largely macro and mezzo level tasks pertinent to the administration of the organization. However, this participant

described her work as being 25% mezzo and 75% micro. When asked about the micro activities, she identified daily work directly with clients, but also such activities as supervising staff, conducting staff training, developing programs, and writing agency policy. The participant indicated that she carried out all of these activities specifically with the benefit of clients in mind. These tasks were for the express purpose of improving the work of the agency and staff *with clients*; thus, she placed them in the micro category. It is notable that discussions of administrative and managerial work, and the level of practice these belong to, is also somewhat disputed at times in the literature, with some authors placing these activities at the mezzo level and others at a macro level (Peters & Burrill, 2010). However, they are not typically considered to be micro practice. This is the one example from this research where a participant appears to hold a perspective of levels of practice that does not necessarily reflect the commonly accepted definitions.

In spite of this difference, it is important to state that all of the participants, including the participant working as an executive director, were able to articulate and describe a structural approach and the ways in which they incorporated it into their social work practice. The occasional lack of clarity or difference of opinion on definitions of levels of practice were mostly minor, and did not in any way detract from participants' ability to understand or articulate a description of structural social work that was consistent with such descriptions in the literature. This does not mean that all participants were equally versed in specifics about structural social work theory, or that they all had identical descriptions. However, all of the participants described their structural practice activities and their thoughts on a structural approach in ways that indicated to me that they were in fact practicing from a structural social work perspective.

One final note about participant demographics is that it is important to understand the importance of theoretical saturation to grounded theory methodology. In grounded theory the goal of sampling is to develop theoretical saturation. Thus, the description of participants in this section is for informational purposes only, not to suggest generalizability or representation. Participant demographics may be relevant to theoretical saturation, data analysis, and development of the theoretical framework of theory-practice integration at times. Where this occurs, the participant descriptions will be included in the discussion of results.

### **Development of theoretical saturation during the research process**

Although the participants do reflect diverse experiences and identities, it is important to note that in grounded theory the purpose of sampling is to achieve theoretical saturation, not generalization or representation. Charmaz writes:

Sampling to develop a researcher's emerging theoretical categories distinguishes theoretical sampling from other forms of sampling. Sometimes qualitative researchers claim to use theoretical sampling but do not follow the logic of grounded theory. They mistake theoretical sampling for the following types of sampling:

- Sampling to address initial research questions
- Sampling to reflect population distributions
- Sampling to find negative cases
- Sampling until no new data emerge.

These sampling strategies mistake theoretical sampling for conventional qualitative research approaches. (2005, p. 100)

She goes on to say that grounded theory researchers do need to identify a starting place for their sampling, which is guided by the development of the research questions, but that as analysis develops it should be saturation of theoretical categories that guides further sampling (Charmaz, 2005). "Initial sampling in grounded theory is where you start whereas theoretical sampling directs you where to go" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 100). Thus, further sampling should not be based on ensuring a diverse sample (or a homogenous sample), or a sample that

reflects the distribution of the target population. Instead, as the coding and analysis develop, the researcher identifies categories and relationships between categories. Where the data identifying such categories or relationships is thin, the researcher would seek to identify additional participants with experiences or knowledge in those thin areas so as to be able to further develop the categories and the theoretical framework that is being constructed.

The initial sampling for this research, as described in the methodology chapter, selected participants who have a BSW or MSW degree and at least 2 years of social work practice experience. The initial sampling goal also included participants from all three levels of practice (micro, mezzo and macro). The first 5 participants interviewed were engaged in social work activities across all three levels of practice, and all were very confident in their use of a structural approach. While several of them voiced concern about having only a weak memory of the textbook definition of a structural approach, they could give numerous examples from their practice of ways in which the perspective influenced their work. So although textbook definitions may have faded from memory, the stories participants shared of social work practice demonstrated that their use of the approach had moved from a conscious pondering of theory and questioning of what-to-do-next in a practice setting, to a perspective that became “implicit” (Lilly), and a “way of life” (Joe). When asked about how a structural perspective influenced her decisions and actions on a particular example she gave, Lilly replied:

Hmm, you know, ... I've had conversations with other people, and I feel almost guilty sometimes because I feel I don't think about it very often.... I feel like it's implicitly part of the way I think about [what] I do, ... and how I approach my work, and I have to really, when you ask me questions like that I have to stop and think, “OK what's structural theory again.” [laughs]. 'Cause I feel like it's so implicit in my brain, I think, and maybe it's not. Maybe other people would say, “Yeah right, I don't think so.” But I feel like it's just a lens for me. It's the way I view what I do, ... but I

just don't think about it very explicitly. I don't think, "OK what is structural theory really telling me about this problem." Yeah, I just don't do that.

The interview with the sixth participant, John, was the point at which the concept of theoretical saturation started becoming clear in the context of this study. John began the interview by saying that he was struggling with how to use a structural perspective in his work, and was participating in the interview as he hoped it would give him some ideas about how to do this better.

**Interviewer:** So, start off by telling me a little bit about why you were interested in doing the interview?

**John:** My bachelor's program is a structural program.... And, I guess now I've been out of school for 3 years now and so much of what we learned, still is very important but [it's] very difficult to find a job or work in a job that you really feel that you're making structural changes. So if, somehow I can do this interview and we learn something from it about how to incorporate structural social work into our work that would be good.

John was the youngest participant, had the least amount of work experience, and had completed his BSW just 3 years earlier. Although he met the initial sampling requirements, including working from a structural perspective, his use of theory was not as ingrained or implicit as it was for the first 5 participants. John was still consciously thinking about a structural approach and trying to figure out how to do it. This does not mean that he was not using a structural perspective. It suggests that John was at a much earlier stage in the development of his social work practice and integration of theory. Another notable piece of information from this interview, relevant to theoretical saturation, was that John was experiencing a considerable number of barriers to his use of structural theory, and these barriers existed across many of the spaces between theory and practice, although he talked most of the barriers he faced in the organization he worked at: "Yeah, but like I say I ... there

is only so much you can do as part of your job given, you know, the funding, where it comes from and just, you know, the supervision that you have.”

During the interview with John and over the course of coding and analyzing this interview, it became evident that, while some of the existing categories of supports and barriers to practice were validated, there was little new information in the interview that expanded the categories or further developed the theoretical framework. One issue was that while John could speak to barriers that prevented him from fully using a structural approach, he had difficulty identifying supports for his structural practice. In addition, his examples did not address the new practitioner space that began emerging in the first five interviews, and which proved to be the backbone of the developing theoretical framework. This category focuses on the ways in which social workers actively create or find supports to practice and manipulate or resist barriers. John was simply not at that point in his practice, yet.

Three implications of theoretical saturation for this project became clear over time. The first included the need to focus on participants who could identify supports for their use of theory, rather than participants who were primarily facing barriers to structural practice. This became apparent during the interview with John in particular as he identified numerous barriers to his use of a structural approach, which limited his contribution to the research. Given the focus of the research on what makes structural theory-practice integration successful, a focus on barriers made it difficult to contribute to this aspect. While this was difficult to screen for, most of the participants could identify a variety of supports to their use of a structural perspective. When participants experienced barriers in one of the categories, they could often identify supports in another.

The second implication for theoretical sampling is that it was the practitioner space that had the least amount of data to flesh out the category. In order to contribute to all aspects of this category, participants needed to have quite a well-developed sense of a structural approach, to the point that they felt comfortable using it in their practice. They needed to be utilizing this approach in a more innate or implicit way, rather than be struggling consciously with questions of *what does this mean for my practice?* However, using this as a sampling criterion was difficult. While this more well-developed sense of a structural approach likely develops over time, it was not as simple as changing recruitment strategies to require a greater length of time since having completed one's degree. One participant, who met the criteria for having a well-developed sense of a structural approach, had only been practicing for 3 years since his degree, the same length of time as John. There was no magic length of time in practice that equated with achieving a well-developed sense of theory-practice integration, and so it was difficult to screen for this aspect of theoretical sampling.

The third implication of theoretical sampling took longer to emerge. As the practitioner category developed, it became evident that this category was more complex than the others. Rather than a list of actions that demonstrated structural practice activities, the emerging category was more adequately defined by a continuum where one's ability to integrate theory and practice develops and improves in numerous, gradual ways. Consequently, in the practitioner category the development of participants' theory-practice integration progresses through a series of stages. Potential participants cannot be put into two categories of having a well-developed sense of theory-practice integration or not having this; there are too many grey areas in between. This made it even more difficult to conduct

theoretical sampling with new participants. However, most potential participants screened themselves, as those who were interested in participating usually did have a stronger, more confident use of the approach in their practice.

There were two repercussions of the emergence of a continuum or series of stages in the practitioner category that are relevant to theoretical sampling. The first is that while participants who did not have a strong use of structural theory could not contribute to all of the stages of development in the practitioner category, the analysis of their interviews contributed significantly to the recognition that the practitioner space was on a continuum with a series of developmental stages. John was the first participant in this situation, but there were subsequent participants who were further along in their practice than John, although not as strong as others.

The second repercussion is where theoretical sampling proved more relevant. In returning results to the participants near the end of the research, and requesting their feedback, those who had not progressed very far on the continuum had significantly less to offer at this point in the research. The participants who had progressed through most or all of the stages were the best able to provide feedback on the stages in the practitioner category. Theoretical sampling therefore guided my choice of who to focus on for the final interview where I requested feedback on the stages in the practitioner space. The participants I focused on at this step were the ones with the strongest sense of theory-practice integration, based on my first interview with them. These participants verified that the description of the continuum did in fact reflect their experiences. In addition, several of them could identify points in time where they shifted from one stage to another and could give examples of experiences that assisted in a shift to another stage. These participants also added new



dynamics to the practitioner space that had not been obvious from the first interviews and prior analysis. Thus, theoretical sampling was especially pertinent and useful at this point in the research.

### **Description of texts and context for textual analysis**

As planned in the research methodology, where participants identified documents or texts as either a barrier or a support to their use of a structural perspective, this was pursued during the interview. In developing the interview questions the decision was made to leave questions open so that participants could take the discussion in directions relevant to them and their practice. The same open-ended approach underscored the identification of texts for textual analysis. Most of the participants who did make documents available to the researcher mentioned a document in passing in the context of responding to another line of questioning. Where this occurred, the researcher asked for more information about the document or text in order to explore the role the document played in the participant's use of a structural approach. On a few occasions the researcher initiated a discussion around texts by asking participants if there were any documents, forms, texts, etc. that had an impact on their use of a structural perspective. In these cases it was more likely that the participant could not identify any such documents, although once in a while something was identified.

A total of 15 texts or documents were provided by participants as being directly relevant to their practice with a structural perspective. Of the 14 participants, 3 could not or did not identify any documents or texts relevant to the research. Three others identified documents, but were not able to share them with the researcher. Two of these participants felt that they could not share their work-based documents without permission and they were reluctant to request permission. One other person was no longer at that job and so did not

have access to the forms any more. Eight of the participants did identify documents or texts relevant to the research and were able to provide these to the researcher; several of these documents were publicly available with some located on organizational web sites. Most of the participants who shared documents or texts for analysis made more than one document available to the researcher, with 2 participants sharing three texts each for analysis. Two different participants identified one of the texts. The 15 texts analyzed for the purpose of this research came from 8 of the participants.

One of the goals of the research was to identify the supports to utilizing a structural approach in practice, in an attempt to move beyond a critique of what does not work toward identifying what does work. The same focus is applicable to the textual analysis. Of particular interest to the researcher were documents and texts that assisted or supported practitioners in moving forward with a structural perspective in their work. In spite of this being the focus, documents and texts, as with other factors in the spaces between theory and practice, could be either a support or a barrier to a structural approach. Of the 15 documents analyzed, 12 were identified by participants as being supports, one was identified as being a barrier to the use of a structural perspective, and two were identified as being both barriers and supports in different ways (see Table 3). This does not suggest that most of the texts of documents in practitioners' lives or work places are supportive of a structural approach. It is more likely that it reflects the goal of the research to focus on identifying supports rather than barriers to this perspective.

As expected, most of the documents or texts identified by participants were from the organizational space. These included job descriptions, program descriptions, broad organizational statements including mandate, vision and value statements, and forms

practitioners were expected to complete as a part of their work responsibilities. Several of the texts were from other categories, most notably from the two newest ones including practitioner and other organizations (including governance bodies). Three texts were identified that were developed by government and had a significant influence on practitioners' use of theory in practice. These texts included two pieces of legislation and a government transformation plan for services to children and families. All were considered by participants to be supportive of the use of a structural approach. Two of the texts were connected across two categories to international organizations as well as one to a provincial government and another to the participants' organization. The participants developed four texts for various purposes, but all were deliberately created with a structural component; these are included in the practitioner category. Three of these texts were various types of client assessment forms. These forms were developed to include a focus on client strengths alongside client issues and needs, and to specifically require the practitioner to note and comment on structural issues in clients' lives. One of the texts identified during the research is a component of a participant's Facebook page where she seeks to identify current societal issues that are structural as a way of incorporating structural analyses into her personal life.

<b>Table 3. Description of Documents/Texts</b>		
Documents/texts as supports or barriers to structural practice	Support	12
	Barrier	1
	Both support and barrier	2
Categories in which documents/texts are found	Organizational	8
	Other organizations – government	3
	Other organizations - international	2
	Practitioner	4

It is important to note that participants are aware of the presence of texts and documents in their work and personal lives, and that they understand that these texts and documents have an influence on their ability to incorporate a structural approach into their work. The textual analysis of these documents has not led to a separate section of findings specific to texts, but instead these findings fit into the context of the theoretical framework for theory-practice integration that emerged during the analysis. The texts are related to several different categories and so the documents analyzed during the course of the research are discussed throughout the results section in the context of the relevant categories.

### **Spaces, places and categories**

The terms ‘spaces’ and ‘categories’ are used interchangeably in this chapter and throughout the discussion of results. The term categories is consistent with grounded theory. In the second step of analysis, similar codes are grouped in categories and the next step is to flesh out the categories (Charmaz, 2006). Theorizing then moves beyond description to an analytical process that adds depth to categories, looks for actions and processes, and

demonstrates relationships between categories. The use of the term spaces, to refer to the categories, was substantiated during the process of data analysis when it became apparent that, for participants, the process of theory-practice integration occurred within a variety of contexts. During the analysis, these contexts formed the categories of the developing theoretical framework. These contexts are largely abstract rather than physical locations, and so the term space reflects the discussion of these contexts by participants. Hence, the terms categories and spaces are used interchangeably.

In the discussion of categories or spaces throughout the description of results, there are times when these contain reference to a specific place or location, such as the organization in which the participants work, and so it is important to differentiate the use of the term space from that of place. In this research *place* is considered to be concrete and to describe a physical location. Definitions of place that are relevant here include “a particular part of space” (The Compact Oxford English Dictionary (OED), 1991, place, 3. a., p. 1353), and “the portion of space actually occupied by a person or thing” (The Compact OED, 1991, place, 3. b., p. 1353). The term *space* is used to describe a more abstract concept and according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) can include both time and place. Germane definitions include: “time, leisure or opportunity for doing something” (The Compact OED, 1991, space, 2., p. 1837), and “a more or less limited area or extent” (The Compact OED, 1991, space, 10., p. 1837). Thus, the spaces in which structural theory-practice integration takes place are intended to depict abstract contexts while encompassing physical locations at times.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter four has presented the descriptive information related to the research process including participant demographics, an overview of the process of developing theoretical saturation, and a description of texts incorporated into the analysis. The information presented here will be discussed in the context of the presentation of results in the next two chapters as it is relevant to the analysis, and to the development of the theoretical framework for the integration of structural social work theory into practice.

## **CHAPTER FIVE. RESULTS II: SUPPORTS AND BARRIERS TO DOING STRUCTURAL SOCIAL WORK**

With the exception of the descriptive information in the previous chapter, the rest of the results fall into two sections. The fundamental core of the findings is the internal or practitioner space to be found in chapter six. This is where the participants actively engage in structural social work practice. However, structural practice does not occur in a vacuum. Participants live, work and carry out structural activities in an array of contexts, all of which influence their practice in various ways and to different extents. Chapter five begins with an overview of all of the findings, and then moves into a detailed presentation of results on the contexts or external categories that influence participants' structural practice.

### **Summary of the Categories**

During the course of the literature review, several dynamics were identified as affecting the integration of theory into practice, and these have been organized into categories that are described as spaces between theory and practice. They are: organizational, educational, personal or practitioner, client, theory and other to account for any not identified in the literature. During the interviews and subsequent analysis I found that the participants did talk about these same dynamics, albeit with much more diversity and complexity than was in the literature. In addition to the categories identified during the literature review, I uncovered two others during the research. Table 4 identifies the categories as described in the literature review and as found through the research.

<b>Table 4. Spaces Between Theory and Practice Pre- and Post-Data Analysis</b>	
Identified during the literature review	Identified through the research
1. Organizational 2. Client 3. Educational (formal only) 4. Personal 5. Theoretical 6. Other	1. Organizational 2. Client 3. Other (outside) organizations, professionals and lay people 4. Educational – formal and informal 5. Personal 6. Theoretical 7. Practitioner

The first new category is that of organizations and professionals outside of the participant's home agency (the agency where they complete their paid work). Practitioners necessarily work closely with other organizations and professionals not only to refer clients to other services, but also to provide integrated services. This new category falls into the group of external categories.

The second new category I identified during the analysis is the practitioner, and it has been identified as being separate from the one called personal. The practitioner space is unique and is not actually a category in the same sense of the external categories; it is the heart and centre of the structural theory-practice integration framework. This category is developed further in chapter six.

Surprisingly, the categories identified in the literature review were also uncovered during the analysis, in addition to the new external category and new practitioner space. However, there were significant differences in the content of the categories in the research when compared with the literature review during the latter part of the analysis. During analysis I found increased depth and complexity for each of these categories and I have described these new dimensions in this chapter. In addition, I found a number of additional



factors in each category that had not been mentioned in the literature, while some of the factors mentioned at length in the literature were not as relevant to the participants and were mentioned only in passing or not at all. Chapter five, the current chapter, discusses findings relevant to the six external spaces, which consist of supports and barriers to structural practice.

## **Themes Across Spaces**

During the analysis I identified four themes or patterns that crossed all of the spaces. The first to become clear is that while social work practice varies widely, the categories and factors identified here are relevant to all levels of practice: micro, mezzo and macro. As discussed earlier the point of mentioning all levels of practice is not to show representation or generalizability. Had the findings been different for each level of practice, theoretical saturation might have directed the sampling process to find participants from only one of these levels. However, in my analysis I found that this process is consistent across levels of practice, and the resulting theoretical framework provides scope for a diversity of practice contexts.

The second theme is that the categories are interconnected and overlapping, although they are presented separately here to identify differences between them and to assist in organizing the findings in a way that makes sense of the data. For instance, a participant's supervisor may be a barrier to the use of a structural approach. At the same time, management or a board hired that supervisor because the person has values consistent with the culture of the organization. Other staff members with similar perspectives are attracted to work at that organization because they are comfortable with the workplace culture. Thus, these three factors within the organizational space (colleagues, supervisor and organizational

culture) interact in a way that further perpetuates barriers to a structural approach. Workers within this non-structural organization may then naturally align with other organizations and associations with similar views, demonstrating collusion across the spaces. Additional interactions between categories will be discussed through the next two chapters.

The third theme is that texts and documents were also important as either supports or barriers to the use of a structural approach, and these texts appeared in a number of the categories. Texts and documents provided by the participants will be discussed in the context of the category to which they are each relevant. Textual analysis contributes to the complexity of various categories and the ways in which barriers and supports exist in written words, forms and documentation, as well as in other ways.

The fourth and last theme I found is that the spaces, and the factors in each space, are complex and could be either supports or barriers, sometimes both at the same time, to the use of a structural approach. There were many intricate factors at play and the experiences of participants with supports and barriers were diverse. One person would find one category to be strongly supportive of a structural approach, while the next participant experienced largely barriers in that same category. The complexities of each category were also apparent within one person's experience such as when situations changed over time. For example, in Shanks' workplace, a supervisor who was a support of the structural approach resigned and was replaced with someone who was not supportive. Occasionally, factors appeared to be more neutral to a structural approach, and participants sometimes used these to their advantage.

When someone sees only barriers to a structural approach, practicing from that perspective becomes difficult if not impossible, and can be accompanied by feelings of hopelessness. Sophie experienced a significant number of barriers in the organization she

worked for, and there were times when she felt that she just did not have the strength to fight back.

**Interviewer:** So, are these some of the things that make it hard for you to work within the system?

**Sophie:** Yeah, I find that really frustrating and like, I don't have the energy to do anything about it and I don't, wouldn't want to do that anyway 'cause that would not be, it would be frowned upon ...

**Interviewer:** So ... you're powerless to do anything about this? Or [pause]?

**Sophie:** Well, I'm sure if I had the energy I could like, you know, create a storm and get mobilization. But people are really—what's the word, apathetic. And I'm apathetic because I'm tired and my colleagues really don't get it and they don't really care. I mean we live in a pretty good society; until things get shitty enough we're not going to do anything, right?

Being faced with primarily barriers can not only make it difficult to work from a structural perspective, it can also discourage and exhaust practitioners so that they no longer even have the energy to try. It is important to not ignore the challenges that social workers face. The more barriers participants faced in engaging a structural perspective in their work, the less they were able to contribute to the practitioner space, which is about actively doing structural social work. Thus categories in this chapter are discussed with examples of how each of these, and the factors within them, can be both barriers and supports depending on the context, although the focus of the interview questions was typically on identifying supports.

The diversity of experiences within each context is not an issue in the development of a theoretical framework for theory-practice integration. The point is not that the spaces have to be experienced in an identical manner; the point is that they exist for all of the participants and that in each context it is possible to locate ways in which social workers *are* supported in the use of a structural perspective. It is an analysis of these supports, and the ways participants used the supports, that allows for the development of a framework for theory-

practice integration. Thus the focus is on supports more so than barriers in the presentation of findings.

## **The Six External Spaces of Structures**

### **First space: Organizational**

The organizational space is the context in which the practitioner works. Given the focus of the research on how social workers use structural theory in practice, it is logical that this was the most important dynamic for the participants. The largest portion of interview time was spent talking about this context and the factors specific to their employment. Of the six factors within this category, the two most often mentioned were colleagues and supervisors.

#### **Colleagues**

Many of the participants worked closely with a team; thus these people were important to participants' use of structural theory in both positive and negative ways. Some of the participants talked about how team members did not understand a structural perspective. Several of the participants mentioned the medical model as a barrier to structural work. For participants on interdisciplinary teams, the other disciplines were often health-care focused, and the lack of focus on the whole client and the structural factors in the client's life could be problematic for structural workers.

Some participants experienced opposition to their use of a structural perspective, not only from people from other disciplines, but sometimes also from other social workers who did not work from a structural perspective.

**Joe:** My biggest opposition for being a structural social worker has always been ... other professionals in the field whether it has been social workers, probation officers, mainly those two, ... also nurses sometimes too. But mainly social workers and

probation officers that are not structural, that are mainstream, white is right, this is the system, this is the way it is.

A lack of structural social work colleagues specifically, or colleagues who understand a structural perspective in general, was described as isolating by some participants, and thus a barrier to practice.

**Interviewer:** The people that you have contact [with] in your work, do they influence your ability to use or not use a structural perspective? Do you feel pressure one way or the other?

**Lilly:** I certainly sometimes feel some frustration. Because I feel like I'm alone in the wilderness sometimes.... I feel like I don't have a lot of colleagues that work with the structural perspective or kind of grasp what a structural perspective is.

Several participants described facing challenges and pressures when they worked with others who did not understand or support a structural approach.

When participants did have one or more colleagues from a structural social work background, these people were often mentioned as a source of support. Participants talked about seeking out fellow social workers at their work place to discuss their work and specifically to talk about structural issues related to clients.

**Eleanor:** I do a lot of talking with my co-worker [a social worker]. We hash things out, we talk about things. I say to her, 'Well you know I'm really struggling with this,' or she says, 'I'm struggling with this, what should we do?' We hash it out, we talk about it, we, you know we really do, we genuinely take the time to talk about our approach or what we are doing.

It was not just social work colleagues who were a support to the use of a structural approach. There were often colleagues from other disciplines, including health care professions, who understood and worked from a structural perspective, even if they did not use the word structural. These people also supported participants in their structural social work.

**Interviewer:** In what ways do you feel that you are supported in ... using a structural perspective in your work?

**Lilly:** One of the things that really helps, is, is people. I have a couple of people who I ... work with who, one of whom, doesn't have a social work background but definitely has a structural kind of perspective. Her background is in planning, but she really, I mean we've never had a conversation about structural theory or structural approaches but she definitely, I would say, has a pretty good understanding of it ... and really appreciates, appreciates that approach, and supports me.

There are other supports from colleagues that are not that obvious. In his interview, Joe talked about colleagues who may not understand a structural perspective, but who can see that his work with Aboriginal people is effective and so they ask him about his approach. Billy talked about his decision to supervise structural social work students in a practicum at his office. His conversations with students were revitalizing for his own use of a structural approach in practice. All of the participants talked about the importance of having someone to be able to talk with about structural social work. Joe said, "We cannot do it all by ourselves, but we have to work in conjunction and cooperation with others, do this together, collaboratively, this is not ... an approach where you can do it by yourself."

## Supervisors

Participants also talked at great length about their supervisors. Supervisors carry much weight in terms of how participants work and the extent to which a structural approach can be utilized. This is especially true where supervisors are very hands-on and make frequent decisions around the direct practice activities of staff. Shanks talked candidly about her frustrations with her supervisor. Her supervisor had a narrow vision of the job and was also very involved in Shanks' work, so her perspective directly affected Shanks' ability to make decisions and how she was able to approach her work.

**Shanks:** The manager that directly supervises me is a nurse and she [has a] really, really task-focused idea of how to manage me.... Her goal is really going to be funding, me staying in my means of my mandate which is acute, and not treatment, assessment only.... [She thinks] I don't need to think about what treatment options are more successful for different populations. She sees that [as] out of the scope of

our mandate. The frustration here for me is that it honours [an] acute medical standard. You are really looking at the individual, you are looking at the isolated problems, you are addressing that question that was asked to you and you are closing the file.

First of all, Shanks' supervisor is from a health care discipline with a strictly medical model interpretation of the work, including a focus on the individual without an understanding of broader structural factors related to client issues. The manager also has a narrow interpretation of the organizational mandate and does not understand Shanks' wider view of her work. Shanks saw her as being focused on minimizing costs and closing files, rather than on client issues. All of these differences, combined with the supervisor's hands-on approach to supervision, meant that Shanks felt quite constrained in her ability to fully utilize a structural approach.

Shanks had worked with several different managers and not all of them had the same focus as the current one. Some of her past managers had been more understanding of broader connections to client issues and so were more supportive of Shanks structural perspective.

**Shanks:** There are some historical managers that we have who have been able to see the bigger picture and have been able to say, you know, that if we can organize work for, organize the structure for the children who have been victims, then services down the road are less likely to be needed.

Shanks saw that this broader vision of services was then able to prevent more need for services in the future since complex issues were addressed in a more complete way initially.

Sophie also had problems with her supervisor and the manager above him. On one occasion she was concerned about a client's treatment at another organization and her supervisor suggested she contact the organization's risk management office for guidance. She accepted the advice against pursuing it as a complaint, although she was told that as a professional she did have a legal right to decide otherwise. Unfortunately the matter did not

end there. The manager felt that Sophie had gone too far, even though the issue was over by the time he heard about it.

**Sophie:** But what happened was my manager ... found out about all of this.... Apparently eyebrows were raised, from what he told me, and he slapped my hand for it. He said it was ‘above and beyond client advocacy’ and I can’t remember word for word exactly but it was like definitely a hand slapping.

Sophie was later reprimanded for another attempt at client advocacy, and this time she said she was told, “that my communication had better improve or it would become a performance issue.”

Not all supervisor barriers to structural activities are as acrimonious as the one Sophie faced, such as in Jamie’s research-based position. While Jamie enjoyed a largely positive relationship with her supervisor, she felt that the person’s lack of knowledge of structural issues meant that the analysis was missing important pieces. Interview questions asked indirectly about challenges her participants may have faced related to their identity as immigrants. Jamie felt that the participants were reluctant to bring up issues of racism for a variety of reasons including unwillingness to speak negatively about services they desperately needed. As an immigrant herself, from the same country of origin as some of the participants, Jamie felt that there were structural and cultural factors that were not being considered by the rest of the research team.

**Jamie:** So, for example, when we look at say the immigrant [participants], so from our data, they didn’t talk a lot about ... discrimination. There’s probably a few [participants] that expressed a few challenges but—and rarely do they use the word discrimination, and if they do, there’s probably just one or two [participants] that use the word although some [participants] sometimes would say they feel very uncomfortable....When I raised the issue about racism, the [lead researcher] would say ‘well no, this is not what the [participants] said, it’s very rare that they mentioned about this’ and then the other team member would say ‘oh, but this is just a negative case, you know, there’s only a few [participants] that mentioned it.’



Based on her experience, Jamie felt that even if just a few participants mentioned discrimination, this was an important finding. She believed that the interview questions should have asked more specifically about discrimination and racism, and that the research missed some key findings because the team did not understand structural issues.

While it may be unpleasant to have a supervisor with whom one clashes, as in Sophie's case, the issue surrounding the utilization of a structural perspective is not one of getting along with a supervisor; the real issue is whether a supervisor encourages or discourages a structural approach. Annie experienced a mix of supports and barriers from her supervisor who never used the word structural but who did encourage a critical perspective along with other approaches.

There were also a number of participants who identified their supervisors as significant sources of support for their use of a structural perspective in a variety of ways. Eleanor was one of the few participants who had a supervisor and a colleague who were both social workers. Both of these people supported her use of a structural perspective.

**Eleanor:** I'm very lucky, I have a social worker boss—my boss is a social worker and I have supervision with her so I have a lot of support. And I think she uses—I wouldn't say that I draw from just structural social work but I draw from a variety of different things and I think she is very supportive of that.... Like I said, I'm not practicing in isolation. I have that support.

Billy described his working situation as being somewhat contradictory. The larger organization was a bureaucracy with a medical model focus, which was contrary to a structural approach, yet his supervisor was supportive of his structural perspective.

**Billy:** So that's what we are on paper and I think that's what we mostly are in practice but our coordinator happens to be a very, very left wing activist and she does her best to impart that to the rest of us. And so she and I we really connect on that, so ... she gets where I'm coming from and I get where she's coming from and she supports me in any way she can ... to do some activist kind of resistant work.

Although the conservative nature of the larger organization was problematic, having a supervisor encourage a structural approach made a significant difference for Billy.

Occasionally, Billy and his supervisor would decide to continue pursuing a client that the team had ‘written off’ in order to assist the person with structural issues that the rest of the team had not acknowledged. Billy said, “And so then my coordinator would say, ‘Well you go off and do that, get back to me and let me know how that went.’ So I’m sort of sent off on little discrete missions.” Just having his supervisor be supportive was all it took to open up a small window of opportunity for Billy’s use of a structural approach. Interestingly, Billy’s supervisor was not a social worker, but rather a nurse who understood structural connections to client issues.

Lilly and Victoria also talked about the importance of their supervisors in supporting structural work, even though they were not social workers and did not use the term structural.

**Lilly:** I also have a supervisor who’s also really fascinated by those ideas, and so, I don’t get a lot of time to talk to him about it. But when I do ... have an opportunity ... he really is genuinely fascinated by that perspective and thinking about that and kind of gets it ... just knowing that he kind of gets it, even if I don’t get to talk to him about it, feels really supportive. I feel like I can do the work.

In addition to her supervisor, Lilly said that the CEO of her workplace was primarily responsible for seeing the social repercussions of the organization’s work and for creating Lilly’s social policy position with enough scope to give Lilly the room to incorporate a structural perspective.

Melissa was in a slightly different position as she was the executive director of her organization, rather than a front line staff member, although she still reported to the board of directors for her organization. Melissa stated that her board had laid the groundwork for this new organization to be structural right from the beginning, even before she was hired.

**Interviewer:** What kind of things existed or occurred within the organization that actually helped you use a structural approach?

**Melissa:** Definitely I think that my board of directors always encouraged me and were happy to...and I think they really wanted the groundwork when the organization first started, for it to look that way [to be structural].... I was always encouraged about that, to make it something bigger.

Melissa was more than supported in her structural work; she was actively directed to develop the organization in a way that included a structural perspective.

Participants talked a lot about their supervisors and were clear that these people had a crucial role to play in whether or not a structural approach was permitted, encouraged or challenged. As the interview with Billy demonstrated, even when the organization presented significant barriers to a structural approach, having a supportive supervisor could make a significant difference in a person's ability to engage in structural social work.

### Organizational culture

Organizational culture is the underlying atmosphere or perspective that is the norm at the organization. In many organizations, there is a culture of work that does not match a structural perspective and it is natural that this culture would permeate the organization.

Sophie saw that her organization aligned itself with a medical model and focused on individual issues without seeing the holistic context. She felt that the organizational culture at her work site did not normally attract people with a structural perspective.

**Sophie:** It's a very conservative organization. I think a lot of the social workers here just see themselves from the clinical perspective and not so much a structural perspective.... This kind of organization, I don't know if it draws the feisty ones.... I think some of the more structural, theoretical type social workers would be drawn more to more hardcore kind of roles ... [this organization] is not a very attractive place to be for a structuralist.

John also felt that his organization had a medical and narrow focus that existed from the board, through the executive director, to the front line staff. He stated that changing this

would be difficult as the board would have deliberately hired an executive director with a perspective compatible to theirs. Sophie and John's comments suggest that organizational culture works in two directions. The organization hires people who fit with the existing organizational culture, and people will look for work in organizations that have a culture that fits with their perspective.

Several of the participants talked about experiencing barriers to a structural approach when organizations were large, bureaucratic and top-down. They felt that the culture of these organizations was one that maintained tight control over their work, did not leave room for professional discretion, did not acknowledge unique circumstances facing clients, and saw social problems as individual issues. These participants were clear that the organizational culture significantly hampered their attempts at utilizing a structural approach in their work.

**Eleanor:** The reality is I work within a system that is, you know, that ... really wants to confine my practice.... There is only so much I can do to try and circumvent the system for people.... It's just becoming more bureaucratic and it really drives me crazy.

Organizational culture is also enacted in the content of forms that workers are required to use. A form called Minimum Data Set (MDS) was the one and only document identified by participants as being entirely negative and detrimental to a structural approach. MDS is an intake and assessment form used to determine a client's level of physical, emotional, social and intellectual functioning prior to moving into long-term care or related facilities. Eleanor and Sophie both identified this form as problematic: It exemplifies Eleanor's quote above of a bureaucratic culture that limits a structural perspective. The form simultaneously erases a client's individuality and strengths, and focuses instead on problems. It affords no opportunity for explanation and consists entirely of tick boxes with limited choices. An example of how the form is structured is demonstrated by the following

question where social workers are required to tick off any of the answers that have been relevant to the client in the last 7 days:

Modes of locomotion:

- a. Cane, walker or crutch
- b. Wheeled self
- c. Other person wheeled
- d. Wheelchair primary mode of locomotion
- e. NONE OF ABOVE (MDS p. 4, Question G5)

The complete absence of identifying any strengths is demonstrated by option e which offers only an opportunity to identify a lack of mobility issues, rather than mobility strengths. In addition, even if the person is largely self-mobile, a temporary mobility issue in the last 7 days would result in the person being identified as having mobility issues with no scope to explain the usual strengths in this area. The 10-page questionnaire is entirely made up of similar questions on client limitations with the exception of two neutral questions asking about the person's preferred activities and activity locations. The form does not allow for a structural or even strengths-based analysis and, in fact, it effectively squelches any attempts to include these perspectives.

Billy also worked in a bureaucratic organization and talked about feeling conflicted:

**Billy:** Well I don't think that [this organization] really supports that [structural social work]. 'Cause they, they're a huge top-down bureaucracy and if they knew how critical I am of them, I don't know if I'll be able to keep my job.... I feel like I'm a bit of a hypocrite. I feel like this is not, it's not sustainable for me to stay here for, for the rest of my career. I mean I love my job but inside I know that ... I'm supporting something that that I don't really feel good about.

For Billy, working in a bureaucratic environment that did not understand or support a structural perspective was not only difficult in terms of being able to do his job and utilize a

structural perspective, but it also did not feel comfortable. It was an environment that did not fit the way he wanted to be able to work.

Another aspect of a bureaucratic work environment was being so busy that it was hard to have enough time to do all the work participants felt was necessary.

**Billy:** So I was you know trying to figure out, what what's my priority? Do I go to the court? Do I stay with this woman who needs [support]? And at the same time I also knew there was a woman who has been slowly distancing herself from us, has been missing medication here and there, and I wasn't exactly sure what was going on with her.

Increasing workloads can mean pressure on social workers to focus on more urgent individual issues, leaving less or no time for structural practice. Sophie's increasing workload resulted in a shifting of her social work activities to largely crisis management.

**Sophie:** Some of the caseloads have gotten quite outta control.... We've had to take on extra cases.... So myself and social workers from the [other] team are gonna be sharing the social work caseload of that other team that doesn't have a social worker.... It slowly seems to be moving back the other way towards more of a generalist crisis management type rule.

Sophie's situation demonstrates is that the large caseloads and time pressure were not constant and that like many other barriers and supports, they can change over time.

Two participants talked about how oppression was a component of the culture of the organizations with which they were involved.

**Shanks:** I see here at [organization name] that people are more judged, [there are] more biases, there is more a thread that is smarter people have more, are more worthy, intelligent people are more worthy; classes—there are a lot of class distinctions here.

In addition to issues of bias and classism in the organization, Shanks also described ways in which Aboriginal people were subtly excluded. Shanks stated that the lack of Aboriginal staff and of any cultural acknowledgement created barriers for potential Aboriginal clients. There was also no financial support for transportation costs for Aboriginal people living in

rural and remote locations, meaning many people could not afford the trip to the service. Although exclusion was not intentional, she could see how the organization was less accessible to and comfortable for Aboriginal people and communities.

In Jamie's work, the culture of oppression was one of a lack of recognition of issues of discrimination.

**Jamie:** The [lead researcher] ... is open to ideas but also I think she limits it from where she's coming from. It's very, very difficult for her to look at these things. It's even difficult for her to hear the word racism.

Jamie respected her supervisor, and so was reticent to describe this situation as oppression. She agreed that it may be a form of unintentional oppression and a lack of understanding about racism. Whether intentional or unintentional, a structural perspective identifies the supervisor's actions as oppressive. It is interesting that when the actions come from a person the participant likes, it becomes difficult to name it as oppression. Although Jamie respected her, the supervisor actively discouraged Jamie's use of a structural analysis.

Organizational cultures that were barriers for structural social workers included workplaces with cultures of oppression and exclusion, conservatism, top-down bureaucracies, and those more aligned with a medical model or an approach that focused on individuals rather than on structures and environments affecting people. In such organizations not only was the support for a structural approach lacking, but workers engaging in a structural approach could be seen as engaging in activities that were outside of their job description. This fits with Sophie's reprimand for her advocacy work. Joe also experienced hostility to his advocacy work, but from colleagues. This exemplifies ideological differences among practitioners. Workers who see problems from the perspective of the individual believe the correct response is to change the individual. Structural workers who place individuals' problems in the context of societal structures believe that, at times,

the appropriate response is to challenge the structures. When colleagues do not understand or appreciate a structural perspective, they will often actively work against such an approach; when this is true for the organizational culture, the result is a systemic undermining of structural practice.

It is also possible for organizations to develop a culture that is supportive of a structural approach. The organizational culture of these workplaces is one that is open to or actively supports a structural analysis of issues. These organizations often have wider mandates for work with clients; they try to name and address issues of oppression; they may be more willing to work outside the box to meet clients' needs; they are often more holistic in nature; and staff are typically more involved in organizational decision-making, particularly regarding clients, but often also about the agency, programs and service delivery.

Kevin worked at an organization where the clients were largely Aboriginal people. In addition to ensuring that half of the governance body was composed of Aboriginal people, the organization overtly addressed issues of oppression in its work.

**Kevin:** What I like about [the organization is it] really understands and really tries to address the influences [of] colonization and to me that is really, really, really, important. That colonization exists, yes, it has consequences and we're seeing these consequences in [our community] every day, ... just saying that it exists. And that's what I like about [the organization], it's willing to look at those larger perspective things.

When organizations are willing to name oppressions such as colonization, to acknowledge that these affect people's daily lives, and then to hold talks within the organization about how to address these issues, the door is opened for social workers who practice from a structural perspective. Kevin also described the ways in which the organization was prepared to support staff with structural issues, not just clients.



Ellen worked at an organization that was structural in both its official mandate as well as its office culture. She worked for a child and youth advocate's office with the purpose of supporting children and youth receiving child welfare services in their efforts to challenge the system. Not only did the organization challenge structures specific to individual minors, it also monitored individuals' issues, and where a structural or systemic problem was identified, the organization reported on it and recommended structural changes be implemented.

Ellen spoke positively of a client assessment form used within her organization. Unlike the problematic MDS form, Ellen's form deliberately left room for structural perspectives, including lots of room for workers to write narratives describing their assessment of the issue. The MDS, with its closed-ended questions focused on client problems, ensured that structural issues or client strengths could never be noted. An open-ended question format allows workers to actually analyze the situation and present structural, or other, analyses. Where the form did utilize closed-ended tick boxes to indicate the presenting issue, it included structural issues as options, such as accessibility of services, responsiveness of workers, quality of care provided, inclusion of the youth in decisions about their welfare, access to legal support, and others. Most importantly, this form was computerized and then examined regularly by computer software for patterns across clients and time, in order to identify structural issues that could then be addressed. These aspects combined to make it a document that was extremely useful in structural practice. In fact, it

was overtly structural in its entirety. It is significant that a form can be created in a way that the form itself is supportive and encouraging of structural analyses<sup>1</sup>.

Organizational culture is also demonstrated in small or background ways that are nevertheless relevant, such as the physical space of the organization or program, which both creates and reflects organizational culture. Shanks talked about how her program was located in a hospital setting that she saw as cold and alien, although the staff tried to structure their physical space in a way that was welcoming and comforting to clients. Melissa also discussed the importance of the organization's physical space to structural social work.

**Melissa:** It's not something you can necessarily write down, I think it's a feeling that you have or you don't. And that was something too that I heard when someone came up ... from [out of the area]. I took him to the building [to the organization] to go see it and he said, 'It's so not like an institution at all!' And I said, 'Well I wouldn't work here if it was,' right?! I didn't want it to look like that and he said, 'This is the way they should be set up, I've never seen them set up like that,' and I just thought it was the building, I didn't really think of a different way I would have done it.

**Interviewer:** So the physical environmental made a difference in terms of it feeling and it being structural?

**Melissa:** Yeah, and you think about those things like you—the physical environment, [I] was thinking about that, how do I make this an area [where] people want to hang out? How do I make this comfortable? You know those are thoughts you put in.

The ways in which physical spaces are structured can contribute to or ameliorate a sense of hierarchy and power, thus contributing to or ameliorating structural forms of oppression in the context of organizational culture. Physical space can both create and reflect an organizational culture of either power over or power with.

The example from Melissa overlaps with the practitioner space where social workers actively engage in structural activities. Melissa not only worked in an organization that had a

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<sup>1</sup> The form has not been identified here as doing so would identify the office the participant works in, and thus potentially jeopardize the confidentiality of this person. This is also relevant for some of the texts provided by other participants. Therefore, texts are at times described without being named and without quoting from them.

culture conducive to a structural approach, she actively worked to create and build that culture in the organization. This is discussed more in chapter six.

### Independence and autonomy

The amount of independence and autonomy participants had in their work influenced the extent to which they could incorporate a structural approach into their work. While a bureaucratic organizational culture tended to allow less independence of staff members, this was not true in every situation, and the amount of autonomy a participant had could significantly ameliorate bureaucratic barriers to structural practice, making this factor distinct from organizational culture. Sophie gave an example from her work where management was expected to have a tight rein on staff: “So it got by, [the manager] got bypassed and he then said eyebrows were raised. Like kinda, ‘What’s your staff doing? Keep your staff under control,’ was the impression I got.”

John also talked about his feelings of being controlled in terms of what he could and could not do at his workplace. While he could talk with clients about issues in their lives, he felt that he was not able to actually work with them to address the structural concerns.

**John:** I’m forced to stop short of stuff ... so I will talk about something like transportation services and talk with them about how they are inadequate and that you cannot have a social life without transportation with disabilities in this town, and you know, I’ll talk about, with them about what they can do to let people know. But yeah, I have to in some ways stop short of saying ‘I will help you with this.’

The more constrained a social worker is, particularly if the supervisor has a narrower or more conservative perspective of the work, the less scope there is to address structural issues.

An example from the interview with Shanks demonstrates the overlap of several organizational factors in limiting her work, including her lack of autonomy. In this example

she talks about her supervisor having a narrow perspective on the organizational mandate and how this is related to the supervisor's tight control over even small decisions she makes.

**Shanks:** The manager that directly supervises me is a nurse and she [has a] really, really task-focused idea of how to manage me. So if I wanted to order a book, she would want to know why that book would be relevant to some of the things that I do. So even if it's a book about treatment, which we don't do treatment, ... I feel from my point of view, that I need to look at treatment options if I am making recommendations. I need to see what the research and what the literature is saying ... I still need to know what works.... She is not supportive about that sort of idea.... So if I wanted to order that book, you know chances are that I would probably have to pay for it out of my own pocket.... And every time I venture in any direction, she reins me in really tight.

Having a non-structural supervisor or manager who maintained a hands-on approach to supervision could limit the ability of participants to engage in structural practice.

Contrary to these experiences, many of the participants talked about having a lot of freedom to do their work and they connected this freedom with their ability to utilize a structural approach. A person's position in the organization could make a difference in the level of autonomy in a job. The broad scope of Melissa's position as an executive director meant that she had a significant amount of decision-making responsibility, as well as a board that trusted her to work as a professional and gave her the autonomy to do that.

**Melissa:** I guess that was one nice thing about my job.... I just got to do it I if wanted it like that. You know that was one of the nice things of being the boss, you know, I just got to, got to do it like that, I didn't have to be accountable—not that I didn't have to be accountable, but my board supported what I was doing and trusted that I was making my decisions, you know, the best way.

People in front line positions and doing direct client work also sometimes had the liberty to make their own decisions including addressing structural issues. Ellen worked very independently in her advocacy work with children and youth, which allowed her to easily incorporate a structural perspective. Joe had considerable scope in his work with youth in custody, giving him the space to incorporate a structural approach into his counselling

practice as well as in court reports he wrote on clients. For Aboriginal youth, some of the structural issues he wrote about were related to colonization, such as attendance in residential schools by the youth or their parents. The lack of a prescribed format for reports gave Joe the leeway to do this.

**Interviewer:** Does your organization provide a context for you or a format that you are supposed to use [for your reports] so you have to try to fit structural with that format?

**Joe:** Just the fact that they give me the leeway to introduce that new information that has been left out of many reports. The fact, because people that have been to residential schools, have impacted their kids and grandchildren, stuff like that. But no, we have no set format that I have to go by.... So no set standard form it is just that, as a professional with a master's degree, there is an expectation as a therapist that you would be putting the pertinent information down, not talking about, 'Today, he looked up at the sky today and saw a bird.'

The structural contents of the reports were shared with the courts and thus had the potential to assist in determining the outcome of a youth's criminal charges.

As with John and Sophie, some participants worked in organizations that were considered to be bureaucratic, conservative and top-down. However, having autonomy in their practice made a significant difference in how they were able to work. Joe and Victoria both talked about working in a large top-down bureaucracy, yet having the flexibility to work structurally.

**Victoria:** I think when they hired me they had a specific focus but I'm really lucky they just let me be my own creative being and see that I'm effective and get things done so I've sort of developed a reputation.

**Interviewer:** Did they leave it open for you a little bit then? Is the contract written in a way that you feel that you have some flexibility?

**Victoria:** Oh yeah, absolutely that I have some flexibility.... I think they see the creative piece as really my greatest strength, which is really interesting considering the environment that we're working in.

In Victoria and Joe's situations, the independence and autonomy they experienced in their positions buffered the top-down bureaucratic culture of the organization. This was enough to allow them the opportunity to utilize a structural perspective in a way that they felt was effective.

#### Organizational or program mandate, goals and vision statements, job descriptions

The organizational culture discussed in the previous section was not one that was written down, but rather consisted of the unwritten culture around how the organization functioned and thought. The organizational mandate, vision and goals were more overt and consisted of the written and spoken statements, which were often public, that defined the scope of the organization's work as well as the approach that the organization intended to be paramount in the work. While the organizational culture was at times related to the mandate, vision and goals, this was not necessarily true in all cases. Several participants noted the influence of these aspects of this factor on their work.

Billy talked about the mandate of his particular program and position having aspects that were simultaneously both supportive of and barriers to his structural practice. The health care program had a mandate to assist street-involved or unstable individuals who were living with HIV/AIDS in order for them to take their medication regularly. At the onset of the program there was no social work position; however, Billy said that over time the health care team recognized that most of the clients also faced numerous social issues that affected their health, and so a social work position was created. Billy talked about how the creation of his position in and of itself acknowledged the links between health and social issues and so opened doors to a social work perspective in the context of an individual health care focused organization. At the same time his job description was written in a way that indicated that

his work was to focus on assisting individuals overcome their problems and challenges, rather than one of addressing structural issues. Thus his position, job description and program mandate were simultaneously both barriers and supports to his use of a structural perspective.

An analysis of Billy's program mandate demonstrates its mixed nature as Billy described. The mandate did acknowledge structural issues related to poverty, culture, gender and ethnicity as barriers to health care. Most of the services provided to the clients, however, had as a goal "to improve ... adherence to ... medications" (Program description, Billy), although one of the services was identified as advocacy regarding issues, including structural issues of access to housing and income assistance. Thus, the program was indeed a mix of structural and individual activities, suggesting it was simultaneously a support and a barrier to a structural approach, depending at times on one's interpretation.

Billy's job description offered even fewer openly structural descriptions of services. It described responsibilities focused largely on individual clinical work, influenced significantly by a health care model of practice. Twice, the job description identified the importance of being able to use a systems approach in practice. Systems theory has been critiqued as having a focus on assisting individuals in adapting to their environment rather than on structural changes. The job description was open to structural interpretation on a few items including working at a community level, connecting the client to resources and working with the client in addressing client needs. In minor ways, some of the content of the job description, while not overtly structural, did leave the door open for a structural perspective.

When Lilly was hired, it was into a new position as a social planner with a small municipality. Lilly felt that her job description opened the doors for her to incorporate a structural perspective into her work. Being the first person in the position also meant that her interpretation of the position did not challenge any previous and less structural interpretations, so her structural perspective has instead set the stage for the expectations of her position. Lilly's role was to examine social issues related to municipal policies and make recommendations to city council. She had no mandate to provide social services to individual clients, but rather focused on addressing policy changes in improving access to community services. She stated that her position was necessarily open to a structural perspective, even if inadvertently, because of the focus on policy and structural contexts. Lilly's job description did not specifically identify a structural approach as necessary to the position. Nevertheless, the job description did indicate that the position was to identify social issues, analyze them and recommend solutions in a way that connected these issues to historical, social and economic contexts and structures. Other structural items in the job description included mention of having knowledge of "social planning and community development" and knowledge of "economics and sociology". Thus the job description did make specific mention of linking social issues to societal structures and policies, which encourages a structural analysis.

The mandate and vision statements where Kevin worked were overtly structural in nature. "It's definitely a part of the vision statement and the constitution. I think one of the values is to address the process of colonization and, you know, all its forms" (Kevin). The vision statement mentioned both individual and community health and well-being as key values, thus intimating that there are links between individual and community health. One of



the organization's goals was to challenge structural barriers to social and health care services as well as working toward an end to oppression, colonization and discrimination. For Kevin, the goals and vision statements were consistent with the organizational culture, creating an organization that was completely compatible with his use of a structural approach.

Ellen worked with an advocate's office for children and youth receiving child welfare support; she also identified her organizational goals, mission and mandate as being supportive of a structural approach. The mandate and mission statements of the organization were analyzed. Descriptions of services included advocacy and ensuring children and youth have a voice in decisions about their welfare. In addition, the mandate openly acknowledges that the organization has the responsibility to identify how child welfare services may be making systemic errors and to suggest ways of rectifying these systemic or structural problems to the Minister. The textual analysis indicated that documents describing mandate and mission of the organization do include some overtly structural descriptions of services and goals.

In spite of working in a bureaucratic and health care focused organization where she was experiencing significant barriers, Sophie could identify a shift in her program mandate that temporarily opened doors for structural work. She worked with complex cases and the heavy caseload left her struggling for the time to manage the difficult cases. Management heard the concerns and redefined the positions in a way that, Sophie felt, actually allowed her to do "real" social work. Sophie shared the memo issued by her organization outlining the changes initiated by management. An analysis of the memo found that it was not structural in its content, but that the outcome of reducing caseloads would give social workers more room to choose to apply this perspective if they wished. The document states: "caseload

sizes preclude case managers from identifying and addressing emerging client health issues proactively” (from Sophie). In the redesign of the positions, the number of social work positions increased, more workers were hired and caseloads decreased. For Sophie, these changes were very promising.

**Sophie:** But when I came to [this organization] they had just done the redesign of the case management role to be more discipline-specific. So that was a huge thing for social work [here]. Because the social work case managers were encouraged to practice social work instead of just the generic case management role. So that was very encouraging.

The analysis of the document demonstrated that it was not particularly structural in its language. It was Sophie’s interpretation of the document and the resulting reduced caseloads that were structural, more so than the document itself.

### Organizational budgets and funders

Although not mentioned as frequently as the other factors in the organizational space, budgets and funding bodies were commented on as both barriers and supports for several participants. Practitioners were aware that the organization’s funding source and budget can dictate the direction of the organization and affect social work practice. John felt that, at times, the government was not meeting the needs of his clients, but that since government funded the organization he was not allowed to criticize it.

**John:** Certainly our funding through the [names two organizations] is not—wouldn’t be encouraging of you know, something that really challenges the norms and the dominant ideas in our society.... I don’t think you would receive funding from the [name of organization] if you say, organize a demonstration downtown,... I think it does affect it. We wouldn’t be able—I think it would be difficult to speak out about a particular policy that say you know, if the [name of government department] was making which we didn’t like. I think it would be difficult to speak out on that based on our funders.... If say a policy—a government policy was going to seriously affect the well-being of the people we work with and we wanted to make a public statement about it, I think there would be a lot of [pause], I think it would be difficult based on how we are funded.

Sophie also talked about organizational funding; she connected budget cuts to the reduction of social work positions and thus to the pressure to take on an increasing number of cases. Fewer workers and higher caseloads result in a reduction in the effectiveness of the social work positions. Sophie said, “So I feel that I have been very supported to do more in-depth work in the years that I’ve been here. Although it’s being eroded a little bit one step at a time, because [of] cuts and so forth.” As front line workers, John and Sophie were still both able to see the connections between funding bodies, budget cuts, and their ability to do structural social work.

Melissa, in her role as executive director, had a positive experience with the funding body for her organization. She expected a battle with them over the structural direction in which she wanted to take the organization, but instead she was pleasantly surprised.

**Melissa:** I think for our funders although they never ... would say that it was a structural, ... but ... if there was some research person going on, they wanted them to come talk to me to find out what we had done at [our organization] ’cause it was so great. And when we went up to meet them ... our organization was only a year and half old. There were other organizations that had been open for 20 years, they wanted us to start out on the best practice talk and kind of lead that off on what had been happening in our building. So that told me that they were proud and they were wanting to take some of that responsibility ... ‘this is ours and this is our organization and we’re wanting people to know about it and to hear about it’.

Thus funding bodies can also, at times, be a support for a structural perspective.

Organizational funding and budgets overlap with the third space (below) of other external organizations. The funder, whether that is government or another non-profit organization such as the United Way, influences organizations, their work and thus their staff activities by virtue of what they choose to fund and how contracts are worded. As John identified, the pressure is sometimes unspoken, but there is a sense of not wanting to anger the funding body lest budgets be cut. Budgets are also internal to organizations when boards

and managers have the power to move funds from one program to another. Thus funding and finances are connected to funding bodies as well as being internal to organizations.

<b>Table 5. First Space: Organizational</b>	
a. Colleagues	
b. Supervisor	
c. Organizational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two texts: both assessment forms (one a barrier and one a support to structural work)</li> </ul>
d. Independence and autonomy	
e. Organizational and program mandate, vision and goal statements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Six texts: i) three were job descriptions ii) two were organizational vision and mission statements, and iii) one was a program description.</li> </ul>
f. Budgets and funding bodies	

### Summary and comparison with the literature

Table 5 summarizes the factors within the organizational space as have just been presented. Participants talked more about the organizational space than any of the other categories, although most of the literature on theory-practice integration discussed the role of educational factors. This may be due to most of the authors working in the field of education and thus having a vested interest in that area in particular. For participants, however, the organizational factors were much more relevant to their theory-practice integration.

Through the analysis I found that the organizational factors were more diverse and had greater depth and complexity than those described in the literature. Although the literature contained mention of several organizational factors, they were often described in isolation from each other, while the participants named more factors and spoke often about the interactions between the factors. The participants talked at length about: program mandates; vision, mission and value statements of the organization; program descriptions;

and job descriptions. Alternatively the literature had a briefer and all-encompassing mention of the role of boards and organizational mandates in directing social workers. Participants described independence and autonomy in their work as important to a structural approach, however, this factor was not found in the literature. Participants described diverse roles of colleagues and supervisors in supporting or challenging a structural approach, and these were the two factors discussed the most in the organizational category. This is consistent with Moreau and Leonard's (1989) findings. Other authors agree on the importance of the role of colleagues and peers, although the diversity of the roles they play was clarified in this study. While the literature mentioned some of the aspects of organizational culture, the research fleshed out more details as to what this means for participants.

The diverse experiences of participants with both barriers and supports demonstrate the reality that organizational spaces are not either a barrier or a support but that these can exist simultaneously within any organization. Part of the work of structural social workers is to find those windows of opportunity, and this becomes a component of the practitioner space to be discussed later in chapter six. The client space is the next to be discussed.

## **Second space: Client**

Participants' discussions of the ways in which clients influenced their use of a structural approach were surprisingly limited. Participants were clear that a structural perspective was necessarily supportive of clients and relevant to their work with them, in part due to a structural perspective's focus on understanding where clients are at and the larger structures affecting them. Some did indicate that they might utilize the approach differently, or incorporate other approaches, depending on client situations. Participants differentiated between individual client factors and population factors for groups of clients.

## Population factors for client groups

Participants often talked about the importance of a structural approach to working with different groups or populations of clients. One of the most common groups of clients discussed was First Nations people. In the organizational space Kevin was identified as talking about how the organization he worked for provided services largely to and by First Nations people. Several participants, including Kevin, indicated that the ability to link structural and historical oppressions to individual client issues was vital in effective work, especially with Aboriginal people and communities. Joe was adamant that it was not possible to work with Aboriginal people without a structural perspective.

**Joe:** Well, if you are working with First Nations people and you don't have a structural approach you won't be able to do it. For the main reason is you know, structural social work is based on anti-oppressive work and social justice and part of the feminist approach as well but also you also want to incorporate a decolonization method as well.... We are not being a racist, we are not being oppressive, we are saying, 'Yes, okay this is the way we are moving.' And I will tell you that there are a lot of social workers and professionals that I have met who asked me, 'How do you do it, Joe? How do you work more closely with First Nations people?' And there are ways of doing that and once again if you are structural you can do it.

The structural perspective provided the link between clients' issues and larger oppressive structures. Without this understanding one's work was less effective.

Participants working in community development and other mezzo or macro level positions often talked about client groups rather than individuals. Lilly was one such participant and she talked about feeling accountable to several different populations.

**Interviewer:** Who would you, from a macro/mezzo perspective, who would you call clients in your line of work?

**Lilly:** I think in some way the community as a whole; I feel a sense of responsibility to the community as a whole. And to people who live in poverty, who experience racism, who meet some of those structural barriers. Those are my clients, those are my people, you know? It's not explicitly accountable to, but implicitly in a sense I am accountable to those people. Whether I see their faces or know their names, or interact with them directly or not, and often I don't. I don't work in a way that I

necessarily have that opportunity. But it's my job to make sure that I'm keeping their experiences, as much as I can, as much as I can know, as much as I can imagine about their experiences, to keep those in the forefront of my perspective when I do macro work, right? When I make a recommendation to council about a policy about secondary suites, how is that gonna impact somebody who lives on \$5,000 a year?

For most participants, working with populations who were experiencing structural oppressions was itself a support to utilizing a structural perspective. As Joe put it, not using a structural perspective was not even possible in this context.

### Individual client factors

Participants were asked specifically about the ways in which their clients influenced their use of the structural approach, or other approaches. Participants were clear that it was important to them to pay attention to the clients, their needs and the full context of the situations the clients were facing. Social workers do respond differently to various clients depending on people's needs, but this response is not necessarily about choosing whether or not to use a structural perspective.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so when you work with individual clients, do they in any way influence the choice of approach or theory that you might use?

**Ellen:** Probably. I don't know if I consciously do it.... Definitely, I change my approach to different youth. I mean some are more able to, ... you know, some are more outgoing than others. Some are more well-spoken than others. Some are more introspective than others.

Ellen talked about matching her approach to children and youth with an understanding of the characteristics of those with whom she worked. She did not so much switch theoretical approaches, but worked with her clients' strengths and situations. Ellen tailored her use of communication, assessment and intervention skills depending on individual client factors, but this diversity of skills and interventions still occurred within the framework of a structural approach. This was also true for other participants, including Joe, who also worked within a structural approach while being able to adapt his skills at engaging clients in unique ways.

Some participants talked about utilizing other theoretical approaches in their practice.

Sophie gave several examples of how clients influenced her choice of theoretical approach.

**Interviewer:** Do your clients in anyway influence your choice of social work approaches or theories that you use when working with them? If so, how?

**Sophie:** Yes I think so. It is hard to describe because these days it has just become part of who I am and I don't always use these approaches consciously. But here's a few examples: When I have clients with fibromyalgia or generalized pain syndrome or obesity, I often use a feminist perspective and it helps me look for signs of childhood trauma and their experiences in the past and what they might be holding on to in their bodies. Another example would be the strengths perspective with that fella I told you about with OCPD [obsessive compulsive personality disorder] and looking at how people with [a] mental illness are stigmatized so also an anti-oppressive perspective. When I have clients with complex family dynamics I am always taking a systems approach and seeing the family system as the client and this sometimes means helping the family draw boundaries with the client—or supporting burnt-out caregivers with difficult placement of the client in a facility such that the client's care needs are not neglected. And I often connect the personal with the political and assist people away from internalizing pathology—social versus medical model, and empowerment.

Many of the approaches that Sophie has described here, such as feminist, anti-oppressive and strengths perspective, are compatible with a structural perspective, while others, such as systems theory and family systems theory are sometimes considered to be less compatible.

For Sophie this did not mean that she was not using a structural approach.

**Interviewer:** Would you ever not use a structural approach because of a client not being open to that perspective?

**Sophie:** No, I think it can always be used on some level—even just hearing the person, validating them, flattens out the power structure a bit.

In Sophie's work the structural perspective was always there, even when drawing on other approaches or perspectives. This dynamic is expanded on in the last factor of the client space.



Structural perspective is always there, even if in the background

The most consistent response from participants when they were asked if there were situations or contexts with clients in which they would not use a structural perspective, was an emphatic ‘No.’ This was true even when participants drew on different approaches based on client issues. Despite this, they talked about how a structural perspective was always there in some way.

**Interviewer:** Are there other ways in which your client population or individual clients affect which way or models or approaches you chose to use with them?

**Eleanor:** Yeah I mean if there is something specific, if they have something specific, issues or problems that come up ... okay, I can give you a good example. So I work with a lot of holocaust survivors and I had to learn about trauma and I had to learn about cultural trauma and I had to learn what different models people would use when working with them so that was very specific to the group of people I was working with.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel that your clients, or their situation or context, do you feel that influences whether or not you use a structural approach?

**Eleanor:** No.

**Interviewer:** So you never, you never turn off the structural perspective?

**Eleanor:** No, I can’t, because it’s, [pause] I said it’s, [pause] no, I don’t.

Whether or not they incorporated additional approaches into their practice, other participants were equally as clear in making the point that a structural perspective is always there for them.

**Interviewer:** Would you choose not to use structural social work based on something, based on your clients or guests at all?

**Melissa:** Well I don’t know how you would choose to do it; you either do it or you don’t. I don’t think it’s a switch that you just get to flip off and say, ‘Well I’m not going to think structurally about this, I’m just going to do it like that.’ So I don’t think there is a choice, and I don’t think I can say there is a guest [client] that it doesn’t fit with.... Everyone is part of the same structure. They might be different and look different, but everyone is a part of those [structures]. So there’s no one in particular that would not fit.

**Interviewer:** So a structural perspective is always there?

**Melissa:** Yup.

Not being able to turn off a structural perspective was a consistent and common response. Most people sounded genuinely surprised that I could think that turning off the approach was even an option. The ways in which the approach was present for people were sometimes different. Some, like Joe, talked about the structural perspective being front and centre for him at all times. Others, such as Annie and Debbie, talked about how they may not be actively using it as a direct tool in a particular client interaction, but that it is always in the back of their minds framing their understanding of the person and the person's situation.

**Table 6. Second Space: Client**

- |  |
|--|
| a. Population factors<br>b. Individual factors<br>c. Structural approach is always there |
|--|

### Summary and comparison with the literature

Table 6 summarizes the factors found within the second space between theory and practice, which is that of the client. The discussion in the literature of the impact of client factors on theory-practice integration focused entirely on factors relevant to individuals. These included clients' presenting issues, needs, age, worldview, and receptiveness to the theory, among others. Participants echoed these statements identifying a number of ways in which they adapted their practice, and sometimes their choice of theory, to individual clients. However, participants also identified population factors as being an important component of their structural theory-practice integration; this piece was not found in the literature review. In addition, although participants did draw on various theories depending on their clients'

needs, they were very clear that they never discarded the structural approach for any client. Although the structural perspective may have moved into more of a background role, it still provided an important analysis and understanding of clients' situations.

Aspects of this space overlap with the theory space. The inability to 'turn off' a structural approach is also a significant component of the theory space, as is the way in which some social workers incorporate other approaches and theories alongside their use of a structural perspective. These speak to client factors but also to the broader understanding of structural social work theory. This will be discussed in more detail later in the theoretical category.

### **Third space: Other organizations, professionals, groups and individuals**

Although not identified during the literature review, it became clear during the course of data collection and analysis that organizations, institutions, professionals and lay people outside of the organization in which the practitioner worked were also important barriers or supports in the use of a structural perspective. In addition, several participants talked about Integrated Case Management where, with a client's permission, professionals from various agencies who are involved with a client will meet together to develop an integrated plan with the client. All participants mentioned people and organizations outside their workplace that influenced their work and their use of a structural approach. There are four factors in this space.

#### **Other agencies, professionals and lay people in the community**

Other agencies and professionals in the social worker's community, particularly those with whom the person worked closely, were the most frequently mentioned factor in this category. On occasion participants also talked about lay people such as family members who

were important to their work. Usually these other people and agencies were a support to their social work practice, although there were occasions where these factors were also barriers.

Shanks began taking on the interviewer role in her work as she developed specialized skills in interviewing children on sexual abuse issues. Shanks also worked with her clients' family members, and on one occasion it was a family member, an aunt, who proved to be the support for her and her work with the child. As her interview skills improved, she started realizing that other services and agencies were not equipped to handle the severity and the number of cases she referred to them for services.

**Shanks:** My structural stance on this individual topic is doing a better job at the interview. [But] the aftermath might be more than what some of our services can handle, or families or parents, so it all gets linked. For me it becomes a situation that can encompass many agencies and many caregivers and many children very quickly, you know?

For her to do well in the interviewing role, but then to have the child and family not receive the services that they needed, was a significant flaw at a systemic level. While she continued to do her work to the best of her abilities, it became problematic for her in many ways.

Joe described his work with an interdisciplinary team around returning a youth from custody back to the community. The process was undermined by a decision from a government professional outside his organization, which disregarded the youth's interests, and the completed plan, and instead returned the youth to a community in which he did not want to live and where he had few supports. This led Joe to involve another professional to challenge the decision.

**Interviewer:** So in that particular case it was not successful, or did not have a positive outcome, because the structural perspective was lost or was not used?

**Joe:** That is correct. It was also, at the point where we had to involve the youth representative's office to get involved with this before we could start getting any progress.

**Interviewer:** So the youth advocate's office then is sometimes helpful for you to bring it back to a structural perspective?

**Joe:** That is very accurate ... because I am a structural social worker, I will advocate, I will get the youth representative's office involved.

In Joe's example, one external professional was a barrier while another, from the advocate's office, was a support to his structural work.

Billy was the only social worker in his agency and at times felt that he needed input from other social work professionals in the same field of work. He talked about developing both working relationships and friendships with social workers at other agencies and finding them to be a source of support when he had a difficult decision to make. His connections were both informal, over coffee, and formal, such as integrated case management planning with a client.

Most of the participants described ways in which organizations, professionals and lay people outside of their workplace affected their structural work as both supports and barriers. These organizations and individuals were often important supports for participants, particularly for those who were feeling isolated or unsupported in the organization for which they worked.

### **Professional associations or networks**

In addition to the provincial associations of social workers, there are a number of associations or networks in which social workers are often involved in connection to their field of work. Many non-profit organizations belong to a provincial or national association of organizations doing the same work, such as women's centres in BC, which typically

belong to the BC Coalition of Women's Centres. Several participants talked about how these associations were relevant to their work.

Lilly mentioned that as a student she had attended the annual conference for the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work. It was here that she had heard Ben Carniol speak about structural social work, and this was very important in her start to understand the approach. For Lilly, her participation in this association was significant in her use of a structural perspective. Kevin talked about the various associations his organization belonged to and networked with being supportive specifically around addressing issues of oppression and colonization.

Joe saw his decision to join the provincial association of social workers as a structural one because he saw the organization as having the role of protecting clients from potential conflicts with social workers. He was one of the few participants who saw the role of professional social work associations as in keeping with a structural perspective. Ellen had been a board member with her provincial association of social workers. She said initially the board was very active in structural activities such as educating the public on structural issues and issuing statements on problematic government policy changes. However, the move to mandatory registration meant the organization became more involved in regulatory activities at the expense of its social action responsibilities, and Ellen became disillusioned with the organization.

Interestingly, most of the participants were lukewarm about their provincial social worker associations, with most participants not being members. They were not necessarily negative about the association, but did not see that it had much of a role in supporting, or challenging, the use of a structural perspective. Sophie said, "I think they are neutral. They

aren't opposed to the approach. There was recently a letter put out by the [provincial social work association] that was pretty feisty.... But it isn't as though they're preparing for a revolt.” Others said they were not sure to what extent, if at all, the social work associations were supportive of a structural approach.

Several participants felt that social work associations should take a leadership role in promoting the use of a structural perspective, but felt they were not doing this. Billy saw the provincial association's lack of involvement in structural social work as very problematic.

**Billy:** I think social work in general outside of academia—I could see a real divide between academic social work which tends to be structural and anti-oppressive in its approach versus professional social work and professional social work bodies and codes of ethics that tend not really to look at that stuff at all and don't really support social workers in making huge changes. I've had, well this is something I've been talking about [with] a friend of mine who's also a social worker and you know a social worker can be taken to task for breaking the code of ethics if it means they are doing something unethical with a client. Why can't they be taken to task if they're not following a code of ethics that stipulates that we must resist structural oppression?... And wouldn't that be a different way of working if it were that way.

For Billy, the professional social work associations were not just neutral or uninvolved; they were an active barrier to a structural approach.

### Governments and governmental bodies

Many of the participants talked about the relevance of governments or governmental bodies to their structural social work practice. While a few of the comments spoke positively about the ways in which governments supported a structural approach, most people linked neo-liberal and right wing governments to creating or exacerbating social problems. Debbie was recently unemployed at the time of the interview, and she connected the loss of her job and the whole program to cuts by the BC Liberals.

**Debbie:** So the budget issues I think, the politics behind government decisions that are trickling down are affecting people day to day, not just mine. Like being laid off recently but budget cuts that are shutting that program down and sort of the

implications that has for a parent's day to day family life, the really core day to day human things.

For Debbie, government funding cuts were not just about her losing her job, but also about the loss of important services to children and families. The program Debbie worked with provided support and respite to families to prevent their children from being taken into care by the province. The loss of the program also meant that vulnerable families were often losing one of their main sources of support, thus placing them at increased risk of losing their children. In her case, the loss of her job completely ended her ability to work structurally with clients. Government cuts to funding for services and programs are in many ways a complete and final barrier to structural work in those arenas.

Others also linked neo-liberal government budget cuts to a loss of services. Sophie and Joe make specific links between cuts and political ideology as well as political parties.

**Sophie:** So back when the NDP was in power you could get a home support worker [who] could do a little bit of cleaning for you if you couldn't do it yourself and they could also do your laundry. It wasn't heavy cleaning but they could vacuum your areas and you know, wash the kitchen floor so it wouldn't get too sticky and maybe do a little bit of dusting so it wouldn't get too dusty and do a bit of laundry for you. Well, when Gordon Campbell came in 2001, they took away the cleaning.

While this may not sound significant, some clients were unable to do cleaning, and had no one else to assist them. This service was important for their health and quality of life. Joe also talked about the ideological shift in BC with the election of the BC Liberals in 2001, saying it is important to understand how these policy changes affect social issues and clients.

**Joe:** As a true structural social worker as you know we look at structures of society as causing the inequality, things that are happening, the marginalizing of citizens as opposed to blaming the citizens [or] blaming the people for their problems.

Ellen also linked a lack of services to political ideology.

**Ellen:** It [my work] kind of goes against the ... political sentiment in this province. And ... that ties back to that ideology. I mean government should be here to help the less fortunate, in my, in my opinion, but that's not a common sentiment here.



Government and political ideology therefore worked against Ellen in her attempts to utilize a structural approach in her work. At the same time, her position and the organization, a provincial child and youth advocate's office, were funded and legislated by the same government, demonstrating the sometimes paradoxical ways in which a factor could be a barrier and support to structural social work at the same time.

Ellen pointed out the government legislation that created the advocate's office where she worked. The legislation, available on-line, was analyzed in the context of this research. The legislation creates and provides funding for an advocacy office to address concerns of children and youth in care. The legislation itself is not overtly structural although it does identify activities related to a structural perspective. For example, the legislation identifies that the advocate's office is to meet or speak with children or youth who come to them with complaints, to advocate on their behalf within the child welfare system, and most notably that the actions of the organization are to represent the perspectives of children and youth. (Quotes from the legislation are not given here as they could identify the province and thus the office in which Ellen works.) While the legislation is somewhat vague, it does provide the opportunity for the organization to take it one step further. An analysis of the organizational vision and mandate text, discussed earlier in the section on the organizational space, demonstrates overt support of structural analyses. The strength of the legislation is that it leaves the door open for the organization to incorporate structural analyses. Ellen also stated that the memorandum of understanding between the government and the advocate's office was important in keeping the government at arm's length from the organization. (The memorandum was not available for analysis.) This is another important piece in giving the

office room to incorporate structural analyses. In this case, it is the combination of these three documents that resulted in an organization supportive of a structural approach.

Joe identified the provincial government and governmental bodies as being both barriers and supports to structural practice. He believes the provincial government's transformation plan for the Ministry of Child and Family Development is a document that will move the traditionally conservative ministry in a structural direction. When challenged on his structural approach, Joe described using the document to demonstrate that his structural perspective is consistent with current government thinking.

An analysis of the transformation plan demonstrates that, as with the legislation that Ellen referred to, the language of the document itself is not overtly structural. The document develops a framework for changes to child and family services in the province. Child welfare has traditionally centred on child protection services, and one key feature of the document is that it moves from this toward an approach that is more inclusive of prevention and early intervention services. Examples of programs in these areas demonstrate that the focus is still primarily on working with individuals and families to cope better with their issues, with no corresponding balance of understanding these issues in the context of structures. While it is understandable that an organizational plan for service delivery would focus more on services rather than structural contexts, a structural perspective demonstrates that these are connected. Providing services without an understanding of structural contexts increases the likelihood that services are only Band-Aids that do not address the primary causes of issues, thus ensuring their continuation.

The section of the document that comes the closest to acknowledging structural contexts is the pillar described as "The Aboriginal Approach" which states that the

government recognizes the unique conditions and cultures relevant to Aboriginal communities and intends to support First Nations in moving toward delivering their own child and family services. This move is itself a structural change for the purpose of improving care and resolving problems for Aboriginal children and families. This pillar also identifies, and seeks to close, the socio-economic gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, although it stops short of pointing to structural contexts for this issue. While it does not spell out structural activities or a structural approach to working with Aboriginal people, it does leave the door open slightly in this direction. The identification of the socio-economic gap and the move to returning child welfare responsibility to the purview of Aboriginal people are consistent with Joe's statement that he believes that the Aboriginal component of the plan is open to a structural perspective. However, he also stated that this connection was likely coincidental rather than deliberate. Interview data and textual analyses demonstrate that documents do not have to be openly structural in order to provide support for a structural social work practice.

Lilly was another person who was frustrated with neo-liberal government cuts and the negative effects on communities and clients, but who also found a place of support for her work within provincial government legislation. Her work within a municipality existed in large part because of the 2004 changes to provincial legislation, which gave more scope to municipalities for their engagement of social issues. For Lilly this shift was exciting and it opened doors to addressing social issues at the community and municipal levels. One of the purposes of municipalities, as identified in the legislation, is for: "fostering the economic, social and environmental well-being of its community" (Government of BC, *Community Charter*, 2003, Part II, Division I, Section 7d). This description identifies social issues at a

municipal or community level as being relevant to municipal government, opening systemic social issues up to the purview of municipal governments. Even more important, from Lilly's perspective, is the acknowledgement in the legislation of overlapping interests between municipalities and the province, and that municipalities can exercise powers in these areas as long as it does not conflict with provincial decisions. According to Lilly, it is the area of addressing social issues at a structural level that has been opened up to municipalities through this legislation. Prior legislation actually prevented them from acting on social issues. As with other government documents, the support of a structural approach is more indirect than direct.

### International communities and organizations

According to two of the participants, international communities and organizations also have a role to play in their use of a structural perspective. Although this factor was mentioned infrequently, it is relevant. Kevin mentioned international organizations briefly when he talked about ways in which he felt supported in his use of a structural approach at work. He indicated that participating in or even knowing about international organizations with anti-oppressive perspectives was a support in his ability to incorporate a structural approach into his practice.

Joe was the other participant to name international communities and organizations as having a role in supporting a structural perspective.

**Joe:** I think that there is enough empirical data that is available right now that says yeah look at it, we knew, especially after the World Commission of Aboriginal People, it signalled that change has to start happening because the international community, United Nations, and other places are looking at countries like Canada, and saying, 'Yeah is this really the best place to live?' Yeah maybe if you are a rich white guy it might be. If you happen to be a First Nations person or another marginalized person it may not be the best place to be living. So there are expectations from the international community for countries to start shifting.

Joe believed that international pressure on Canada makes a difference and that it has pushed both national and provincial governments toward changes that are structural in nature. These shifts in turn pressure organizations to move in the same direction, and although the connection is indirect, Joe says that this opens doors to his use of a structural approach.

The relevance of international contexts was also noted in two of the documents identified by participants as supporting a structural approach. Interestingly, neither of the participants mentioned the international connection in these documents; perhaps not realizing it was in the document or not knowing the relevance to the research. The first is the provincial transformation plan noted by Joe. In a message from the Deputy Minister prefacing the plan, Lesley du Toit points out that the plan is based on and “informed by” several factors including “international good practice” (Government of BC, *Strong, Safe and Supported*, n.d., circa 2007, p. 7). In several places in the body of the document the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is singled out as being an important international convention that informs the work of the provincial child welfare office and the transformation plan in particular. The accountability of national and provincial governments to the UN described by Joe is also noted in the report:

The CRC provides governments across the globe with a comprehensive international standard for children’s rights.... By ratifying the Convention a country assumes a legal obligation to recognize the rights identified in the Convention and ensure that these rights are reflected in actions, policies and programs. These countries are also accountable for this commitment before the international community. (p. 10)

Although this does not spell out a commitment to a structural approach to child welfare, it does identify the relevance of the international community to practicing social work in child welfare. According to Joe, this pressure did open doors for his use of a structural perspective.

The organizational vision, mission and mandate for Ellen's office also referenced the UNCRC as being a vital document supporting their mandate, vision and activities, which were overtly structural in nature. Although Ellen did not mention the relevance of international bodies to her structural practice, she did note the importance of the organizational mandate, which in turn noted the importance of an international Convention. This suggests that international pressures can open doors for structural social work practice, even if workers do not always see this connection clearly.

<b>Table 7. Third Space: Other Organizations, Associations, Professionals and Individuals</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Other agencies, professionals or lay people in the community</li> <li>b. Professional associations or networks</li> <li>c. Governments and governmental bodies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three texts: i) a government transformation plan, ii) provincial legislation regarding an advocate's office, and iii) provincial legislation governing municipalities' mandates.</li> </ul> </li> <li>d. International communities and organizations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two texts referenced international documents: i) a government transformation plan and ii) an organization's mandate.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### Summary and comparison with the literature

Although it is logical that other people and organizations would affect social work practice, this category was not found in the literature on theory-practice integration. Other organizations, professionals and lay people are relevant to structural social work practice for the participants. The factors in this category are summarized in Table 7. While organizations and people in the communities where practitioners work is the most often talked-about factor within this space, social workers recognize a variety of barriers and supports to practice, external to their organization, from local to global levels.

## **Fourth space: Educational**

The educational space is where much of the research literature is focused. While academics may be more interested in education because of their teaching responsibilities, this was not the most significant category for participants. Nevertheless, participants still identified it as relevant to their use of a structural perspective. One important change is that participants described learning about structural social work in many different contexts, not just while completing course work. There are five factors in this section.

### **Course work at an educational institution**

Taking courses for a social work degree was the starting point for many participants in learning about a structural perspective. It was during course work, readings and lectures that many of them formally learned the words ‘structural social work’ and related terms such as anti-oppressive, critical, radical, feminist, anti-racist and others. They also learned about concepts of oppression, power, privilege and societal structures and connections to social issues. For Billy, this moment of learning is one he remembers as if a light bulb was turned on and suddenly he could see the issues.

**Billy:** My mom convinced me to do social work so I started my social work degree. And immediately I went, ‘Ohhhh! Right! This is what’s really going on!’ Because you know it was my very first course, which was anti-oppressive practice and it was just this wave of information and feeling that was just coming at me. Just not only were there all sorts of reasons and historical and current things working against people. But I, myself, being white and being a man and being middle-class and being able-bodied and all the rest, was really kind of benefitting from this and I had never thought of it that way. I had just sorta thought, ‘Well we can all be equal,’ you know? Why would I have to change, why can’t we all just be equal? I started realizing ‘Oh right! I, I have to change too. I have to think differently as well.’ And it just started going on from there.

For others, however, there was a sense of gradual learning over time. Without realizing it, all of the information on structures and social issues slowly coalesced for them.

**Lilly:** I think it kind of just evolved.... It's really hard for me to describe, I guess, the evolution of that thought process.... It just sort of became incorporated in my practice. And the more I learned, the more I understood, the more I read about what was going on in the world, about history, about First Nations issues, about race issues, about policy issues. The more, I mean it's back to those linkages again, you know nothing is disconnected from anything else ... yeah I find it really hard to, to articulate.

Most of the participants said that learning about structural social work was a gradual process that happened slowly over time and was hard to describe.

Participants were also often able to identify instructors they had or textbooks they read that gave them a strong sense of what a structural perspective was in theory and in practice.

**Ellen:** Actually well Bob Mullaly ... was my instructor for probably like half my courses when I did my fourth [year].... I had ... his structural social work textbook.... So it was ... his influence, I mean every course we took, whether it was direct counselling practice or the social policy course, it was always tied back to the structural perspective.

In addition to Mullaly, participants named several other instructors from schools of social work across Canada who were instrumental in their learning about structural social work. The most common structural social work textbooks named by participants as being important to their learning process were Mullaly's *Structural Social Work* text (2006) and *Case Critical* by Ben Carniol (2005). *Becoming an Ally* by Anne Bishop (2002) was also mentioned.

For Shanks, being able to see advocacy in action in her BSW practicum and being able to see structural connections in the context of work with victims of abuse in her MSW practicum were both valuable learning experiences. Annie's field placement experiences made the abstract construct of structures more real.

**Annie:** I remember my practicum ... they would have me do things like you know, get in a wheel chair and ride across [a main] street or something like that you know, just to kind of really experience ... what real life is like ... and what barriers would be. It's not the same as dealing with it you know day-in-and-day-out from you know,



your own life but you know, anything like that ... can give you a light into what the structures of society really are.

Annie's practicum, by including hands-on learning opportunities, helped her understand the effects of structures better.

Shanks, Joe and Melissa all described learning about a structural perspective in social service certificate or diploma programs they attended. Joe described learning about conflict versus consensus perspectives in sociology courses he took before completing a BSW. Information on the conflict perspective set the stage for the eventual courses he took on structural social work, which he identified as fitting within a conflict perspective.

While learning about structural social work in school was a support for structural practice most of the time, problems were also identified in this context.

**Ellen:** I can think of kind of one example of an instructor ... you know the city I went to school in was fairly small so ... people knew each other in the ... community. And she wasn't the type that would walk the talk [laughs]. And, so I mean that wasn't helpful.... There were a couple courses I ended up taking from her.... When you hear somebody spouting some things off and you kind of have some other knowledge about them, that they don't necessarily practice what they preach, I think that, to me I find that very disheartening.

Lilly talked paradoxically about how what she learned during her BSW degree was foundational for her future practice, but that this learning was not always positive.

**Lilly:** Because really, especially in a professional field, your first exposure to theoretical stuff is really, it builds a foundation I think ... the foundation is always there in some way.

**Interviewer:** So the foundation you get from your education, from being in school, is always with you?

**Lilly:** I think it's always with you good or bad, you know? Good and bad I think. And whether it still fits for you or not, I mean there's lots of things about my BSW experience that I think lowered, or did more damage than good.

Lilly described her experiences learning about structural social work as occurring largely outside of the classroom. While other doors to learning about the approach were opened

during her time in school, such as her attendance at the CASSW conference, the social work program itself was more of a barrier than a support to her use of a structural perspective.

Eleanor also expressed frustration with part of her education process. She completed her BSW and MSW at two different universities and had very different experiences in each.

**Eleanor:** I did my BSW study at ... a big structural social work hub and to me that was just the way that you practiced social work, that was taught to us. That was how you looked at, how you looked at social work and the work that you did. So to me it is just very logical.... And when I ... did my masters and literally we didn't talk about it and I thought it was weird.... After I did my BSW study I practiced for 8 years and that is how I have been practicing, so there was no touchstone for me in the MSW program because we didn't talk about structural social work and yet that is what I learned and what I integrated into my practice. That was really difficult for me.

Despite the lack of a structural approach in Eleanor's MSW, her BSW studies and the learning about structural social work from that time remained with her.

Jamie talked extensively about her educational experiences as both negative and positive. Her negative experiences within the school of social work were related to issues of identity as a visible minority woman and an immigrant. She described how most people were very nice, but no one made an effort to really connect with her. She felt excluded because of her identity, but in a subtle rather than overt way. Jamie saw that this exclusion at the level of personal interactions reflected the program and university's exclusion in general, while simultaneously hiding the exclusion under a cover of superficial 'niceness' to everyone.

**Jamie:** I think it's the university as a whole, in terms of it being very mainstream and also not only with [this university]. I think it's with how people understand oppression, racism, like, you know, what you said if it's unintended.... But there is an impact on the person whether you intend it or not. People are influenced by how they socialize so I think those individual pieces play out in the organizational level and the organizational level also plays out in the individual level. So if these things are not encouraged to talk about and we just present a very nice front, we're nice, we're very, very kind. There is no room for you to even raise an issue cause if I say like 'I don't feel like I'm included' then they'd say. 'Oh but we include you.'

Jamie shared examples of being invited to join others in an activity, but few people talked with her during the event and those who did, engaged with her only briefly and in a shallow or insincere manner. She made an effort to connect with people during and between classes, but it was not reciprocated. Although she did not see the exclusion as deliberate, it was still exclusion. The university and school presented as being anti-oppressive, and having an equity program in place. This contributed to a façade that all was well, which, according to Jamie, shut down the possibility of talking about issues of exclusion. While this does not necessarily sound traumatic from an outside perspective, for Jamie it was huge and very personal.

**Interviewer:** So in some ways this is a form of oppression that's very hidden?

**Jamie:** Yes, it is very hidden and it is very difficult to voice, it's very difficult to deal with. But it has an impact on me because I cried for the first three months every day I came back from school. My life was miserable. I had not struggled so hard in my life.

The subtle forms of exclusion held so much sway over her sense of self that it became difficult to participate in classes and she began to doubt herself and her ability to contribute. Jamie was essentially rendered invisible in many ways. Not only did she feel invisible, but her perception was driven home one day when she was "introduced" to a woman with whom she had done her degree, and the woman had no recollection of ever having seen her before. The exclusion was so palpable and painful for Jamie that she toyed with the idea of dropping out of the program. Jamie finally found an instructor within the social work program who helped turn her experience around, a woman who understood her exclusion and frustration and who could support Jamie in continuing on in her studies. Jamie used her experiences as a starting point for some of her writing and she felt that, in the end, she turned a very difficult time into a positive learning experience.

Participants encountered both barriers and supports to a structural perspective in their studies. For most participants, it was the place where they learned in a formal way about structural social work. Billy, in particular, talked about the difficulty to maintain a structural approach once he left school.

**Billy:** It's really hard not being in school because you tend, I tend to kind of just slip back into day-to-day routines of just, of being traditional, a generalist practitioner and, and really just looking at people as individuals and looking at problems as being personal. So it's really good to be in school and to be learning and reading constantly and going, 'Right, right, that's why things are the way they are.'

Once they left school, participants wanted to continue learning about the structural approach, and this also formed a part of the educational space.

### Studying on one's own

Several of the participants described ways in which they educated themselves on structural issues on their own time and outside of a school setting. Joe learned about structural issues in many ways, including reading books such as ones by Noam Chomsky and Naomi Klein. Billy, in his work with marginalized people on the Downtown Eastside, found that Gabor Mate's (2009) book on his work with vulnerable street-involved people in the same area was helpful to him in his understanding of structural issues. Joe and Lilly both talked about attending conferences where they were able to hear speakers sharing information on structural social work. Joe accessed information specific to Aboriginal culture and historical oppressions to be better at his work with Aboriginal clients.

**Joe:** As a professional person, a structural person, I make myself aware of the residential school impact on Aboriginal people, I've read the documents, I've read the books, not to make me an expert and not to say that by reading a book you would ever know how much Aboriginal people suffer. But from a structural social work perspective, I have brought myself up to speed on all those techniques and understanding the importance of ceremonies and Aboriginal healing so I was well aware of those things to help me become a nonjudgmental person, to see a young Aboriginal male who is usually affected by the multi-generational impact of

residential schools and historical trauma that they carry with them. Seeing that his Aboriginal strength that he had was a plus.

Joe actively worked to increase his understanding of Aboriginal culture and contexts, and he links that learning to the structural approach he uses in his work.

Lilly did not learn about a structural perspective at school; her initial learning came instead from a friend.

**Lilly:** I had a friend who I did my BSW with who was quite interested in structural theory and did his MSW shortly after his BSW. And so I had a lot of conversations with him because by the time he did his MSW at the school, they were starting to teach structural theory and he was quite interested in it anyways. He was reading intensive stuff and so we had lots of interesting conversations about it and so that definitely kind of piqued my interest.

Participants often chose to spend time outside of formal studies to learn more about issues of oppression, ways to address oppression and utilizing structural approaches.

### Learning from other contexts

Many of the participants indicated that they learned about structural social work in a variety of contexts, some of which were slightly unusual. All of these different contexts for learning were supports for them in utilizing a structural approach. John talked at the beginning of the interview about hoping that the interview process itself would open doors to learning more about how to use the approach in practice. One of the most unique learning contexts was John's experience in public school. He recalls receiving encouragement at the public school level to be accepting of gay, lesbian and bisexual people and to actively talk about and fight homophobia. In some ways, this early learning about oppression opened doors for his learning about structural issues and approaches when he did his BSW.

Participants most often described learning about structural issues from others, usually clients, who were experiencing oppression. Billy worked at a homeless shelter before doing

his BSW. He learned about structural issues causing social problems from co-workers and clients.

**Billy:** I was learning a little bit about a structural perspective, kind of, I mean there, there are people, colleagues, that I work with [who] have a little bit of knowledge about this and that and they shared it with me and opened my eyes. And the people who stayed in the shelter had a huge amount of knowledge of structural oppression in their lives and they shared it with me and I, at first it was much easier for me to kind of just go, ‘Oh no you’re, no that’s not true, you’re not staying in a homeless shelter because society sucks, you’re staying in a homeless shelter probably ‘cause you’ve probably made some bad decisions in your life.’ Like that was how I, that’s where I was coming from at first and then after hearing the same stories over and over again, I had to go, ‘Wait a sec, there’s something going on.’ ... I mean ... it’s just happening to people over and over again. It can’t be that all these people are making the same bad decisions.

Learning about others’ experiences of oppression was also important to John, who said, “As you interact and talk more to people who’d experienced some of the oppression in that area, it makes you maybe more passionate about a structural perspective.” For John, understanding what it means for others who experience oppression brings it to life, and it then becomes more pressing for him to work toward social change.

Annie was even more emphatic about the importance of seeing and learning from other people’s experiences with oppression. She said she was quite young when she took her BSW and although she learned about the theory, it did not really make concrete sense for her until later.

**Annie:** To be honest, I was like, pretty young when I took [my BSW], and didn’t have a lot of life experience and I have to say ... I’ve come from a background that is in a lot of ways privileged, right? So a lot of it you understand it on one level but on another level you don’t really understand what it means in real life.... So you know I’ve learned the terminology there [in the BSW] and I learned a little bit more later when I [did my MSW].

Annie’s formal BSW studies were a start, but that by itself was not enough. During her MSW, Annie worked as a research assistant on a study about structural barriers to services and connections to oppression; this made a significant difference to her understanding.

**Annie:** I did one research study ... that was a real eye opener too, it was more practical than just like the course work ... 'cause I talked to real people and how they, you know, they were seeing real barriers to the services in the community and how like for example the location that they made all these new services, new wonderful community centres and everything and they put them in a rich area of town where the people who really needed them the most, who were these poor [people] living in poverty, it would take them two hours by bus to get there so they couldn't even access that.... That really put ... what I was learning in school in class—I guess I'm the kind of person that really needs to see real life examples before really understanding it. So that experience, I think, of meeting those people and hearing their stories really helped me understand what structural really means.

While many participants talked about how seeing issues of oppression as experienced by others was important in their learning, Annie spelled it out more specifically by saying that her formal education alone was not sufficient in truly understanding a structural perspective.

Participants also needed to have discussions with others about oppression, power and structural perspectives.

**Lilly:** I'm a really hands-on learner, so for me in terms of learning theory, what really works for me is talking about it with people. So that's been really useful, either in trying to explain what I know myself to other people, [or] just having discussions and having debates and dialogue about issues and theory and the linkages between them. That, I think, has really been the best learning for me.

Many of the participants talked about the importance of these conversations.

Lastly, one more very important arena for learning for several participants was their own personal experiences with issues of oppression. There is an overlap between this factor and the personal space. Personal experiences that are opportunities for learning or which set the stage for being open to structural social work will be discussed in greater detail in the personal category.

### Learning is ongoing and evolves over time

Many participants, when asked to describe how they learned about structural social work, were clear that learning about these issues is ongoing and continues over one's

lifetime. Billy described his initial learning of power and oppression and said that he still had lots of work to do in his own life: “And it just started going on from there. And it’s a long, long road as I’m sure you know and I’m nowhere near the end of it.” John also commented on the ongoing learning process: “It’s sort of a reflective process that happens over time and it is still happening in a lot of ways.”

Many of the participants described learning about a structural perspective as something that began before they started their social work degree. When I asked Joe about learning about structural social work he said, “I [have] always been this way.” The formal education often gave participants the language for, and more depth to, what they had already started to learn informally. And they talked about how their learning continued after they finished their studies, how it was ongoing through their work and lives, and that it was something at which they actively worked. Annie described how her ongoing learning about structural issues also meant that her understanding of structural social work evolved over time.

**Annie:** I can say [my] understanding is ... better as I grow as a person. You know, I experience more, the more you learn, the more you read, the more you grow, the more you have your own situations. It [structural social work] just all makes more sense.

The interest in continually learning new things generally, as well as learning more specifically about structural social work is a support for participants in their ongoing use of the approach.

### Feelings around learning about structural social work

Billy was the participant who was the most direct in expressing his feelings during his initial time learning about issues of power and oppression, although other participants



described similar feelings. It was clear that, for Billy, his positive feelings about what he was learning were very much a support in his continued interest in the area.

**Billy:** It was at once both really exciting and liberating and it gave me a mission almost because I was starting to get really, really frustrated with how things weren't changing at work. And finally I saw this, this avenue where I could start to make a difference.

It makes sense that finding an approach to practice that is relevant and meaningful is supportive to one's continued learning and utilization of that approach. However, Billy was also able to see that it would be possible to feel powerless in the face of an approach that places causes of social issues at larger structural levels. Billy talked about needing to work against a feeling of hopelessness and thus a desire to give up. He also spoke of the more difficult feelings involved in learning about a structural perspective.

**Billy:** But just to get back to your original question about how it felt learning everything I learned in my BSW, it was, it was also pretty shattering ... in terms of my own conception of myself you know? I had, I had always thought that I was a pretty good guy and that ... in no way did I think I was a part of the problem. And it took ... some getting used to.

If positive feelings about what one learns can encourage someone in continuing in that work, it makes sense that negative emotions hold the potential to become a barrier to one's use of structural social work. That did not happen for participants in this study, but participants were also selected for their ongoing use of a structural perspective. It is possible that some people may choose to not continue in their learning about and use of a structural perspective when negative or uncomfortable emotions are too strong, thus becoming barriers to structural practice.

<b>Table 8. Fourth Space: Educational</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Course work at an educational institution</li> <li>b. Studying on one's own</li> <li>c. Learning from other contexts (experiences, clients, at work)</li> <li>d. Learning is ongoing and evolves over time</li> <li>e. Positive and negative emotions while learning</li> </ul>

### Summary and comparison with the literature

Table 8 summarizes the factors in the educational space and the myriad ways by which participants learned about structural social work theory. The educational space is the category that is the most dramatically different from the literature review. All of the factors identified in the literature pertained to formal social work education. While participants agreed that their formal education was important to their use of structural theory, this factor was only one of five identified during analysis. Factors that carried more weight in the literature review included the field placement process as well as field seminars and the use of theory-practice integration models in the field seminars. None of the participants discussed using theory-practice integration models and only two of them mentioned the usefulness of their field placements. For these two, the placement was useful, but was by no means the most important learning point, as seems to be suggested by the volume of the literature on this topic compared to other learning factors.

The remaining four factors identified in the research analysis were about learning experiences in addition to formal education. The most important aspect for these is that these factors were as vital to the learning process as the formal education experiences were. Formal education and personal learning experiences are both equally necessary to structural

theory-practice integration for participants. While both are necessary, neither is sufficient. According to participants, the two of them must both be present for learning to take place. This finding is a significant departure from the literature. Learning about structural issues was not just an academic process for participants. It was also a very personal experience in being able to understand the context of power and oppression in personal and political ways.

### **Fifth space: Personal**

All participants shared stories about friends, family members and personal experiences in the context of their structural perspectives. Participants articulated ways in which personal factors contributed to their use of a structural approach, while others chose to utilize the approach in spite of life experiences that were barriers. There are four factors in this section.

#### **Family of origin and upbringing**

The family participants grew up in was the factor discussed the most in the personal section. For most, it was a support to a structural understanding although, for others, it was a barrier instead. John was the participant who had experienced the most significant barriers with this particular factor. He described his childhood with a family of origin that had close ties to conservative Christian beliefs.

**John:** My parents are, you know, my dad is a pastor, ... sort of conservative evangelical, so that is kinda how I grew up and you know, in some ways, I was able to fit into that community and in some ways, I wasn't. So I think when I started taking you know, social work classes, especially in my degree program, which I said was structural, a lot of the ideas [were] very different than what I grew up with and, in some ways, made a lot of sense to me and, other ways, I think it's taken a while to understand.

While he was clear that he loves his parents, John also was able to articulate how his structural learning was often at odds with what he learned at home and in the church.

**John:** I guess by conservative evangelical on social issues they would be, you know, not supportive of same sex relationships or gay rights. Not particularly vocal on feminism, not necessarily against it in every way, but certainly I would say, you know, I would say, when I was younger, like certain things were not equal between men and women.

John went on to link this childhood learning to his initial difficulty in understanding or accepting a structural perspective: “I think in some ways ... gay rights would be, was probably [one of] the harder things to sort of wrap my head around.” Despite the disconnect with his upbringing, John was open to what he learned in school, although he describes this process of essentially switching values to be a very difficult time for him.

**Interviewer:** Those things that structural social work challenged you on then, how difficult was that for you to shift, to shift your thinking?

**John:** Yeah, it’s difficult. Like I say it’s difficult in the sense that you have to admit that some of the things you were taught from a very young age may not be right. But ... it’s easy in a sense that if you begin to connect it to a reality that presents itself, in your life.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**John:** I mean ... when you see it [oppression] being acted out, and then you reflect on some of the things you saw growing up, you know you have to do it. Maybe easy isn’t the right word, but you know you have to do it. So it’s not easy because you definitely, I would almost compare it to, you know, a coming out process, in some ways. ‘Cause ... I mean you’re in the community, you’ve grown up in the community everybody assumes you agree with the principles and, and the ideals of the community, and at some point you have to say, ‘Well, actually I don’t think that way.’ Even though ... many people ... assume you do. So in some ways it’s a coming out process ... so it’s difficult.

Like Annie in the previous section, John had to connect his theoretical learning with real life experiences; both his own experiences of belonging and exclusion, and other people’s experiences with oppression. John was able to make a positive connection between his upbringing and a structural approach. Growing up in a conservative environment was a reminder for him of how much work there is still to do in addressing issues of oppression: “It’s not like we’ve arrived, ‘cause I know a whole lotta people who ... are quite vocal

against some of the human rights issues that [a] structural perspective would support.” John described that for him, the knowledge of the strong existence of a conservative perspective brought him an even stronger sense of urgency for the need for social change. There was only one other participant for whom her upbringing was also very contrary to a structural perspective.

**Ellen:** I seem to have gone counter to everything my parents believed. And my parents actually were quite, quite the bigots and, yeah and very judgmental of other people.... So I don’t know what it was but ... my worldview is pretty much opposite of what theirs is.

In spite of this difference, Ellen’s use of a structural perspective was very strong and she was very articulate in how the approach was important to her work and her life.

Some participants indicated that their upbringing was both a support and a barrier at the same time. When asked if the values she was raised with fit with a structural approach Debbie said, “I guess, they do and they don’t.” Like John, Debbie was raised with Christian values and beliefs, although, unlike John, Debbie felt that some of those values fit with a structural approach, such as her parents’ teachings of generosity, compassion, respect for others and being non-judgmental. Debbie described how some of her faith values, including religious stands against gay and lesbian people, were harder for her to merge with what she was learning in school. As with John, it took some time to make the shift to a structural approach.

**Debbie:** ’Cause I saw ... [a] structuralist ... approach was pretty accurate to what I was seeing.... But, yeah, it took time for me to reconcile between my faith background and what I actually believed and just being okay with that.

While Debbie’s upbringing provided mixed support for her structural perspective, seeing the reality of oppression was central to moving further in that direction.

Annie and Billy described growing up largely in a context of privilege with a lack of exposure to the effects of oppression. Annie's parents divorced when she was a child and she lived at first with her mother, then moved in with her father at age 12. She says that the lifestyles were very different since her mother had a much lower income. In retrospect she connects that to patriarchy, though she did not see that as a child. Billy connected his childhood experiences to political ideology, describing his family of origin as "liberal" and his mother as "feminist." Exposure to these views set the stage for a structural approach, although they were not the same.

**Billy:** So you know I was raised with this idea that we live in a good society but it could always get better and the way for it to get better is for people to be more equal and so for women to have more rights and for immigrants to have more rights.... So it was, it was ... very, very superficial way of thinking of the world. And then I kinda just went about my life, ... 20 years or 25 years, just thinking that way until I started working in social work, [and] I started realizing, 'Hey there's a lot more going on here than I had originally realized.'

**Interviewer:** So your parents set the stage for you to be prepared to learn more?

**Billy:** Yes.

The liberal ideology Billy was raised with also challenged a structural analysis.

**Interviewer:** So for you then the structural social work theory ... it fit with the worldview that you were raised with. Is that accurate?

**Billy:** It was a *challenge* to the world ... I was raised with.

Billy felt that the liberal perspective he was raised with opened the door somewhat to understanding structural issues, while simultaneously putting the onus on individuals to take advantage of opportunities rather than seeking to change structures. In this sense it also was a challenge to his eventual use of a structural approach.

Family of origin was a support to other participants. Kevin was raised with six sisters and said that he had a strong understanding of feminism at a young age. His family did not

use the word structural but family values were consistent with that view. Shanks said that her family of origin gave her a personal understanding of racism.

**Interviewer:** If you hadn't learned about structural approaches in your BSW, would you, would you be drawn in that direction anyway now or not?

**Shanks:** I think I would be drawn to that anyways. I kind of grew up in poverty and I grew up in a First Nations home. I am not First Nations but my half-sister is and I had a stepfather that was. I can see the racism.

Several participants felt that their experiences growing up would have eventually led them to a structural analysis even if they had not learned the structural theory language in school.

Lilly expressed that her family of origin set the stage for a structural perspective, and those values were explicitly discussed in the home. Like Billy, Lilly linked these values to ideology.

**Lilly:** I think it's really rooted, I mean I think it goes all the way back to my growing up in a family that had a fairly ... socialist kinda set of values.... Certainly my mom, my mom grew up in a family that was very socially conscious.

Family of origin was very important for participants in terms of their openness to a structural perspective. Near the end of the interviews, participants were asked to describe what or who they saw as their most important support in using a structural perspective. Melissa said, "I want to say that my upbringing is the most important thing 'cause that laid the foundation for me to learn something. "

Supports for utilizing a structural approach interact across spaces for participants. Melissa first named her family of origin and, second, her experiences studying social work as the two most important supports for her in her use of a structural perspective. Her quotation above continues:

**Melissa:** But I think actually going to school, I think actually taking my degree was what allowed me to actually flourish.... I mean, I think it was something I was always taught, but I think once you can learn a label [for] something and seeing it as

something, it normalizes for you what you already think. And then it helps push you to go beyond what you already might be thinking or feeling.

Like Annie, Melissa indicated that learning about a structural perspective was not complete until what she learned in her personal life was connected to her studies. Making connections across spaces was vital for being able to put a structural perspective into action.

### Current family and friends

When participants talked about their current family and friends they indicated that these people were largely supports for them; this was true of spouses, in particular. Ellen said about her partner, “We both have kind of similar perspectives.... We’re just very in line with each other that way.” Billy agreed that support from his partner was important to him.

**Billy:** I’m lucky that my wife ... thinks, well almost exactly the way I do and she’s also done some social work training. So we’re here to remind each other of how to make the world a better place and how to challenge our own privileged place.

For Billy, this support was not only about utilizing a structural perspective in his work, but also throughout his life. John talked about the importance of his partner’s support at the difficult time when he was disclosing to his family and church community that his values were no longer the same as the conservative religious ones he was raised with.

**John:** It was supportive in the sense that it was nice to have somebody to discuss with and ... you don’t know how your community is going to react to the changes you make for yourself. But you knew that at least there would be somebody there at the other end.

It makes sense that people would seek out spouses or partners with similar views as their own. While this does not necessarily mean that they are a support for one’s use of a structural approach, many times that was the case.

Annie was the respondent in the educational category who said that the structural approach did not become real for her until she could see oppression in the lives of real people she met. The other place where oppression became real for her was in her own home. Annie



had a daughter with a serious disability, and was friends with another family with a disabled adult daughter. She talked about how by living with her daughter, and watching her friend's daughter struggle to find employment (with a university degree), she could see over and over again the structural barriers facing them in their lives.

**Annie:** I have also a daughter with some special needs as well and I see it all the time, the way structures are set up. It doesn't meet everyone's needs so yeah, all these things I've learned in school years ago that I sort of understood, and sort of got. And now that I'm getting older and experiencing real life and having grandparents that are aging and, you know, all these things, in-laws that are aging ... you know real family, that you see in real life, real action and living real life with real circumstances ... I really get it.

Being a part of these struggles at a very personal level was important for Annie in understanding of a structural perspective and using it in her work and her home life.

Many participants talked about having friends who understood structural ideas to whom they could go for support and discussions. Annie met such friends in her MSW studies.

**Annie:** My biggest support would probably be my own personal experiences and internal thoughts I think. But outside from that, I would say, like, you know, also the friends you meet along the way in these programs and engaging in conversation with them is also you know, very supportive.

The importance of having understanding friends also came up often with other participants.

**Interviewer:** What advice would you give to a new social worker who wanted to use a structural approach in practice? What would you say to them?

**Shanks:** What helped me is just some of my friends who were really good at it, sort of looking at some of their ideas and some of the things that, you know, they speak of.

Shanks' friends were not only people she talked with about structural issues, but they were also role models for her; people she could watch and learn from. When asked the same question, Billy said new structural social workers needed to have supportive friends and

colleagues to talk with about structural issues. Melissa identified both friends and family as important supports.

**Interviewer:** Any personal supports?

**Melissa:** Personal supports—yes. I can say that, I mean, I have couple of my good friends that have been ones that I can talk about that kind of stuff.

**Interviewer:** And you can go to them with structural stuff?

**Melissa:** Yeah. And I also think that's where my family also comes into play too, we talk about that kind of stuff. That's just the way our family talks.

However Melissa was also clear that as a structural person she did not want to isolate herself from others just because they think differently than her.

**Melissa:** I think for people just because they are uneducated and maybe lived in a really sheltered life and that's what their mom and dad think and the way their mom and dad talk, so it's not like I isolate myself from them just because they don't know any better.... I have lots of friends who I totally call complete rednecks. Do they drive me nuts by the way they're thinking? – Yes. But it [does] not mean that I don't find all their stories hilarious, and just stay away from those [structural] topics with them.

Melissa sometimes shared structural ideas with them if they were interested, but sometimes she just spent time with them as friends. All of these diverse friends were important supports to her.

**Melissa:** I would say there is like four sides of me, there's mom Melissa, you know, worker Melissa, there's party Melissa and then there's laid-back, relaxed, intellectual Melissa that would like to talk like that [structural]. And I mean they're different hats that I wear all different times, you know. Sometimes I want to get into an intellectual talk and sometimes I want to go get some beer and hot wings.

Having friends who did not share her structural views was in no way a barrier to Melissa's use of the perspective. A few participants said that it is important for structural social workers to not isolate themselves from people with different views. Being around others with different views was not always easy, but neither was it necessarily difficult or taxing. Melissa said, "So I guess that's why I would say not necessarily having a community of

people who are all the same. I actually love having all these different people [around me].”

Melissa added that this did not mean that she turned off the structural approach; it was always on. She would meet with different people prepared for different conversations and being open to those differences. These friends were still a support for Melissa, albeit in a different way than were her structural friends. For most of the participants, their friends were important supports for them in various ways, including being supports for utilizing a structural perspective.

### Personal life experiences

Participants described various experiences that prepared them for or supported them in a structural approach. Billy worked in a shelter for homeless people before doing his BSW and he identified his interactions with clients as an important learning opportunity about structural oppression. Billy’s experience crosses over into several categories including personal, educational and clients.

Joe described a variety of experiences he had before studying social work. He talked about growing up with his mother who was a single parent with four children. He described living in poverty, being working class, living in a “rough” neighbourhood and participating in street gangs in his early teens. While no one taught him about structural ideas, he said these life experiences prepared him for having an understanding of structural issues, but without having the language to describe it for the first many years of his life. Joe also worked in a variety of paid and volunteer positions, which he connected directly with a structural approach.

**Joe:** I have been a social justice advocate, community activist for 30 years.... I started a nuclear disarmament group 20-some years ago in [name of community]; I was president of the NDP club back then; I was a member of Amnesty International for 30 years; David Suzuki Society; I worked in the crisis centre line as a volunteer; I

was a volunteer 15 of my 20 years at [name of employer] on the employee systems program; we were foster parents for 25 years; I was involved with unions when I was 16, 17, 18 years old.

When he finally studied social work in school, Joe was taught a structural approach, which gave him the language and the concepts to talk about things he said he already knew on a different level.

Lilly identified how growing up in small, rural community had an important role in her use of a structural approach. She said small communities are often conservative in nature, but that they also seek to balance the individual in the context of belonging to a community.

**Lilly:** I guess it's a sort of a balance between being an individual in the community and that there was a real sense that the community as a whole was important and that it was important to contribute to that.... It also was in a community where if you didn't work together, if you didn't develop a sense of the community as important ... it was hard to survive, let alone have a quality of life.... When I think about it, for me anyways, that it links to structural, that it's about more than just how I can just get ahead and about my quality of life. That there's value in paying attention to inequality; that it affects me too.

Those pieces of interconnection and interdependence that existed in her small community resonated with Lilly as she developed her structural perspective.

Jamie's personal experiences of oppression after she immigrated to Canada from Southeast Asia, while being very difficult for her, also contributed to her understanding and use of a structural perspective. Her first difficulties were with transitioning to a new country and job.

**Jamie:** When I started working at the community organization, ... that was my first full-time job in Canada and it was very, very challenging for me to adjust to the culture of working in Canada. I wasn't provided with any type of orientation, so I struggled with it.

Reading about racism and talking with others who understood her experiences were important steps for her in understanding what she was experiencing.

Jamie experienced racism and exclusion in her MSW studies, at work and in her personal life. She also had friends who had experienced racism in both explicit and subtle ways, and she learned from these experiences too. Experiencing oppression is difficult. In spite of this, Jamie identified these experiences as important in her learning and use of the structural approach and in her structural work. She calls these painful experiences a “privilege” because of what she learned and how she was able to use it in a positive way.

**Jamie:** So for me it’s a privilege for me, it’s an advantage for me because I’ve experienced these oppressions. I’m more able to make these connections. But there are other times when I’m not able to make the connections but I think because I have experienced these experiences, I’m more open to listening. And maybe it’s easier for me to connect with people’s experiences because I know how it feels and I know how painful it feels.

Like other participants such as Annie, Jamie felt that these experiences made structural social work more real to her than it would have been just reading about the approach. She added, “My experience actually enriches me because I’m able to see things in more detail. I’m actually able to see how it actually happens instead of just looking at them through the book.” While difficult, these experiences were a stepping-stone in understanding and utilizing a structural perspective. Many of the personal experiences that participants talked about, whether negative or positive, were supports for them in their use of a structural approach.

### Personal fit, worldview and confidence

The worldviews and disposition of participants, and their confidence in their practice, were also important to their use of a structural approach. The participant with the most articulate description of having a natural predisposition to a structural approach was Joe.

**Interviewer:** Can you start by telling me how did you decide to start using a structural approach or a structural perspective, and do you remember a particular moment when that all came together for you?

**Joe:** Well first of all, I have probably been a structural social worker all my whole life.

Joe made that point twice during the interview. This was simply how he viewed the world as far back as he could remember. Several times he listed a number of social activism experiences that he had been involved with over the years, long before he did his BSW, to demonstrate how structural activities were simply a part of who he was. Joe made a couple of other comments that speak to both his disposition to, and confidence in, a structural approach: “I have a very strong sense of justice, I don’t know where it came from but I have a strong sense of justice.” Another was in response to a question about whether structural social work has changed him as a person or practitioner. Joe responded, “In my case, it’s probably allowed me to be me.”

Joe also made the following comment, “I try to do the best I can as a structural person.” A few other participants also referred to themselves as a “structural person” suggesting that it was not just an approach you used and then put away, but that it was more about a state of being. Lilly expressed in more detail how a structural approach just fit with who she was.

**Lilly:** In some ways it comes really naturally to me, I think, because it fits really well with my experience of social work, my life experience, my understanding of kind of the way the world is, you know? It fits with my worldview.

Not all participants felt that a structural approach was a natural fit with their worldview. John described how his shift to a structural perspective was very difficult to make since these values were not a part of his growing-up years. This does not mean that a structural approach did not fit with who he is now, or who he always was as a person. Instead it reflects the numerous factors in his life that were adding up to ingrain in him a perspective that was not structural. The conservative worldview of his parents combined

with the conservative and fundamental church teachings were constants in his formative years, shaping his thinking in a way that was very different from a structural approach. When John came face to face with a structural perspective in his BSW, there was, therefore, no seamless acceptance of the approach as with Lilly, Joe and Billy. Instead John had to re-examine everything and compare the values of his church and the structural approach with how he saw the world working. It was his ability to see and recognize oppression in people's lives that made him realize the relevance of a structural perspective. His thinking shifted dramatically and he completely changed directions in how he viewed the world, and therefore, how he lived in the world. Debbie also talked about needing to take the time to reconcile a structural perspective with the faith beliefs she was raised with. Where people identified a fit between who they were and the structural perspective, it is logical that this experience would be a support to using the approach in practice. While the lack of a fit may have made it harder for John to encompass and utilize the approach, it did not end his ability to use the approach; it just was more work for him to get to that point.

Related to disposition is the level of confidence participants had in their ability to engage a structural perspective in their work and their lives. Where people had a personal fit with the approach, they were also more likely to indicate a higher level of confidence in their use of the perspective. Joe was very confident when he talked about using the approach.

**Interviewer:** Have there been ways in which your work with clients themselves lead you to a structural perspective or lead you away from a structural perspective?

**Joe:** No, my approach is totally structural right from day one. The time I wake up in the morning to the time I get to work, whoever I am working with, my approach is totally structural.... My approach is structural from the day I walk in.

In contrast, John was less confident in his use of the approach, and this was likely due to a combination of factors. As described earlier, John was a relatively new BSW graduate, was

working in an organization that had many barriers to his use of the approach, and his upbringing contradicted a structural way of thinking. As may be expected, John struggled to use the approach in his work and the work became very frustrating for him at times.

**Interviewer:** So tell me how your use of structural might have—or your perception of structural might have had changed over those three years?

**John:** A lot of it is, you know, frustration.... It's sort of like, I feel like I'm working as hard as I can, and I feel like the person I'm trying to support is working as hard as he can, but we still can't manage to get them employed, we still can't manage to ... do anything as far as housing.

Yet John did not give up on a structural approach. He said that the lack of change in an individual's circumstances made it even more important to him to have a structural perspective and to identify structural changes to work toward. But he was not sure how to make this happen.

Table 9. Fifth Space: Personal
a. Family of origin and upbringing b. Current family and friends c. Personal life experiences d. Personal fit, world view and confidence

### Summary and comparison with the literature

As with previous sections, participants experienced both barriers and supports in this category. Table 9 summarizes the factors in this section. The personal space, as with the educational, has significant differences between the research findings and the discussion in the literature. While most of the factors in the literature review were also mentioned by participants, almost all of these fit in the fourth factor, that of personal fit, worldview and confidence. However, for the participants, this factor was just one of several which were all



important. During my first interview, I was so surprised when the participant started talking about her family of origin and upbringing that I did not ask very many questions before moving into a different topic. When my next participant did the same thing I was more prepared with probing questions. All participants talked about either their family of origin or their friends and family or both, and explained how these people were relevant to their use of a structural approach. Personal life experiences with oppression were also important in participants' understanding and use of a structural approach. It is interesting that participants often described how in understanding a structural approach it was necessary for them to link what they learned (educational category) with their personal experiences; that one without the other was not enough. Thus the personal space is not just one piece in the background; it is a vital component in utilizing structural social work in practice.

### **Sixth space: Theoretical**

The theoretical category was difficult for some participants to speak about. Shanks was reluctant to talk about theory and when asked directly she struggled with her response, possibly concerned about appearing inadequate.

**Interviewer:** So I have been using the terms structural approach, structural perspective and structural theory interchangeably. Are those terms interchangeable for you or not?

**Shanks:** I guess an approach to me, ... is kind of part of you but it is something ... that's always going to be at the forefront of what you do.... I have not studied it well and probably am not doing it much justice. Theory for me, [is] really a more academic look at what it really means and how it fits in society.... If ... you know your theory well and you [are] practicing from that perspective, you would just be able to rattle off how it really helps.... So I guess ... the structural approach, ... it's in my mind, it's at the forefront, you know, what I am thinking about.

**Interviewer:** So the word approach works better for you then?

**Shanks:** Yup.

**Interviewer:** And the word theory makes it sound like you have to be an expert?

**Shanks:** Right.

Other participants were also uncomfortable. One even joked about being glad the interview was by phone so if there was a question she was not sure about, she could look up the right answer on the Internet while we talked! Shanks was the first person interviewed. Given her discomfort with the word theory, for the remaining interviews the words structural approach or perspective were used most of the time, depending on the comfort level of the participants.

There were several interview questions asking about activities at work, and for stories or examples from various settings. On many occasions, information about how participants used structural social work, and how they understood the theory, came out in the context of these stories or examples. When participants seemed comfortable, they were also asked directly about theory. At times the use of structural social work was almost second nature.

**Interviewer:** So what role does structural social work theory play in, what role did it play in this particular piece of work that you did?

**Lilly:** Hmm, you know, ... I feel almost guilty sometimes because I feel I don't think about it very often.... I feel like it's implicitly part of the way I think, about the way I do, and what, and how I approach my work, and I have to really, [pause] when you ask me questions like that I have to stop and think, 'Okay, what's structural theory again.' [laughs] 'Cause I feel like it's so implicit in my brain, I think. And maybe it's not, maybe other people would say, 'Yeah right, I don't think so.'... But I just don't think about it very explicitly. I don't think, 'Okay, what is structural theory really telling me about this problem?' Yeah, I just don't do that.

Despite a reluctance to talk directly about theory in some cases, and the feeling that it was so implicit that they were not sure they could put it into words in other cases, participants still had much to share about what worked and what did not work for them specific to the theory itself. There are four factors in the theoretical space.

## Strengths of a structural approach

Given that participants were recruited based on their choice to utilize a structural approach, it is natural that all of them had positive things to say about it. It is interesting how many times the language that was used was similar or identical from participant to participant in talking about the strengths of the approach. One of the most common descriptions of the perspective was how participants used it as a way of viewing their work, social issues, and the world. Several participants specifically used the word *lens*, while others talked about the perspective influencing how they looked at or saw the world around them. Lilly said: “I feel like it’s just a lens for me. It’s the way I view what I do.” Lilly also described her position as a social planner as being one of allowing others to also see through that same lens: “I spend a lot of my time ... trying to provide ... a social lens to the work of municipal government.” Eleanor also talked about how it influenced the way she viewed her work, saying, “I guess it makes me look at things in a different way, and that’s important.” And later again:

**Eleanor:** I think about the structural approach to social work, I think, in a bigger way than I do about [pause] I don’t know, I see it as a much bigger lens than I do as something really specific that I draw on.

Most participants described a benefit of structural social work as providing a unique way of looking at issues. Building on the term *lens* was the discussion of how this lens allowed them to see issues in a more complex way than a traditional narrow focus of the problem. Shanks said, “If I didn’t have a structural framework ... I would not take the time to look at ... how it is all linked to maybe [a] bigger answer.”

Participants often used the concept of the *bigger picture*, describing it in various ways.

**Eleanor:** I guess I wanted to make people aware of how the bigger things, those bigger systems or structures, how they impact individuals.... What are the bigger things that are influencing the bigger picture?

Eleanor used the word bigger to talk about the structures that caused the issues in the first place, which is similar to Shanks description of looking for a bigger answer, also referring to structures. This was more than seeing people in the context of their environment, but rather was an analysis of how structures caused or exacerbated the issues facing individuals. Seeing the bigger picture was about the structural analysis as a first step in the structural social work process.

In discussing her work, Lilly talked about how sometimes the city was not interested in seeing this perspective, but that she felt that this was her job to show this to people, and it was what a structural perspective offered as a way to understand issues facing her community.

**Lilly:** There have been ... incidents I guess, in the community that the city is kinda called upon to respond to, to do something. And often that response is very reactive, and it's reactive on a very simplistic, [pause] in a very reactive way. And typically that is to deal with whatever presents itself, as opposed to what's behind it, which is kind of how I would simplistically describe a structural approach, just to, just to go behind the presenting kind of issues, and the presenting crisis or incident, and sort of step your way back and say you know, 'What's upstream? What's going on in this bigger picture?'

A structural perspective of social issues allows participants to see not only the issue in front of them, but also to see some of the structural causes of those issues; this is the larger picture. To react to the immediate issue without understanding the bigger picture does not actually solve the problem in the long run, or prevent it from recurring. This does not mean there is no immediate response needed to a crisis. Lilly talked about how one particular community crisis related to gangs and violence did need a response, including a police response. But according to Lilly, in order to prevent it from recurring, people needed to understand the larger issues of racism embedded deep in the fabric of the community that were the driving force behind the violence. Seeing the issue allows someone to put a Band-Aid on it; but

understanding the structural causes of the problem allows the community to try and prevent it from happening again in the future by righting some of the structural wrongs of the past.

Participants had various images of the ways in which a structural view works. Melissa had another way to put it that was pragmatic and succinct. She was asked what advice she would give to a social worker struggling to connect structural theory with practice.

**Melissa:** My other one I always say is, I always say about backing up the bus, is always my other big one-liner.

**Interviewer:** What is it?

**Melissa:** Back up the bus. I don't know where that comes from, maybe that was a parent one too! [chuckles] But this is what you see right now but if you back up a little bit, you're going to see something a whole lot... bigger.

**Interviewer:** A whole lot bigger. So by backing up, by backing up the bus—the window of view that you have is much broader?

**Melissa:** Yeah, yeah.

One of the most often mentioned strengths of a structural approach was that it offered an opportunity to see social issues in a larger context, and to see factors that at first glance may not be apparent, but that are nevertheless crucial in understanding and addressing the issue.

The next strength of structural social work flows from these first pieces. In addition to seeing the bigger picture, it also allowed participants to understand how structures, issues and opportunities to address issues are interconnected. As Lilly said, “What that lens does is, is it keeps reminding me how interconnected all of the pieces are.” Other participants also talked about these connections and linkages. Participants talked about seeing connections between societal structures and individual issues, understanding the relevance of history to current issues, and to seeing connections between individual cases and how larger structures can underpin those cases as a whole, which then leads to structural solutions.

**Shanks:** Rather than just going from an individual kind of look, at an individual file, ... taking all the files together and trying to think it through. I think if I, from a structural point of view, ... I guess when I think about structure, 'What do we need to change? Who needs to change?'

Shanks makes connections between individuals and between cases, and uses those connections to lead her back to structural issues. Billy makes connections between the issue one person is facing and a variety of structures that may have affected that person over their life span: "[Issues facing clients] must be framed in terms of historical, social, economic, and geographical factors that have played a role in that person's life up until that point." Billy goes on to say that social workers need to be able to translate those connections into working to change the system apart from the client, but also into how workers work with clients differently because of being aware of the connections. Lilly agreed with this assessment.

**Lilly:** And for me that's just part of doing structural work, is making those linkages between, [pause] it's not just about you know, 'Yeah these structural issues about poverty and racism and all those other things,' it's also about breaking down those connections between those issues and linking up the solutions in a way that addresses more than one kind of piece in people's lives, right?

Lilly's point is that these linkages are not just about abstract knowledge. Identifying connections between issues and structures opens a view to activities in the community. In her role as social planner she links solutions together in a way that parallels and addresses structural issues. This only happens when she first understands the links between structures and social problems.

Another important strength, described first in the client space, is how a structural approach could not be turned off. Some people stated this more than once. Participants described a structural perspective as living in the back of their head, interpreting and framing their perspective of any issue they were working with, even if they were not actively or consciously employing structural strategies in that moment:

**Debbie:** Umm, I think for me it's definitely—'cause the work is so—in my mind there is so much politics and bureaucracy, which to me totally kind of makes it—it never goes away entirely.

**Interviewer:** So it's always there even if it's just sitting in the back of your head?

**Debbie:** Yeah, even if it's not explicitly stated, I think I'm usually more cognitive of it.

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**Shanks:** Well, I think it's in the back of my mind. I might not be saying to the woman sitting in front of me, 'Well ... violence against women is not addressed and ... the government has not put funding towards addressing any of these issues and that's why are having these issues.' I may have it in the back of my mind that some of these things may have impacted her ... but it's definitely in the back of my mind.

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**John:** I think it's always there in my head like I'm always connecting what people are telling me in my head to ... the political situation that we're are in or all the funding cuts that we have had and things.

The only person to waiver was John; he first made the statement that, "It's always there in my head," and then later said maybe he turned it off at times—he was not sure. As the person facing the most barriers to his use of the perspective and as a new and young social worker, the difficulties he was encountering may have made him doubt his first response. Yet the other participants did not waiver. This did not mean that the structural approach was all they used. Many of them talked about how in the immediate moment with a client they may need to rely on other tools and methods, even other theories; but a structural perspective never disappeared.

In addition to these key strengths a number of other benefits of the structural approach were also identified. It is a starting place for Annie, as well as the place to which she always comes back. It offers an important understanding of the many forms of discrimination at individual, community and societal levels. It does more than talk about

treating people as equals, but also describes how to explore concepts of privilege, power and social change. Structural social work helps identify power imbalances and how they can be challenged. It also challenges social workers to start with growth and change in their own lives and doing things differently as workers and as people. In turn, understanding structural causes of oppression and links to personal issues gives social workers reasons for issues facing clients that do not just blame the individual. If these links are understood, then participants are likely to be less judgmental and more compassionate in working with others. The strengths of structural social work were clear and abundant for the participants. Yet they were not completely uncritical about the theory.

### Problems or gaps with a structural perspective

The most often mentioned concern with a structural perspective was that it did not make clear enough connections between structural concepts and individual-level practice. Although participants did eventually make these connections, they were only made with much personal effort and after years of working in the field. Participants felt that these links should be clearer from the outset. Shanks was one who felt that the level of the individual was not emphasized enough in a structural approach.

**Shanks:** We can talk about racism, we can talk about inequality, we can talk about developing policies, but it can't be the end-all and be-all. It is very important and powerful but we can't walk away from it, we can't set up the structure and walk away from it. We also have to consider some of the individual needs.

Annie also felt that there was not enough connection to the individual.

**Interviewer:** Interesting, tell me more about the individual piece. So, do you see structural as missing, missing that piece, the individual side?

**Annie:** I see it as underestimating the importance of it, I suppose. Because the focus is more on the, you know, all the focus gets placed on, the real emphasis is really on looking at the societal, the societal level and, you know, the structures in society.

Annie made another point related to this a few moments later.



**Annie:** Yeah, I mean it's a hard question. But when they teach it, they certainly don't say to you, 'And don't forget the individual, which is also important too,' right?... It's not that it can't be incorporated.

In her statement, she refers back to the educational category, which brings up an important possibility identified in the analysis. In talking about the problems with a structural perspective, it is difficult to know if that is a problem inherent to the theory or not. It may instead be that the piece is already in the theory but was missed in the teaching of the theory, or the practitioner just did not hear or understand this piece as they learned about the theory. This dilemma underscores the interactions between the theoretical and other categories. The concern that structural social work does not adequately incorporate the level of the individual was mentioned by a number of participants. Whatever the origin of the gap, it is obviously an issue that needs to be addressed.

Annie's last sentence raises another point. She has been working with a structural perspective for long enough that she has decided that, while underestimating the individual piece, it is not opposed to its inclusion. Other participants also talked about developing ways to incorporate an individual focus into their structural work. Joe talked about balancing a structural perspective with the reality that violent offenders still had to take responsibility for their violence and find other ways of living in society. He was not sure if that was a component of structural social work, but nevertheless saw it as compatible with the approach, and necessary in his work.

Another concern with structural theory is that it focuses on explanation at the expense of describing how to actually do structural social work. Jamie described it this way.

**Jamie:** They [the school of social work] might talk about social justice, they may talk about structural social work but it's not often clear to students that it's about anti-oppression. And then students often say, you know, 'Great, you have an analysis of the structure, but what do we do in practice?' so there is a very, disconnect between theory and practice.

Jamie said this disconnect dissipated once she began working in the field, yet several participants felt that information on how to do structural social work needed to be clearer.

**Melissa:** I think that's one of the benefits of this study, is, I think is being able to pull those tangibles and being able to say to your students, 'This is what it can look like, these are some of the things that you can do.' 'Cause I just remember that frustration piece ... that was where structural didn't really feel tangible 'cause it took me a while to get that tangibles toolkit around my belt so I could feel like [pause]

**Interviewer:** The doing piece.

**Melissa:** Yeah. That there are things that I can grasp on to, where, 'Okay this situation came up, I can do *this*.' Well if you're just thinking about it in terms of the bigger structures, ... you're just going to walk around frustrated the whole time. So yeah, I think those links a bit more for people to see what it looks like.

Participants may have left school feeling uncertain about how to use the theory in practice, although over time and with use those feelings subsided. Melissa still felt, however, that the piece of how to do structural social work in practice needed to be more clearly articulated.

The above problems with a structural approach were the most often mentioned by participants, although others came up as well. Billy talked about how having a structural perspective with a focus on what does not work with the system can, at times, lead to a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. John believed that structural social work needed to better articulate the complexities of oppression; such as how one person can be both oppressed and an oppressor. Shanks felt that more research needed to be done from a structural perspective in order to more clearly hear the voices of people living with oppression. The identified problems with structural social work did, at times, present barriers for the participants in their use of the perspective. However, most of them actively looked for ways to address their concerns and spent time in their work and the rest of their lives seeking out solutions to these concerns. One of the ways they did this was by incorporating other theories into their practice where relevant.

## Use of other theories alongside structural social work

Most of the participants talked about utilizing other approaches, methods, theories and tools in their practice alongside a structural approach, or more importantly, within the framework of a structural approach. The participants differed in the extents to which they relied on a structural approach, and whether or not it was their main focus of intervention or more of a background information piece that provided context. Most participants, even the most confident users of the perspective, also incorporated other approaches into their work.

Many times participants incorporated approaches or theories that were seen as compatible with a structural perspective. Joe talked about incorporating social justice therapy, feminism and others. Others talked about feminist, anti-racist and other anti-oppressive theories specific to one oppression. Still others used language that crossed over between structural, anti-oppressive, critical and related terms as if these approaches were essentially the same, or were related to the extent that one's practice with any of them was the same. A few people indicated that there were differences between them, but that they saw them as related.

**Interviewer:** Do those words all mean the same thing: critical, radical, anti-oppressive?

**Annie:** I think they're different takes on—it's almost like if you look at a word like dementia and how there's different types of dementia that would fall under it. So I would see structural social work as the big picture and then I would see these different types falling under, different types of structural social work. That's how I would kind of envision it in my mind so radical might be one type and critical might be another type and like that.

For most participants, from a practice standpoint these theories were interconnected if not interchangeable. While participants often blurred some of the distinctions between these concepts, academic discussions of these theories do normally see them as being a part of the same family of theories, typically as being derived from a critical theoretical framework.

Sophie described the relationship this way: “I think all of my theory backpack is consistent with structural theory and much of it is included within structural theory.”

Participants also incorporated other theories into their practice that they did not necessarily see as completely compatible with the structural approach.

**Billy:** I don’t know how compatible the strength model and structural social work are. One of them says that it’s all inside of you and the other one says it’s all outside of you.... I think there is a point where they can overlap and that’s the point I’m trying to find.

Several participants addressed their perception of the missing individual pieces in structural social work by incorporating other approaches that have more of a focus on this piece. Joe incorporated approaches he felt brought in an added dimension of specifically addressing aboriginal contexts, such as indigenous approaches and post-colonial psychology, since he worked largely with Aboriginal people. He also talked about using mainstream theories, but he indicated that he used them with structural social work as the overriding theory.

**Joe:** Whoever I am working with, my approach is totally structural. Yes, in my counselling I have to use things like cognitive behavioural therapy, I use mainstream approaches, narrative therapy is actually quite effective and is also recommended by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.... All theories or approaches I use ... have been filtered through my structural brain.

Joe’s last sentence is indicative of the view held by other participants: that a structural perspective was paramount and the use of other theories was within the structural framework.

Annie also incorporated other theories. She was not sure she was being entirely true to structural theory, but it was still there for her, similar to Joe’s description.

**Annie:** I haven’t used it as a purest theory really. You know in the work that I’ve done, it’s just sort of just been there behind the scene still filtering in the different theories I’ve used ... but ... it’s clearly there.

Participants appeared to be using structural social work in practice in two ways. Many of the participants described using other theories and approaches in a deliberate way that strove for

consistency with a structural perspective. This, combined with participants saying they could not turn off a structural approach and that it was always there in the back of their minds, suggests that they were using it in an overarching way to interpret or analyze the situation at a big-picture level. The second use of the structural approach was as a set of tools in one's practice. While tools from other approaches were used instead at times, the overarching analysis and big-picture piece was always present. Even when the other approaches being used were more than tools, but were theories, a structural approach continued to be present guiding the process.

### Defining structural social work: What it is and it means to participants

Although some participants had a hard time describing structural theory, others offered up very unique and practical definitions or descriptions of what it means to them in their practice. These definitions offer additional insight into the ways in which the approach is a support to practitioners and how they use it. One of the more academic definitions came from Billy.

**Interviewer:** So now that you've told me about the theory and what it means to you through your actions and your examples from your life, can you put structural theory into words for me?

**Billy:** The problems ... that we are faced with and that are often on our desk in the form of cases and case notes, and in our offices in the form of clients and patients ... those must be framed in terms of historical, social, economic, and geographical factors that have played a role in that person's life up until that point... People's problems are also society's problems and if you treat only the person's problem then the problem's not gonna go away.

Some definitions were linked directly to how the approach was used in social work practice.

Joe's description of the way structural social work influenced his practice was unique.

**Joe:** I have always said that my principles of structural social work have always been my guide, my North Star when I am working in areas that are not mapped yet, such as non-Aboriginal social workers working in remote First Nations communities; that has

not been charted very well.... My code of ethics, my structural social work values, helps me to keep an even keel.

In Joe's example the approach is a guide that keeps him on track during his work. Lilly was the participant who talked about a structural lens as a way to see behind or upstream of the presenting issues. She also had a unique definition of the theory and the goal it is trying to achieve.

**Lilly:** I remember ... having a conversation with somebody ... talking about the metaphor of life and being in a ball game, or a hockey game or something. That we all have tickets [and] we all come through the same door, but we don't all have the same seats. And that metaphor really just sorta clicked for me. That in some ways it's a metaphor for structural theory.... Some of us have the nosebleed seats.

**Interviewer:** So [what] does structural theory say about that then? What's the response?

**Lilly:** I think the response is that the challenge is how to figure out how to rebuild the arena so that everybody has good seats.

Participants also suggested that structural social work theory is not just a theory, but a way of viewing the world, and thus a way of life.

**Interviewer:** I don't know that I have any more questions; do you have anything else that you want to add?

**Lilly:** Hmm.... It's good for me to talk about it.... It's a conviction for me. It's more than theory. It's more than [an] ...academic or theoretical perspective. It's a philosophy, it's a conviction, it's a way of understanding the world. And that's what keeps me going.

Once participants learned about the perspective, and saw the bigger picture, it was also something they could not stop doing. As Billy said, "Like, I think once you know this stuff, once you know, once your eyes have been opened, you can never go back."

In many ways these definitions bring home practical aspects of the theory. The participants have been grappling with questions of putting theory into practice for years, and the insights of practitioners adds depth to the academic descriptions of theory.

Table 10. Sixth Space: Theoretical
a. Strengths of the approach b. Problems with or gaps in the approach c. Filtering other theories through a structural social work perspective d. Defining structural social work for practice

### Summary and comparison with the literature

While the practical definitions and the strengths of the structural approach served as a support to participants' use of it, gaps or problems with the theory were not necessarily a barrier, although they did pose challenges to one's practice at times. Table 10 summarizes the factors in the theoretical space. The use of other theories and approaches was in many ways a response to gaps that participants saw in the theory. It is interesting that the two gaps identified most often by participants were also found in the literature: (a) the focus on structures at the expense of the individual, and (b) the focus on the abstract to the detriment of practical skills. However, other than the 20-year-old research by Moreau and Leonard (1989), most of the critiques in the literature are based on conjecture rather than research. The views of the participants here lend credibility to those concerns while providing concrete examples of the issues. The most interesting difference between the findings and the literature is the participants' discussion of how they incorporated other theories into their work, but without ever losing the overarching foundation of a structural perspective. There is very little in the literature on how this process may happen and what the connections are to theory-practice integration.

As with the other sections in this chapter, this section also had overlaps between factors and with other categories. In many ways the theoretical category overlaps the most

with the practitioner space, to be discussed in chapter six. It is difficult to talk about the theory itself in a pure sense without it being filtered through the interpretations of the participants. The discussions and quotes in this section flow back and forth between the ways in which the theory affects the practitioners (as a structure imposed from the outside) and the ways in which the practitioners have internalized the theory and how it comes out in their talk and their practice. Instead of seeing the theory as an academic construct, there is the opportunity to view it as it is being used.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Analysis of interview and textual data identified various spaces between theory and practice, including the external spaces, which offer either supports or barriers to structural practice. (For a visual summary see Figure 10 at the end of this chapter). While the findings are similar in some ways to those found in the literature, such as consistency between the broad categories, there are also significant differences. In addition to two new categories, two of the existing categories changed dramatically while the rest of the categories had new factors added, as well as increased depth and complexity. There are also four other aspects uncovered during the data analysis that are relevant across the categories.

### **Oppression and power**

The first aspect found across the categories is that of oppression, which is related to power. The data analysis uncovered experiences and identification of oppression across all of the spaces between theory and practice. In their descriptions of a structural approach, participants identified that understanding, recognizing and challenging oppression were key components in structural practice. Oppression was present in each of the spaces discussed in



this chapter, albeit to different extents for each participant. Some described the oppression they faced in their personal lives or the lives of friends or family. Most participants described working with clients who lived with oppression. Others described working in organizations where power and hierarchy translated into oppression within their organization, within other agencies and by people with whom they worked. One participant described being oppressed by others within the same social work department where she was being taught about anti-oppressive and structural practice. Participants struggled with trying to challenge oppression affecting others, dealing with oppression they themselves were facing, and sometimes coming to terms with their own complicity in oppression as a member of a dominant group. As suggested in the literature review, the presence of oppression also made it difficult to practice structurally at times. Yet the identification of oppression suggests participants were in fact utilizing a structural approach in their analyses and social work practice.

While oppression is sometimes very obvious and apparent, it can also be hidden and potentially invisible and there are examples of both in the data. One of the goals of a structural approach is to make these structures visible so they can be challenged. In her interview, Jamie talked about being frustrated when her supervisor would not acknowledge the subtle and careful mentions of oppression by research participants. Although this itself is a form of structural oppression, Jamie's positive relationship with her supervisor made it difficult for her to name it as oppression. Jamie mentioned other personal experiences of oppression that were hard to overtly identify and, thus, easier for those involved to deny. Subtle or even unintended forms of oppression were much more difficult to identify and challenge, making structural practice even harder. Other participants talked about

experiences of oppression that they were able to see and name only in hindsight after learning about oppression in school. Although oppression was found across all spaces, it also proved to be elusive and difficult to challenge at times, particularly if it was hidden or unintended or if participants were having a hard time naming it.

## **Ideology**

The second aspect that crosses spaces is ideology, which is also an important component of structural social work theory. Oppression was often easier to talk about and acknowledge for participants, and some participants had a difficult time expressing the role of ideology to their practice, although others did discuss it. In some ways, it seemed that oppression was an accepted or legitimate component of structural practice, while ideology was more complex, harder to explain and in some ways engendered caution, as if someone talking about it could be perceived of as being problematic, or, in Sophie's words, a "trouble-maker."

Most participants did identify that ideology had repercussions across the categories and had an impact on their lives and work. People talked about growing up in conservative, liberal or socialist families; they described interacting with others of different or similar ideologies to themselves; they linked ideologies to organizational culture and mandates; they understood the role of ideology in government decisions to fund or cut funding to organizations or programs; they saw the effects of ideology in their clients' lives; and they learned and talked about ideology in the educational category.

As with oppression, ideology is infused throughout all of the spaces between theory and practice. It is impossible to avoid or ignore and it has significant effects on the participants. One participant had recently lost her job because of funding cuts to the program

for which she worked, and she linked the funding-cut decision to the current government ideology. Others identified ways in which shifting ideologies affected how services were provided and the types of services offered to clients. A structural perspective taught participants to look for, understand and engage with these issues in their social work practice and all aspects of their lives.

### **Texts and documents**

There are elements from the textual analysis that cross the categories in this chapter. The first point is that there were disagreements at times between the participants' assessments of these documents and the assessment made during the analysis process. Eleven of the 15 texts are located in the external spaces. One document was identified by 2 participants as being decidedly in opposition to a structural approach, and the analysis confirmed this. Of the remaining 10 documents two were identified as being both positive and negative, and the other eight were identified as supports of a structural approach. An analysis found that all of them contained content that was both supportive of and a barrier to structural social work, with vastly different amounts of structural content. Five contained a variety of overtly structural content from being very structural to having only a line or two related to structural. The other five texts contained little or no structural content, but included elements (as identified by participants) that were vague enough that they could be interpreted in a way that supported a structural approach.

It is the interpretation piece that is particularly interesting. Participants did not normally just passively utilize or make note of documents in their practice. They actively engaged with the documents, just as they actively engaged with all of the factors across all of the categories. Thus participants interpreted and, at times, manipulated documents in a way

that opened doors to a structural approach. While the documents are located in the spaces external to the participants, the interpretation and engagement of participants with the documents as a form of challenging the status quo is relevant to the practitioner space and so will be discussed more in chapter six.

The second point regarding the textual analysis is that although the documents analyzed for the research were found in only two categories, texts and documents were noted by participants throughout most of the external spaces. All 11 of the texts analyzed for chapter five fit within either the organizational category or the section on other organizations or people. Other texts and documents noted, but not analyzed, included articles and books such as some written specifically about structural social work (i.e., Mullaly's 2006 text and Ben Carniol's 2005 *Case Critical* book). Related topics and documents were also identified, such as anti-oppressive practice and being an ally with vulnerable groups (Bishop, 2002), as well as work by Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein and Gabor Mate's 2009 book about his work with street-involved people. Participants sometimes mentioned specific book titles and other times talked about a variety of work by a particular author. They also mentioned texts in a very abstract way, saying they were constantly trying to learn new things by reading material from a variety of sources, without necessarily noting a specific author or title. While it was outside the scope of this project to analyze all of these works, it is important to mention the roles of these texts in participants' structural practice, and that these texts are found throughout most of the categories in this chapter. A selection of texts is included where participants mentioned them as directly affecting their structural practice. Identifying texts for analysis is not about ensuring that texts or documents are represented across the categories; sampling is still guided by the principle of theoretical saturation. The point is that

textual analysis does support the identified spaces between theory and practice, and to mention that there are a plethora of documents that influence practitioners, many in a supportive way, and that they are found across the categories.

A third point arising from the textual analysis is when there was a lack of a text. In contrast, Sophie and Eleanor described the MDS form as a complete barrier to a structural approach. This form was not merely non-structural, but rather it was actively anti-structural. In addition to the content of the assessment questions (and the focus on client problems), the other serious issue with the form was the lack of a section for the worker to write narratively on their assessment of the client. The lack of room to present one's own analysis was seen as a serious impediment to utilizing a structural perspective and in using one's professional judgment in any way. Alternatively, some participants identified that writing case notes where there was no set reporting format allowed much more scope for the effective use of a structural perspective. Joe was one such participant who mentioned that the open-ended approach to case notes allowed him to consistently describe structural issues in his Aboriginal clients' lives, such as colonization and residential schools. Thus the lack of a text dictating what to include, or not include, in writing notes on clients was beneficial in the use of a structural approach.

A fourth point regarding the textual analysis is the on-line connections. Of the 15 documents analyzed, six were found on-line. The increased reliance on the Internet in today's work and personal worlds means that documents and texts relevant to a structural perspective are easier to access, and by placing them on-line they are more available to workers and to the general public, thus are potentially more transparent. Five of these documents were discussed in the context of this chapter. They included government

documents (transformation plan and legislation) and organizational documents (mission statements and organizational mandates). The sixth text is unique; it is a participant's Facebook page. Facebook blurs lines between public and private, and the discussion of this in the context of one's structural perspective is particularly interesting. The textual analysis of the Facebook page is discussed in chapter six.

### **Complexities and overlaps**

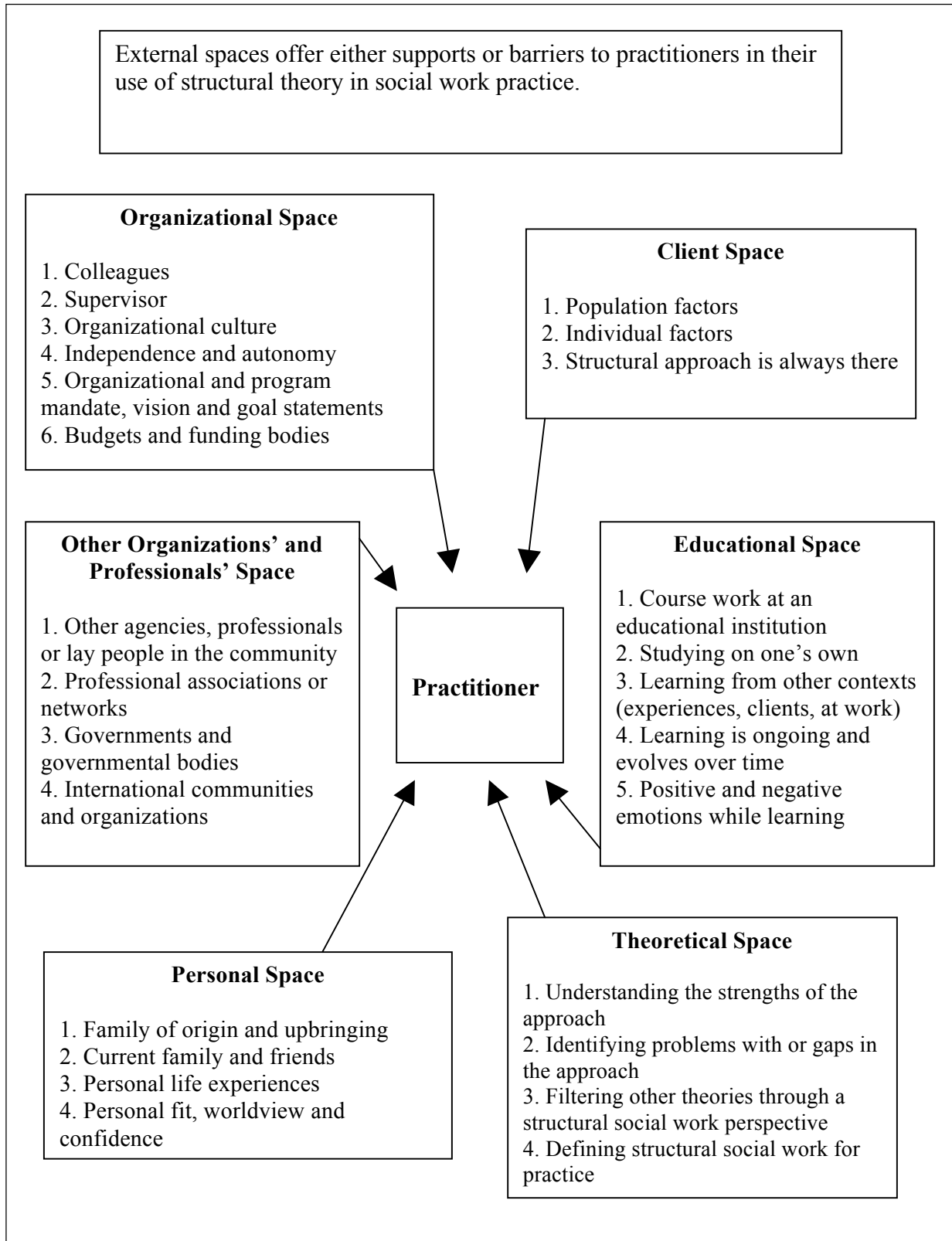
The data analysis also demonstrated the depth and complexity of the categories, and offers other thoughts on the way the factors and categories work in the use a structural approach. First of all, the categories, and factors within each, can all be barriers, supports or both, often simultaneously. In addition, none of the categories, or factors, by themselves makes or breaks a person's use of structural social work theory. The use structural social work theory is not that simple that one barrier can obstruct its use, or that one support guarantees it. Social work practice and the integration of theory is a complex coming-together of many different pieces. This is actually good news. It means one mistake does not bring the learning process, or the utilization of theory in practice, to a halt. It also means that people doing and teaching structural and related approaches have a number of opportunities to open doors and bring the right factors together in someone's life.

The data analysis process demonstrated that the overlaps and interactions between and among categories are more complex than as initially presented. This makes sense; for the practitioners, all these categories come together in their lives—they do not live each separately. One of the significant overlaps is between the personal and educational categories. A structural approach is not just taught in an educational institution, but it must also be seen in action people's lives for it to become real. Another significant overlap is the

practitioner category of the next chapter with all of the sections here in this chapter. The practitioner is the one common denominator to all of the spaces.

Finally, practitioners do not experience these supports and barriers passively. Throughout the interviews as they talked about barriers and supports, the participants also talked about the ways in which they utilized the supports, resisted the barriers and created new ways to do structural social work. The literature review identified the agency-structure dialectic as a component of structural theory and also as a reality of the spaces between theory and practice. While the literature review made only brief mention of it, the data analysis indicates that this dialectic between participants and the many factors of the categories is a significant element in how theory is integrated into practice. The process of participants actively engaging with the factors in each of the spaces is the basis of the next chapter.

**Figure 10. External Spaces Between Theory and Practice**





## **CHAPTER SIX. RESULTS III: PRACTITIONER SPACE—UTILIZING SUPPORTS AND RESISTING BARRIERS**

The practitioner space discussed in this chapter is the backbone of the newly developed theoretical framework, while the external spaces discussed in the previous chapter are the context in which the activities of the practitioners in this chapter unfold. The dialectic, or interaction, between the structures of chapter five and practitioner agency in chapter six brings the theory to life. Participants in this research were not passively experiencing the barriers and supports described in the previous chapter. They were involved in and engaged with the various factors. Participants actively interacted with the barriers and supports by: looking for and utilizing supports; identifying, resisting and working around barriers; manipulating neutral factors so that they became supports; and innovatively creating additional supports where they were needed.

This does not mean that participants were always successful. John and Sophie in particular experienced a number of significant barriers in their workplaces, which complicated their use of a structural approach much of the time. This was difficult for them and both talked about being frustrated and feeling that they could not do the work they really wanted to be doing. Their experiences suggest that there are times when the barriers are significant enough that a structural approach is challenged and perhaps even stopped. So the development of the practitioner category is not intended to suggest that if social workers are facing barriers to their structural perspective that they just need to try harder. The point is not to fall into the trap of blaming the victim for the oppression they face. However, as structural and critical theories identify, people are actively engaged with the structures around them; this is the agency-structure dialectic. Sometimes structural social workers are

up against barriers that are not moveable and they are prevented from much of their structural activities, but other times they are able to find a way through the structures.

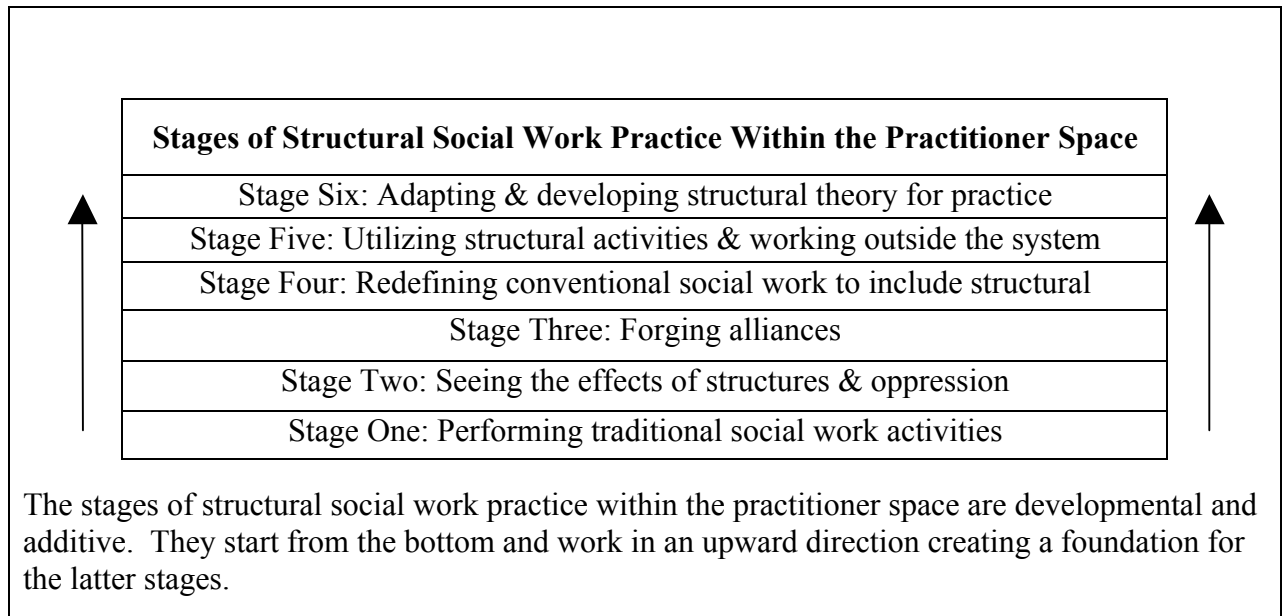
The supports and barriers to structural practice in chapter five are on the structure side of the agency-structure dialectic. The activities of the participants in chapter six encompass the agency side of this dialectic. However, these two sides are not independent or static. The dialectic is about the ways in which agency and structure interact and this process is active and dynamic, constantly moving and changing. It is this “dance of the dialectic” (Ollman, 2004, p.143), as experienced by the participants, which brings the theory-practice integration framework to life. While all of the participants spoke about the ways in which they engaged in this process, the ones with the most supports and the fewest barriers were often the ones with more stories and examples pertinent to this chapter. Yet even the participants facing multiple barriers had some examples that were relevant here. It is the moments of success that are identified in this chapter. In successfully engaging, utilizing and challenging the factors that exist in the various categories, these practitioners have developed ways to find, or even make, spaces where a structural approach can be practiced successfully.

## **Stages of Development in the Practitioner Space**

Findings within the practitioner space have been organized into stages that build on each other (see Figure 11). The stages of structural social work practice within the practitioner category are developmental and additive. Participants began with stage one activities and progressed to the next stages as their skills and knowledge developed and as they encountered supports rather than barriers to this process. Participants also did not finish a stage in progressing to the next. Instead, the additive process meant that participants added further stages to their activities while continuing to develop a greater depth to their

knowledge and work at previous stages. In this sense, the stages are also foundational, where the knowledge and skills from the first stages are crucial to one's development at future stages. Thus, Figure 11 has stages listed from the bottom toward the top, to demonstrate the foundational nature of earlier stages for later stages.

**Figure 11. The Practitioner Space**



The first stage is engaging in traditional social work activities. The second stage is the work practitioners do to actively see structures of oppression and privilege in the world and in their own lives. This stage is about recognition and is tied closely to the educational and learning category, although in the practitioner category the person is very actively engaged in these experiences and in applying a structural lens to themselves and the world around them. The third stage is about forging alliances with clients, marginalized populations, and people from across all of the external categories. Activities at the second and third stages gave credence to a structural approach and are where participants developed support networks for their structural work; a necessary foundational piece of structural

practice according to the findings. The next stages are about the ways in which the participants then move the application of structural social work from themselves and their learning, out into their lives, in all of the external spaces. In the fourth stage participants find ways to incorporate structural approaches into traditional social work jobs and activities. In the fifth stage the participants identify ways in which they practice and live structurally outside of traditional activities and locations. The last stage was where participants developed practice activities and concepts in a way that addressed their perceived gaps within the theory itself. In this stage their actions were focused on adapting and developing structural theory itself, albeit not necessarily in a conscious or deliberate way.

As with the rest of the theoretical framework, these stages often overlap. For example, the experience of applying a structural perspective to one's own life and experiences is not a discreet step which, once it has happened, is finished and put back on the shelf. Instead, struggling with structural issues in one's own life is a life-long activity. What a person learns in this stage can then be applied (stages four and five), but as learning is ongoing, so is the process of application. In addition, the application begins to occur in conjunction with traditional social work activities (the first stage) and so the stages are often intertwined. However, the stages are not randomly ordered. For most of the participants there was a logical progression of their use of a structural approach; the actions undertaken in the initial stages often formed a foundation upon which future activities were built. Participants were also found to be at different stages in their work. The barriers and supports they faced in the external spaces, combined with where they were at in their personal level of knowledge and growth regarding structural theory and how long they had been working

structurally, meant that some participants were at early stages of development and some had progressed further in their use of structural theory.

One further note on the way in which the stages work is that instead of progressing from one stage to another, the stages are additive. When participants achieved even just an initial level of understanding in the first couple of stages, they then began adding activities from the next stage to their structural work, while continuing to develop and deepen their understandings from the first stages. Lilly with her 17 years of structural social work practice was very developed in her use of structural theory and gave valuable examples of her work that were relevant throughout all the stages; yet she also gave a powerful example of ways in which she still struggles as she seeks to apply a structural lens to her own life (stage two).

### **First stage: Engaging in traditional social work activities**

During the interviews practitioners were asked to describe their jobs and the activities they engaged in during their work, from the mundane to the unusual. The first point to be made is that all participants engaged in a variety of activities, many of which are common social work activities that all social workers engage in, no matter what their theoretical orientation. Some of these tasks are specific to micro, mezzo or macro levels of work while others cross these levels. Table 11 on the following two pages, illustrates many of these activities as described by participants.

**Table 11. Social Work Activities**

<p><b>Work with clients:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• intakes</li> <li>• assessments</li> <li>• goal-setting</li> <li>• facilitate groups</li> <li>• plan, organize and implement activities (social, recreational, etc.)</li> <li>• meet with clients and hear their points of view</li> <li>• understand and meet client needs</li> <li>• work with clients to identify their own needs, goals, solutions, and plans to move forward on issues</li> <li>• problem-solve</li> <li>• referrals and assist in accessing other resources, professionals, services</li> <li>• interviews</li> <li>• provide counselling, therapy, rehabilitation</li> <li>• reframe problems, issues and concepts</li> <li>• get to know people</li> <li>• build rapport</li> <li>• inform clients of how the system works, what is happening, next steps, their rights</li> <li>• teach/educate</li> <li>• advocacy (for/with clients)</li> <li>• debrief</li> <li>• crisis interventions</li> <li>• share information on resources</li> <li>• connect clients with supports</li> <li>• prepare for court</li> <li>• empower clients: assist clients in exercising their rights, requesting and accessing services, etc.</li> <li>• review client (and related) files</li> <li>• review, develop, revise organizational service plans for clients</li> <li>• file appeals with/for client</li> </ul>	<p><b>Work with other professionals and community:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• network with other professionals and organizations</li> <li>• debrief with others</li> <li>• request assistance/advice/support</li> <li>• evaluate team functioning</li> <li>• work with communities (including Aboriginal and other ethnic communities)</li> <li>• work with inter-disciplinary team</li> <li>• facilitate, attend and prepare for meetings</li> <li>• do many client-related tasks as a part of a team</li> <li>• long-term community planning</li> <li>• respond to community social issues</li> <li>• bring community organizations and professionals together—facilitate collaboration</li> <li>• facilitate and improve service delivery</li> <li>• offer professional advice</li> <li>• integrate social perspective into community context</li> <li>• represent views of clients to others (i.e., managers, decision makers, community)</li> <li>• facilitate discussions of client or community issues</li> <li>• participate in, develop or facilitate committees on issues or topics</li> <li>• participate in, develop or facilitate client-based case management meetings</li> <li>• present on topics, issues, clients, etc.</li> <li>• teach/educate</li> <li>• consciousness-raising or raising awareness</li> <li>• follow-up with individuals or committees on plan-implementation processes</li> </ul>
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<b>Table 11. Social Work Activities</b>	
<b>Administrative or organizational tasks:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• write reports</li> <li>• take notes</li> <li>• phone calls, emails</li> <li>• organize meetings</li> <li>• attend meetings</li> <li>• read reports, documentation, other literature</li> <li>• document issues, developments, changes, findings, etc.</li> <li>• gather, write and/or present information on a client, issue or topic</li> <li>• gather information to describe and understand the history (of a client, community, issue, etc.)</li> <li>• develop recommendations</li> <li>• complete forms on/for clients or issues (intake, assessment, case notes, etc.)</li> </ul>	<b>Management, policy development and research:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conduct interviews</li> <li>• conduct literature reviews</li> <li>• identify gaps in literature</li> <li>• write proposals</li> <li>• plan and implement research activities</li> <li>• transcribe recordings</li> <li>• do data analysis</li> <li>• write results</li> <li>• develop frameworks</li> <li>• develop and manage projects</li> <li>• advise colleagues, public, supervisors, politicians, etc.</li> <li>• reframe social issues and solutions</li> <li>• make policy recommendations</li> <li>• brief decision-makers</li> <li>• develop policies</li> <li>• develop survey or interview questions</li> <li>• gather data and information such as background material for decision-making</li> <li>• explore and present pros and cons, all sides of an issue</li> <li>• develop new ideas to address issues</li> <li>• identify systemic issues and potential solutions</li> <li>• advocate for systemic/structural changes</li> <li>• lobby government or organizations</li> <li>• supervise staff</li> <li>• develop and coordinate an organization or agency</li> </ul>

The tasks and activities in Table 11 are loosely divided into four categories. Three of these categories are simplistically aligned with the three levels of social work practice. Work with clients (which includes individuals, families or groups) is considered to be micro-level work. The section on working with community and other professionals may be correlated with mezzo-level work. The last section on management, research and policy is typically

considered to be macro-level work. As was discussed in chapter four the participants had somewhat varying descriptions of these three levels of practice and the categories here do not necessarily match each participant's view of what tasks are at which level. Even the literature disagrees at times as to which level includes which activities (Burrill & Peters, 2010). The divisions here are not intended to be definitive, but rather to provide one view of organizing the social work tasks identified by participants. The fourth section, administrative and organizational tasks, consists of activities that are necessary components of all three levels of social work.

As can be seen in Table 11, most structural social workers do not work in a highly specialized set of jobs specific to structural social work. The organizations in which they work, the jobs they are in, and the tasks they do, are mostly common to social work in general, and sometimes common to other disciplines as well. Consistent with all social work practice, this is also the starting point for structural social workers as they seek to engage a structural perspective in their work. However, the research participants suggest that they brought a structural approach into their work in two ways. First, they completed traditional tasks in a way that integrated a structural perspective. Second, they incorporated a number of other activities that were specifically structural in and of themselves. Both of these types of tasks can be seen in Table 11, and both of these ways of undertaking structural social work are woven throughout the factors in the practitioner space. Although participants may have started off developing traditional skills and utilizing them in traditional ways, as their use of structural theory developed, their use of traditional activities also matured to embody structural actions and goals.



## **Second stage: Personal growth and seeing and thinking about structures**

The next step in applying a structural perspective was to begin with one's own life and experiences. In chapter five several of the participants noted that a structural perspective was not real to them until they saw it in action in their lives or the lives of others they knew, whether clients or friends. It was not until their learning came together with their experiences that they began to understand structural social work in a real way. However, while this coming together of education and experiences was at times a passive encounter for participants, it quickly became an opportunity for participants to actively apply what they had been learning. There are two sub-categories in the second stage.

### **Personal growth and applying a structural perspective to oneself**

Many of the participants talked about the ways in which they explored structural concepts in relationship to themselves. The most common starting point for this activity was a search to understand how the concepts of privilege and oppression were a part of their lives and who they were as people. In the previous chapter Jamie was presented as having immigrated to Canada from Southeast Asia as a young adult. Although she struggled with the oppression she faced when she arrived, she also talked about these experiences being a significant part of her learning about structural social work. She did not just passively go through these experiences.

**Jamie:** That was my first full-time job in Canada and it was very, very challenging for me to adjust to the culture of working in Canada.... Now, during that time where I had to struggle, I did end up seeing a counsellor and again, I think I feel privileged to being able to afford to choose a counsellor I am able to trust and [who] understands the issues of being an immigrant and understands the issues of racism. So that helped me to look within me as well as coping with the stress of working in Canada. What else happened—I think intellectual work actually helped too—being able to read what people find about everyday racism, cultural racism or any other literature provided me with what's going on. So even though on a personal level I felt really, really, really unhappy and upset but I am able to put myself a little differently in the sense of

I'm not taking it—I'm taking it personally because it has that personal impact on me but also I'm not taking it personally at the same time when looking at it ... [in a] more political way and more structural way.

One of the reasons these experiences became an important part of Jamie's understanding of structural social work is that she actively explored her experiences with a counsellor and on her own as she read literature about racism and structural analyses.

Annie talked about being able to see both privilege and oppression in her own life. She described applying a structural perspective to others as well as herself: "It makes you less judgmental and more open and you're able to put your own issues in perspective." Other participants talked about examining their own privilege. Eleanor said: "I think that, like everybody, I struggle with my own privilege." In addition to acknowledging that she is examining her own privilege, Eleanor also identified the expectation that all structural social workers know they need to do this work. Billy remembered first learning about structural and anti-oppressive ideas in the classroom, and suddenly realizing that he had to apply the concept of privilege to himself.

**Billy:** Not only were there all sorts of reasons and historical and current things working against people. But I, myself, being white and being a man and being middle-class and being able-bodied and all the rest, was really kind of benefiting from this and I had never thought of it that way. I had just sorta thought, 'Well we can all be equal, you know? Why would I have to change, why can't we all just be equal?' I started realizing, 'Oh right! I, I have to change too. I have to think differently as well.' ... It's really easy to not think that way because I have a pretty privileged life and, and when I'm not at work and I'm just with my family I can, I can ignore everything else that's going on in the world quite easily. But ... I have to not ignore it. And I'm lucky that my wife ... thinks, well, almost exactly the way I do.... So we're here to remind each other of how to make the world a better place and how to challenge our own privileged place.

Not only was Billy able to understand his privilege in the context of structural analyses, but he also realized that this examination of privilege is ongoing. His last sentence speaks to the work he and his wife continue to do together in understanding and challenging privilege in

their lives. Lilly echoed this examination of one's own life, including privilege and issues of oppression. During the interview she not only talked about grappling with understanding oppression and privilege in her own life in the past, but she also talked about her current struggles with doing social work from a position of privilege. It has been 17 years since Lilly completed her BSW, yet these struggles to understand these concepts in her own life and how they affect her ability to carry out structural social work activities are still current.

**Lilly:** This really came up around the cuts to programming and job cuts and stuff around ... when the Liberal government was elected. And the whole sort of idea of survivor guilt. And there's a piece of me that feels a little guilty because here I am doing structural social work. I'm a white, middle class, heterosexual woman. My one sort of piece—but I live in a multi-racial family—but I do sometimes think, 'Where do I get off thinking that I can even imagine understanding the differences and the struggles and the challenges of somebody who has lived a different experience?' You know I have a middle- to upper-income job that's secure, I have health benefits, I have a nice home, I have a lot of privileges. Can I really do structural social work living this life?

**Interviewer:** And?

**Lilly:** And you know sometimes I think in my dark moments, I think maybe I can't. Maybe I need to either give up doing it or give up something. And then the other part of me says, 'It's important to do it from both ends of the spectrum and ... there is power in privilege.' And if you use that power, if you use that privilege for good as much as you can, you don't pretend to think that there are things that are not consistent with that. If your intention is, and you are conscious of using that privilege to address inequality, that's the best I can hope for. And would it be fair to my family to give up that privilege? I guess I struggle with that sometimes, I think, 'Hmm, maybe I should.' But I've done it too you know? I've worked in jobs that didn't pay well. I lived in poverty not by choice. I've experienced many other oppressions, but umm, yeah. I think it's a struggle that many of us have and it's important to think about whether there's a resolution to it. Could I affect the same level of change?

Part of effectively utilizing a structural perspective is the willingness to continually examine one's power and privilege, and to be aware that it is present and has an affect on oneself, one's work, and the people with which one interacts at work and in one's personal life.

Several participants also talked about ways in which they then tried to apply this self-examination of privilege to their work. Joe described both understanding his privilege and his steps to try and decrease his power in relation to clients.

**Joe:** I could call [on] my white male privilege if I wanted to, I try not to ... I am a male with a social work degree, I got all kinds of personal power. I understand that; that is why I became a registered social worker so other people can have some control over me if they feel like they needed it.

Joe's decision to become a registered social worker means that his clients now have a place to go to challenge him if they feel he is not maintaining social work standards in his work with them. Billy uses another approach in applying an understanding of his privilege. He works with a lot of Aboriginal clients and he will talk with them directly about concepts of power and privilege in trying to acknowledge and then mitigate some of that disparity.

**Billy:** The fact that I'm not Aboriginal ... is something ... I often will put on the table with people. That I recognize that there's already a power imbalance because I'm from, I have a European background and I'm here sitting in the expert's chair and you're not and you know let's, let's make that clear that I recognize that ... this is already upsetting the balance of our relationship.

Joe and Billy's steps to begin to take their understanding of privilege from their own lives into their work with others in a tangible way, is one example of how practitioners take what they have learned from stage two, personal reflection, to stage three, application in other spaces.

Although exploring power, privilege and oppression in their own lives was the key elements of this factor, participants also engaged in a number of other types of self-reflection and personal growth relevant to their application of structural social work. For example, some participants talked about efforts to improve their skills and abilities. Shanks described how her desire to do her best for her clients led her to seek out training opportunities. There

is an overlap here with the educational space, as the desire to learn more and to improve one's skills often leads practitioners to seek out opportunities for learning.

Another way of improving their skills was for participants to be aware of their limitations and to acknowledge and learn from their mistakes. Billy described learning from an error he made. His concern for this client led him to call another agency to refer the client there for special support services, but he forgot to check with the client first. Billy said that when the client challenged him on his decision, he realized what he had done.

**Billy:** And so he came back and challenged me and for a long time wouldn't talk to me and wouldn't work with me and I, you know? It was like a little light bulb that went off in my head and I went, 'Oh, of course! Right, I can't do anything without people's permission.' That's horrible, that's like going against one of the main ethics of social work practice but I had done it anyway thinking that I was really gonna be helping him in the long run. But I just betrayed his trust and that was that.... I was contributing to structural oppression rather than resisting it.

The ability to see his own errors, understand them in the context of a structural approach to social work, and then make changes in his way of working are, from Billy's perspective, important steps in developing his skills and improving as a social worker.

Many of the participants worked with a team of colleagues, some of who were important sources of support for improving one's skills. Eleanor described talking with her fellow social worker about their work, their struggles and their mistakes.

**Eleanor:** I do a lot of talking with my co-workers ... we genuinely take the time to talk about our approach or what we are doing and to admit mistakes ... you know—maybe I shouldn't have done that with that person—and then changing practice based on that.... It's a huge responsibility to be a social worker you have a huge amount of power, you have a lot of control over people's lives. I realized that I do and sometimes I realize that I used that power inappropriately.... I just have to keep questioning myself and I'm lucky that I have people I can do it with.

As with Billy, Eleanor also sought to identify structural issues and other areas in her work that could use improvement, sometimes connecting with a colleague to do this work.

The desire to improve extended into participants' personal lives. Several participants talked about being a structural person more so than a structural social worker and so improving in structural knowledge was both a professional and personal task.

**John:** I think in some ways the structural perspective in its fullest expression is really—doesn't have anything to do with work, it has more to do with just being the best person you can be and being the best community member you can be ... I think in some ways ... structural is beyond the profession. It's really about changing who you are and connecting with other people.

The changes that resulted from a structural analysis of one's own life were positive. In the words of Annie, "I think it makes you a better person."

The final piece of personal growth and development that several participants expressed is that of on-going self-care. Structural social work was not only about participants challenging themselves, but also about them taking care of themselves. Billy talked about how a focus on resistance alone can lead to burnout. Joe talked about how working with violent clients can be traumatic for social workers. Both Joe and Billy mentioned the importance of self-care. Kevin was on a leave of absence from work at the time of his interview due to stress, which he linked to a lack of self-care: "I remember taking courses on self-care and stuff like that and I was like, 'Oh, I will never need this stuff' ... but I wish I would have listened before because it does, like, it does happen." Kevin felt that he put too much pressure on himself to live up to an ideal of structural social work, which was not balanced by taking care of himself. One effect of Kevin's stress was that he had lost his ability to empathize with his clients. During his time away from work he realized self-care was necessary to work effectively with others. Joe and Ellen also talked about the importance of self-care and balance in their lives. This was not about blaming themselves for stress they experienced; rather, it was about recognizing that there were a number of expectations imposed on them in areas such as work, family and their own structural ideals.

They acknowledged that these needed to be balanced with self-care in order to be effective in their structural practice while staying healthy.

### Seeing and thinking about structures in other people's lives and in the world

Alongside the work of personal reflection and personal application of a structural perspective is the activity of critical analysis. Critical analysis is the process of practitioners taking what they have learned about structural analyses and applying it to the world and people around them, to see if structural theory can accurately and effectively explain what they see happening. In using critical analysis several things happen. First, participants learn how to do critical analysis by practicing it. Second, they start to “back up the bus” (to quote Melissa) and they begin to see the structures in society and the ways in which those affect people. Third, in the words of Annie, a structural perspective becomes “real”; it moves from being an abstract concept to becoming a concrete approach that makes sense of social issues. These first three points take place here, as a part of stage two. Finally, structural social workers start to understand that there are concrete activities that they can do to challenge structures, which moves them into the next stages of the practitioner space.

One of the strongest points the participants made about the process of critical analysis is that it is something that is ongoing. Once they started critically analyzing the world around them, it was not possible to stop and it became a part of how they lived and worked. As Annie said, “When you just had that teaching of structural social work, you’re always, you’re always thinking that way to a certain extent.” Ongoing critical analysis was both reflexive, as suggested here by Annie, and deliberate, as described by Shanks.

**Shanks:** I am well aware that I need to, for me, I feel like I always need to be thinking about what’s working and what’s not working and how come that’s the way it is and how come that’s set up the way it is.

Where possible participants tried to incorporate it into their work and personal lives as an important aspect of effective practice. Billy said, “I have much more of an opportunity to step back from things. I can structure my day the way I want and I can spend an hour here and an hour there just thinking.”

Critical analysis took place within all of the spaces between theory and practice. Participants described engaging in critical analysis at school, work and in their personal lives. Shanks described thinking about the organization she worked in and critically analyzing what worked and what did not work at an organizational level. She recognized that Aboriginal people were not accessing her organization as much as other people, and she was able to identify structural reasons for that such as the lack of Aboriginal staff, remoteness of Aboriginal communities and lack of transportation. Other participants also spent time critically examining the organizations they worked for in order to understand the potential structural impacts, positive and negative, on the clients with whom they worked. Many of John’s brain-injured clients felt excluded from their families and communities and he described a need for education programs on how to be inclusive of brain-injured people.

Participants also applied critical analysis to their own social work activities. They asked themselves questions about what is effective in their practice, what are structural issues they are facing in their work, and how can they improve their work. As Shanks’ ability to conduct interviews of sexually abused children improved, she realized she was getting a greater depth of information from her clients. While this was useful in laying charges against abusers, she recognized that the resources available to support victims of abuse could not always keep up with the number of victims or the severity of the abuse. Shanks saw the lack



of necessary resources as a structural issue. Even the process of participating in the interview for this research was a critical analysis process for some participants.

**Ellen:** When I came in and I was like, ‘Oh my goodness ... I’m not gonna be able to say anything because I haven’t been thinking about this.’ But, no, it’s, it’s nice to have the opportunity to talk about it.... I mean even this [interview] helps me be a better practitioner because it makes me slow down and think about what I’m doing and why I’m doing it.

Any opportunity for practitioners to think about what they do and why, is an opportunity to engage in critical analysis with the goal of understanding the role of structures.

In the theoretical space, it was identified that participants overwhelmingly felt that one of the strengths of a structural perspective was that it gave them a lens through which to view the world around them, and that the lens allowed them to make links between social issues and societal structures. The theoretical space overlaps with the practitioner space in many ways, and one of the key areas of overlap is the process of critical analysis. While a structural perspective may provide an explanatory lens to practitioners, the participants also described that they needed to actively choose to use that lens to engage in a process of critical analysis. Seeing the big picture did not just happen for participants; it was something at which they worked.

## Summary

In critical and structural theory it is important to move from critiquing, to developing ideas for social change, and then to trying to put changes into place. In stage two participants described starting to identify structural issues they saw in themselves, in society or in their organization. The first step in working for social change is to understand where changes are needed (see Table 12). The next section, stage three, describes how participants built networks of support as a necessary foundation in their work toward social change.

<b>Table 12. Summary of Stage Two: Personal Growth and Seeing and Thinking About Structures</b>
a) Personal growth, self-care and applying a structural perspective to oneself b) Seeing and thinking about structures in other people's lives and in the world

### **Third stage: Forging alliances**

The structural social work activity of forging alliances happened across all of the spaces and throughout participants' lives. There are two sub-categories in stage three, they are forging alliances with clients and actively developing support networks with colleagues and peers. These were two of the most often talked about ways in which participants engaged in structural activities. Developing rapport with clients and networking with colleagues and others are common activities for social workers, regardless of one's theoretical orientation. However, structural social workers actively engaged in these activities with structural goals in mind, and for the purpose of finding support and assistance in effectively utilizing the structural approach. Becoming an ally with vulnerable groups and forging alliances with others begins with the concepts of rapport-building and networking, but takes them further via a structural perspective. The result is that participants who engaged in forging alliances were doing much more than just rapport-building and networking.

#### **Becoming an ally with clients and vulnerable populations**

One of the first places where participants sought to develop alliances was with clients and vulnerable or marginalized populations. They made the effort to develop an alliance with vulnerable people both as individuals and as communities. Becoming an ally was about developing a partnership with, not an expertise on, others.

**Joe:** But I am not an expert on First Nations people. I will tell them that. I work with First Nations people, I've got some experience working with First Nations people, but by no means am I their spokesman or am I an expert on First Nations people. They are their own experts. I work as an ally with [the] First Nations struggle.

Joe used the term 'ally' throughout the interview to describe his goal of working with and alongside First Nations people, not from a position of authority. Although Lilly's mezzo- and macro-level work meant she had little if any direct contact with clients, she stated that she kept in mind how her work and decisions may affect people experiencing oppression. This suggests that being an ally occurs at all levels of practice and is about both a state of mind and concrete relationships with others.

Other participants also talked about being on the same side as others who were experiencing oppression, and this extended outside of the workplace. Annie's description of her advocacy for resources for her disabled daughter reflected the process of being an ally similar to that described by Joe. Jamie was helped through her experiences of racism in school when she developed a relationship with an instructor who was also a visible minority person; they understood each other's experiences. Both Annie's and Jamie's personal experiences with oppression then extended to feeling connected with friends and others they met who faced similar oppressions. Billy described his concern about issues of oppression experienced by neighbours and he worked to develop relationships with them.

Becoming partners and allies with others in the struggle against oppression took many forms and participants used a variety of strategies to develop these alliances. Joe and Billy in particular identified specific strategies, and were most likely to link these activities directly to their structural approach. One such strategy was to develop rapport in a culturally sensitive way.

**Joe:** Part of it is building a rapport with your counselling. As you know, in your counselling session you have to build rapport, and with my rapport, was the fact that I was very culturally sensitive in the fact that he was First Nations.

One simple decision Joe made to build rapport was to often wear t-shirts with an Aboriginal design on them. One day a client looked at Joe's t-shirt and told Joe that his father had created the design on the shirt. That simple coincidence provided a starting point for conversation and a point of connection between the two.

Participants also identified that in their work with clients and communities they sought to gain an understanding of the structural context of people's lives, such as where the person or community was coming from, the circumstances that affected them, and the importance of the client's culture and history. Billy described working with people who were HIV positive and were facing multiple barriers in their lives, making it difficult for them to keep up with their medication.

**Billy:** It's medication that a person needs to take every single day for the rest of their life. Without missing a single day so it's a very hard thing to do for everybody no matter what their, their social situation is. It's very hard for anybody to commit. If they're homeless and using crack cocaine and maybe suffering delusions and it's really impossible. So that's what our team is there for ... we do basically all the work for people so that they can take their ... pills. So we'll deliver pills to their door, we'll go out and find them in alleys.

Understanding and empathizing with the situations of clients made it possible for Billy to work alongside and in support of them. Without this ability it would be easy to be frustrated and begin to see clients as an adversary instead of someone who needs support.

Seeking to understand where clients are at in their life may be a tool used by social workers from diverse theoretical orientations. In Billy and Joe's work this was expanded to understanding and watching for structural issues of colonization, racism, poverty and others.

**Billy:** So I think recognizing that she's an Aboriginal, she's a drug user, and so the pain that she's feeling right now is very legitimate.... So what's going on is ... not

her fault.... It's just the reminder to me that people are often victims of their social environment.

Understanding the structural oppressions in a person's life not only allowed Billy to work more effectively with his clients in addressing a variety of issues, but it also assisted him in being more empathetic to what his clients are facing.

One of the most important activities for Billy in developing this understanding and empathy was asking clients how they were doing, and then just listening to them talk. He gave numerous examples of tracking down clients and taking the time to hear how things were going for them: "A lot of what you do is just listen to people. I think that's the key to working with individuals." Listening was necessary to understand people's situations and see their lives in the context of larger structures, and this led to becoming an ally with them in their struggles.

One of the goals of practitioners is to operate from a non-judgmental perspective with clients; this is sometimes harder than it sounds. When a practitioner understands the structural context for what is happening with clients, it is much harder to pass judgment on them. Joe said: "I come as an ally, and they know very well that I do; I am not judgmental." In his work with street-involved clients, Billy tried to support them in leaving the street and finding a place to live, but he was very careful in trying to be supportive and not judgmental in that process: "You don't have to be stuck down here forever so I'm gonna remind you of that constantly, but not in a shame-you way, not in a ... guilt-tripping way." Understanding and empathy are important in being able to be supportive without judgement.

Being supportive of people also was about being able to meet them where they were. Billy took this literally and when clients stopped coming in to the office he would find them.

**Billy:** I'll go to that person's home and I'll try and find them or I'll ask around, 'Have you seen so and so?' And I'll usually find them at home, or at a soup kitchen,

or something and we'll, we'll sit down and we'll talk and I'll say, 'Hey I noticed that this is going on, is there anything I can do to help?'

Several of the participants talked about the importance of asking clients what they wanted or needed, rather than imposing their own idea of what clients should have.

Part of becoming an ally with clients was also being able to see people's strengths, not just their weaknesses or where they needed help. Billy talked about it as encouraging clients in their resistance to some of the not-so-good things in their lives.

**Billy:** I think that sometimes I might be the reminder of the little resistance, the little shard of resistance left inside of some people and I wanna build on that. 'You know you can stand up to all the shit that's gone on, I know you can do it. And I'm here to stand beside you.'

He described that it was not that clients could not do it without him, but that sometimes being this support in their lives was what they needed to realize that they could move forward. To see people's strengths was also to believe in them, and to believe that it is possible for their lives to be different.

The skills of listening, empathizing, being non-judgmental and supporting clients' strengths were transformed by participants when the thread of structural analysis of social issues ran through their perspectives and work. According to Lilly a structural analysis makes it easier to be non-judgmental, empathetic and supportive and that without this perspective it is too easy to become frustrated and begin blaming people for the issues they are facing. It was the coming-together of all these ways of working, combined with a structural perspective, which moved the relationship from one of traditional social work rapport-building to a structural one of an alliance.

## Forging alliances with other professionals, lay people, friends and communities

As identified in the previous chapter, most of the participants talked about the ways in which colleagues, those in the same organization as them and those from other agencies, were often supports for them in their efforts to utilize a structural approach. This was not accidental. Participants recognized the value of a network of people who could support them in their efforts to develop their structural analyses and approaches in their work and their lives. As Joe stated, “We cannot do it all by ourselves but we have to work in conjunction and cooperation with others, do this together, collaboratively. This is not ... an approach where you can do it by yourself.”

Building alliances with like-minded others encompassed more than the traditional social work activity of networking. Eleanor and her fellow social worker used each other to bounce ideas off of and to assist each other in growing as workers. Billy, who did not work with other social workers, described actively seeking out social workers at other agencies as sources of support. Joe talked about working with other organizations and community groups. Finding others with whom to connect could be a formal or informal process. Oftentimes, for Joe, this consisted of just dropping in at community organizations to connect and touch base. Billy described setting up signed consents with clients giving him permission to work with other organizations and professionals. These formal connections benefited clients and provided a source of support for Billy too. These supportive others were often, but not necessarily, social workers. Lilly described how a colleague and her supervisor, neither from a social work discipline, were supports for her in her work.

Developing support networks of like-minded others occurred outside of the workplace and in other spaces, including educational and personal spaces. Ellen, Billy and John talked specifically about how their spouses had similar thoughts on structural issues, so

they could both support and challenge each other. Shanks, Jamie and Melissa talked about the importance of friendships with others who understood how they thought.

**Interviewer:** [Is there] anything, people or anything, in your life that might be helpful to you?

**Jamie:** I think having people helps, like having allies. People who have an understanding of these issues, but at the same time who are able to challenge you as well.

Annie described the importance of like-minded fellow students who became friends of hers while taking her MSW.

Participants also talked about forming alliances with others who did not necessarily support a structural view. Billy, Shanks and Melissa also described connecting with colleagues who were not structural. There were many benefits of these relationships, and for Melissa this included forming these alliances for the purpose of managing that relationship in a way that gets her clients what they need.

**Interviewer:** You also said something about ... developing relationships with people so that you feel you can go to them. Tell me how that works, [about] developing relationships with people and why and how that's been beneficial?

**Melissa:** I think that's somewhat the most important part of anything community wise.... The people who work down there their hands are tied just as much as mine are.... Instead I can ... teach them where the loopholes are in their own jobs, [so] that we can all be a little more flexible.... When I do make a phone call, they like me on a personal level and they also know that I'm going to treat them well and be respectful and that I'm going to come with solutions instead of just complaining at them all the time.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and relationships are a key part of that?

**Melissa:** And manipulating those relationships to an extent.

Manipulating these relationships for Melissa was not about being disrespectful or inappropriate; these relationships were genuine. It was about recognizing the validity in the



old adage that *you can catch more flies with honey*. This was more about manipulating the system and structures for the benefit of clients, but through her relationships with colleagues.

Another place where participants sought to forge alliances was in the wider community. For Lilly, this occurred as a part of her community development and policy position with a municipality. She described it as “public engagement work” where she worked to develop relationships with the public and with community organizations. Lilly also talked about the importance of developing alliances with compatible social movements.

**Lilly:** I think that there’s hope in alliances. I think that there’s hope ... particularly in the environmental movement. I think that there’s tremendous potential for alliance between people who use structural theory ... and the sustainability movement particularly. Because people who are doing that sustainability work understand that it’s very the structures of society that have to change [for us] to actually survive.... And for the earth to survive.... I don’t have a lot of people around me that use structural theory or even know what it is. But I find alliances in the sustainability movement because they understand.

Billy described how, in his personal time, he sought to develop relationships and alliances with neighbours and others in the community in which he lived.

**Billy:** Like me, lately it’s been about, umm, gardening with my neighbours. That’s really what I’m into these days. It feels really good when several people on the block will all come over and talk about gardening or even share your vegetables with your neighbours or just little things like that I think. That, that’s social work.

Billy’s example of gardening demonstrates his belief that structural social work is about more than his job; it is about his whole life. Developing relationships and alliances is an important aspect of this.

The importance of building alliances, and a personal support network in particular, was driven home by many of the participants near the end of the interview when they were asked what advice they would give to a new structural social worker.

**Billy:** I would say find other people in your field or in your, in the part of the city or town where you are working, other people who think and work in the same way that you do. Because if you do it all on your own, you’re gonna burn out and you’re gonna

end up just hating your life. You really need to find people who, who can support you and who can offer ideas and so that you can bounce your problems off of and who are hopefully willing to join with you in doing things at the macro level.... And if you don't have other people in your life that want [pause] that also think from a structural perspective then it's never gonna work.

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**Eleanor:** One of the first things I would say was find some peer support. I think it's huge and I also think find peer support from people who think like you do. You know, you probably went to school and there's people where you share the same world as you ... I think you really need to have people—that support, to tell you that 'No, the way you're looking at things is right,' because you're going to work in a crushing, debilitating, dehumanizing system that wants to define your practice ... and they are not gonna want you to have those conversations, they are not wanting you to integrate that into your practices. You have to find a way of finding like-minded social workers. I think that's huge.

Many participants gave similar advice, emphasizing the importance and the foundational nature of forging alliances in order to effectively engage in structural practices. Building alliances spanned all of the spaces between theory and practice, all facets of participants' lives and all levels of social work, taking the traditional concept of building rapport, networking and developing relationships to a structural level.

## Summary

Various social work activities described in stage three, such as listening, rapport building, developing trust, attentiveness, networking and building relationships, are all traditional skills being used in a structural way for a structural purpose (see Table 13). Structural social workers use many of the same skills used by professionals from other theoretical orientations. It is not the individual skills that identify the theoretical orientation. Instead it is the package of skills, theoretical context and goals of the therapeutic work, which, when combined, identify the theoretical framework. Thus, many professionals rely on the skill of rapport building, for example, as an important foundation of their work with clients or communities. One of the purposes of rapport-building for participants was the goal

of becoming an ally, which is a structural goal steeped in their structural analysis. Therefore, although rapport-building is not necessarily structural in and of itself, it became a vital element in the structural work of creating alliances. One of the important structural shifts is moving from developing rapport to also developing alliances. Forging alliances was foundational for participants; having alliances in place allowed participants to further develop or deepen their use of a structural approach throughout their social work practice and in other areas of their lives. Not having alliances was a barrier to structural practice.

<b>Table 13. Summary of Stage Three: Forging Alliances</b>
a) Becoming an ally with clients and vulnerable populations b) Forging alliances with other professionals, lay people, friends, family and communities

#### **Fourth stage: Redefining conventional social work to include a structural approach**

Stage four is one of looking for and seizing opportunities for a structural approach within the system and within the context of traditional social work activities. Where structural social work involves new activities that are outside of traditional activities and may be unique to structural practice, these are included in the next stage, rather than in this section. Traditional and structural activities are often intertwined in reality but are presented here in a developmental process where incorporation of structural approaches into traditional activities often happens first. Engaging in a structural approach within the system involved finding the existing supports (from the previous chapter) and taking advantage of these. On other occasions, where barriers existed, it was about pushing a closed door open or identifying a way around a closed, locked door, potentially including efforts at manipulating the system to open a back door. There are four sub-categories in stage four.

## Incorporating structural methods and goals into traditional activities

Some of the activities identified during interviews appear to be the same as traditional activities by non-structural social workers. Yet participants identified ways in which these activities were expanded to incorporate structural approaches. In sharing her thoughts on the research findings, Melissa stated that structural social workers cannot ever just do the traditional activities in stage one; they have to do these activities in a structural way. Her example was that of a client assessment. Melissa stated that while social workers from all perspectives completed assessments, a structural social worker would ask different questions that would then lead to structural goals. Thus even a simple assessment was different when done by a structural social worker. Other activities mentioned most often by participants will be used here as examples of how traditional activities can be approached differently with a structural perspective.

The first example is that of advocacy. While advocacy is often associated with various critical approaches to practice, it has at times become a part of practice for practitioners utilizing non-structural approaches as well. Yet this is not true in all organizations or for all professionals. Joe described being approached by other professionals and told that he was doing too much advocacy and should instead focus on his counselling work, as if advocacy was not supposed to be a part of his job. Debbie described advocacy work as “beyond my normal scope of my job.” In such circumstances advocacy was seen as being outside of traditional social work and even as being political or problematic. Joe said, “People see you as being an advocate as someone causing problems.” Just doing advocacy work in these settings can be seen as structural.

Shanks described advocating for services that that are in the “best interests of the child,” in her words. This included advocating for services that a client needed, even if these

services were not directly relevant to her area of work. In one of Shanks' examples she talked about working with a child with poor teeth, and how her colleagues commented that the parents should take the child to a dentist, seeing the issue as a problem with the parents. Shanks first of all reframed the problem from being a problem with individuals (the parents) to being a structural problem, one of poverty. Shanks' structural understanding of poverty then led her to advocate for access to dental treatment for the client and she identified unique ways of accessing this service within the family's income. While this was technically outside of Shanks' job description, it was within her structural approach to practice.

Advocacy at mezzo and macro levels in ways that challenge the system were more likely to be specific to structural work for participants. Shanks mentioned advocacy to address issues of poverty and violence against women. Joe talked about advocating for support for Aboriginal issues at a community level. Billy described doing micro advocacy as a routine part of his job, and doing mezzo and macro advocacy in his personal time. Ellen was in a unique situation as her position was one of being an advocate for children and youth; not only was her advocacy work supported, it was mandated. In spite of this, Ellen described how her structural approach to advocacy sometimes differed from that of her colleagues and supervisors, and that she would go further than others to get her clients' needs met. In addition to her work with individual clients, the organization also officially tracked client problems in order to identify systemic or structural issues to then advocate for change.

While macro-level advocacy for changing structures was not a part of most people's jobs, it was something that many of the participants saw as being an integral part of their structural analysis and activities, whether in the work place or on their own. Participants saw macro-level advocacy as something that non-structural colleagues did not normally do and

often did not understand. For some of the participants doing any advocacy was seen as structural when the organization or colleagues did not support that work. In Ellen's case her structural advocacy pushed the boundaries somewhat with her workplace, although her work was intended to be as an advocate. Although advocacy was a mandated part of her job, this did not make her advocacy activities any less structural.

Referring people to other resources or services is also a common social work activity that could, at times, be structural. Billy talked about finding out what the client wanted or needed and connecting the person with resources that met the client's needs and interests. At times these needs fell outside of his narrow job scope; acting to assist clients in finding resources anyway in these situations was, for Billy, about a structural interpretation of his work. John described connecting a disabled client to a group (at a different organization) that was lobbying for better transportation for people with disabilities. In describing that referral or connection, John said: "In that sense we were at least able to lay the groundwork for somebody ... that we supported to engage in changing the community." John made this connection of a client to a resource for the purpose of encouraging social change; thus in his eyes it was a structural activity.

Other traditional activities with structural components included researching a topic, presenting information to decision-makers, and writing reports or case notes. Joe was clear that when he wrote case notes, reports and made recommendations about Aboriginal clients, he always included a discussion of structural issues of colonization, residential schools, institutional racism and how these may have affected the client. His recommendations to decision-makers (such as judges in the case of clients facing charges in court) indicated that

these issues of structural oppression should be taken into account as decisions are made about the client.

**Joe:** I think that by being a structural person there are a lot of things that I can draw in there [the report] like the poverty issues, maybe about residential school issues, there are a lot of issues that you can put forward that sometimes might have been left out.

Lilly incorporated a structural analysis whenever she wrote briefing notes or suggested recommendations for social policy changes. Lilly also identified social issues as a component of proposed by-laws; in some cases her colleagues had not recognized the by-laws as even having social components. The structural analysis as a key addition to these documents moved them from being a traditional social work activity to a structural one.

Participants often made decisions to incorporate structural activities into conventional social work tasks and traditional jobs in a variety of ways. In some cases they were expanding their job description to include activities outside of their normal range of work. At other times their activities fell within their job descriptions although the tasks were completed with structural goals and analyses in mind. These opportunities could have been missed had the participants not actively sought out ways in which to incorporate a structural perspective into their work.

### Opening doors and manipulating structures within the system

Participants identified a number of situations in which the existing structure or system was inadvertently set up in a way that opened doors to a structural approach. Usually there was no one in the organization announcing the open door for structural activities. Thus an important element of this process was that structural social workers actively looked for the openings, were able to recognize them, and then developed methods to utilize them in an effective manner.

One example involves the texts and documents shared by participants. The analysis of these texts showed that they were not typically overtly structural. The structural perspective was instead in the eye of the beholder: the participants. The new Community Charter was provincial legislation, which Lilly said did not mandate municipalities to engage in social planning but opened the door to their work in that area; Lilly's job description took this one step further. While the Charter and her job description opened doors to a structural approach, it was Lilly's interpretation of her job description in particular which gave her the credibility she needed to work from a structural perspective.

Billy and Joe also interpreted documents broadly so as to argue that they indicated support for their structural practice. For Billy it was his job description and program mandate, while for Joe it was a government document.

**Joe:** The Ministry of Children of Family Development that is involved right now in a transformation plan ... they want to shift practices in order to be more in alignment with First Nations endeavours and once again, I believe structural social work, our principles are totally in line to be that ally, to be those change agents for the new world way of doing social work.... They [MCFD] might not even know that they are doing it that way, that it is structural.

In both Joe and Billy's examples structural interpretation of the documents was likely unintended. Nevertheless, this interpretation gave them a position from which to contend that their structural analysis and activities were legitimate and fit with the organizational goals and objectives. When challenged, Joe pointed to this document and argued that he was working within the official mandate of the organization, which dissipated the challenge to his practice. The documents themselves were not structural; it was instead the active interpretation of the documents that allowed participants to push open a door to structural social work.



Billy talked about looking for windows of opportunity to connect with clients, going further out of his way to make these connections than a non-structural worker may have done. Joe described his written goal of providing “general counselling” for Aboriginal clients allowed him to talk about anything he felt was relevant to their situation, including structural issues such as poverty, colonization, racism and residential schools. Joe also presented structural issues in his reports on clients in a way that was empirical and based on research, which ensured that his reports were taken seriously by decision-makers.

Lilly was able to bring structural issues to a prominent place in city planning. One example of an unexpected opportunity for structural analysis was when the city faced a sudden increase in gang activity and violence and she was called in to offer an expert opinion. Although her supervisor, and the city, were reluctant to hear that the issue was complex and based on historic structural oppressions, which in turn meant that there was no quick solution, she was able to argue that an immediate short-term reaction needed to be combined with long-term work to address community and institutional racism in order to address the issue at its core. Lilly’s ability to offer a structural analysis quickly with little preparation allowed her to seize the moment in ensuring that structural perspectives were considered in planning.

Shanks described using the phrase “best interest of the client” to make carefully articulated requests of her supervisor for services for clients. Using these methods meant that her request was more likely to be supported. Although the word manipulation was not typically the language participants used to describe these efforts, Melissa did use the term to describe her efforts to access resources for clients. Eleanor talked about using her knowledge of how the system worked in a way that was to her client’s advantage.

**Eleanor:** One of the things about social work I love is ... I love finding out ways ... to work systems in ways that without me you might not know, because I have a knowledge of the system and I have a knowledge of how things work ... I think the things we try to do for our residents and our families is circumvent the system.

Participants' use of a structural approach meant that they were always watching for and seizing opportunities in which they could bring structural activities into their work.

Participants also looked for structural opportunities in their choice of work and decisions to make career changes. Ellen and Lilly both described leaving one position and moving to another because they felt they were better able to create structural social change in the new position.

**Lilly:** Having [the] structural prospective really requires you to, to challenge whether what you're doing is really solving a problem ... whether if it's actually making any kind of a difference.... It's the reason I got out of micro work, because it wasn't, I didn't feel like I could make a difference doing that work.... I was like, 'I will never change the world if I have to do it one person at a time!' ... I couldn't make enough change, I didn't feel like I could make enough change because I couldn't change the environment that they were in, I couldn't change their life circumstances very much.... And so for me, doing macro work and mezzo work, but particularly macro work, this is where the real change happens, this is where we actually have an opportunity to affect something.

Eleanor and Shanks felt that they could not leave their full time positions, but instead they both found part-time positions that allowed them more scope to push for social change.

Shanks took on a policy development position that allowed her to change policies related to her full time job. Eleanor took on a part-time position where she could educate others about structural contexts of social issues. Making a career change was a more overt way in which participants sought out opportunities to engage in structural practice.

### Taking a stand and challenging the system

In addition to finding ways in which to incorporate structural approaches in their work in legitimate ways, participants also occasionally actively challenged the systems they

worked within. These challenges were sometimes stronger than others, although in these examples the goal was to challenge the system while continuing to work within it.

Eleanor talked about pushing the boundaries at her work in several ways, including when she was told she could no longer contact social workers at another institution about client needs.

**Eleanor:** We definitely have a reputation, myself and the other social workers ... we have [a] reputation as being brats, like, we are ... you know, pushing the boundaries with what we should be doing or what we're not supposed to be doing. ... We were like 'screw you,' we're going to talk to the other ... social workers, we know the information they can give us and, and, we get in trouble for that. We will get reprimanded for doing things, you know, not talking to certain people or talking to certain people ... I think a lot of what I do is ... to try to bring it back to talking what our residents need and what our families need.

**Interviewer:** So you bring it back to client's needs [as] your way to try to push the boundaries of the system?

**Eleanor:** Yeah.

In order to address client needs Eleanor was willing to challenge the system to the point of being reprimanded at times for her decisions.

Shanks described requesting special permission to work with a client who, technically, fell just outside the age limit requirement of her organization. She was working with a family with three adolescents all of whom had potentially been sexually abused.

**Shanks:** The older girl was 19, which is not in our mandate so I had to get special permission to do the exam here and to interview her here so I did that. I got approval for that when my manager was away, thank god because probably she would have said no.

Had the rules been followed, the oldest sibling would have been sent away for assessment, likely to the RCMP for an interview, while Shanks and the organization would have provided more in-depth and specialized services to the younger two children. This would have been difficult for the family and problematic for the older sibling who had communication

problems. On this occasion, Shanks chose to challenge the organizational policies for the purpose of providing better services to a family. Billy also described an experience where his team made a decision about disengaging with a client that Billy felt did not take into consideration the structural issues facing the client. Billy, as with Shanks, requested special permission to continue to stay involved with the client. In these examples challenging the organization or system was about pushing to get special permission to do something out of the ordinary.

Shanks stepped outside her position on another occasion. She intervened on behalf of a child when an RCMP officer conducted a particularly problematic and oppressive interview of the child, using guilt and threats to pressure her into disclosing the name of her abuser. Shanks could not challenge the officer directly, so she contacted the child's aunt and the two of them talked with the child in a gentle and respectful manner behind the scenes to facilitate disclosure. This essentially challenged the officer's work, which is unheard of in child protection where the police carry a significant amount of power. Although Shanks' challenging of the system was not as up-front as Eleanor's, it was still a way of taking a stand against and addressing structural inequities or problems within the system.

Sophie and her fellow social workers challenged the use of the problematic MDS form, (described in the previous chapter as a barrier to structural practice), by creating their own assessment form to use with clients in addition to the MDS. Their form gave scope to address client strengths and identify the structural contexts that the MDS avoided. Creating this form was a safe way for Sophie to challenge her organization's avoidance of structural issues. An analysis of this form found that it actively challenged the limitations of the MDS form and gave social workers the opportunity to bring in a structural analysis.

When Lilly started her position as the first social planner for a municipality, she talked about being prepared “to defend the existence of the position.” Although she experienced considerable support she did have to take a stand against challenges on some topics.

**Lilly:** Secondary suites really fall into zoning by-laws and into building by-laws ... it is my responsibility to develop a secondary-suites policy, but I’ve had a lot of internal battles about whether that should be my responsibility or not.

Lilly knew that the secondary-suites policy offered one way to develop affordable housing for low-income people, yet it is typically perceived of as a building or zoning by-law issue rather than a social policy issue. Lilly had to both educate people on policy connections to social issues, as well as fight to have this connection acknowledged.

Joe gave an example of a decision made with a youth that was overturned by someone in another area of the organization. Joe believed that disregarding the youth’s perspective in decision-making about his future was an error, and so, in spite of potential repercussions, he challenged the system by contacting the youth advocate to get the decision overturned. This was a decision that was directly connected to Joe’s structural stance.

When Ellen was frustrated with systemic problems at work that prevented structural practice, she not only switched jobs, but also shared her concerns in writing with her supervisor.

**Ellen:** I’ve made some conscious decisions ... when I was at the [name of department] and I couldn’t stomach what was going on in, in that particular unit. So I wrote a letter with all the details about why I was requesting to go back to my previous position and that made a lot of people very angry and I was told it was a career-ending move. And I just remember saying to one person that said that to me that, ‘It depends what you wanna do with your career. I’d rather not have the promotion and, you know, stick with something that I feel is ethically right.’

Challenging the system while staying within it can be intimidating and difficult for many people. Yet several of the participants indicated that this was an important aspect of their

structural approach to practice. At times the challenges were direct and without permission, and some participants made decisions to challenge the system in spite of potential reprimands and repercussions. At other times challenging the system involved requesting special permission to engage in something normally outside of organizational policies.

### Being strategic and careful

In addition to challenging the system, participants also understood that there were times when a more strategic or cautious approach was more effective. It was not necessarily different participants who challenged the system versus the ones who were more strategic or cautious. Oftentimes those same participants talked about doing both, depending on the situation. Joe described situations in which he does not give any more information than the minimum about his theoretical approach to practice.

**Interviewer:** Are there ways in which your organization supports a structural approach that you use?

**Joe:** First of all, probably the agency does not even know what structural social work approach is.... No one has asked me, 'Are you, what they use to call a radical social worker from the '60s?' No, they hired me because I was a social worker, a registered social worker. Nobody asked me ... are you consensus or are you a conflict? I am a conflict social worker but if you tell people that they might not hire you because somehow that sounds radical.

Eleanor also talked about how a structural approach to practice is not necessarily one that a potential employer wants to hear in the job interview. She said that at the social work program she attended the standing joke was, "If you were going for a job interview, just tell everybody you use family systems when they said 'what's your theoretical approach?'"

John and Ellen also utilized the 'don't-ask, don't-tell approach' at times. John described being involved in a community group to address homelessness, which he felt his supervisor, who was not structural, would not see as related to his job. He had been involved

with the group since before the supervisor started with the organization and he decided that the safest approach was to continue with the group and just not talk about it with his supervisor. Although Ellen described her organization as one that was very open to a structural approach, she also stated that her supervisors were not particularly structural in their theoretical orientation. She also chose to simply not talk about all of her structural activities. Ellen: “Most of the time they [my bosses] don’t know exactly what I’m doing.... We’re ... very autonomous.”

A strategic approach to structural practice was not just about keeping one’s perspective or activities a secret. At other times it was about doing structural work, but in a way that did not necessarily offend others. Melissa described advocating for clients’ access to income assistance in a way that was more likely to be effective.

**Melissa:** Income assistance is an example again. The people who work down there, their hands are tied just as much as mine are. They have to go by that policy manual too, so me stomping my feet and yelling and screaming at those women down there is not going to help with anything. Instead I can teach them where the loopholes are in their own jobs, [so] that we can all be a little more flexible.

Lilly talked about educating colleagues on structural issues by “gently connecting the dots.” These were people she needed to work with on a regular basis and she needed them onside with her work, so opted for strategies that would educate but not alienate.

Eleanor was also a participant who had talked about pushing the boundaries in her work, yet she articulated that there were times that called for a more strategic approach.

**Eleanor:** You have to be careful; you have to be political. I have a friend that is very political and passionate as a social worker but she pisses people off because she can be incredibly strident, you know. I agree with what she is saying but the approach that she uses I think just turns people off. You have to find a way to be political but [in a way that] ... doesn’t offend people or bring them down.

Participants were more likely to openly challenge the system when they were seeking access to services for clients. They were more likely to describe strategic and careful efforts when

they were seeking to educate others on political or structural contexts, and where they are hopeful that they can help someone to see the situation differently for the long-term.

## Summary

In stage four, participants found ways to utilize structural approaches within the system, or to incorporate structural goals and methods into traditional social work activities or jobs that were not necessarily structural in and of themselves. At times participants engaged in these activities in ways that challenged the organization or policies, while at other times they gently sought to manipulate the system to request special permission for doing something outside of the norm. All of these activities, however, were about working within conventional social work systems and with traditional social work tools, albeit in new ways and with structural goals. See Table 14 for a summary of stage four.

<b>Table 14. Summary of Stage Four: Redefining Conventional Social Work to Include a Structural Approach</b>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) Incorporating structural methods and goals into traditional activities</li><li>b) Opening doors and manipulating structures within the system</li><li>c) Taking a stand and challenging the system</li><li>d) Being strategic and careful</li></ul> |
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## **Fifth stage: Structural activities inside the system and working outside the system**

In the fifth developmental stage, the focus is on activities that can be considered to be structural in and of themselves. At times these structural activities and tasks were ones that participants used within their social work positions. This was more likely to occur when participants were working in organizations that were open to a structural perspective, either deliberately supporting the perspective, or simply neutral, but with doors left open to the use



of the approach. At other times these were activities that the participants engaged in outside of their workplace, including activities in their personal lives. There are six sub-categories in stage five.

### Connecting individual issues to societal structures

In the theoretical space one of the important strengths of the structural perspective is the way in which the theory identifies connections between social issues and societal structures. Participants described the theory as a “lens” through which they viewed the world. This lens allowed them to see a “bigger picture” of social issues including the broader context, which in turn results in the linkages and connections between issues and structures to become visible. The insight into connections and linkages was not passively acquired. Instead, participants actively engaged with the theory and applied it to what they were encountering in the world. This allowed them to move from a position of recognizing oppression and privilege in their lives and the world around them (stage two) to a deeper level of analysis and active theoretical application in connecting social issues with structures, the personal with the political.

Several participants talked about constantly connecting the dots between micro, mezzo and macro levels. Joe could articulate the connections between an Aboriginal client’s current issues and the history of colonization and residential schools. Lilly linked municipal building policies with issues of affordable housing for people living with low incomes, stating that policy “had implications for the human side.” Shanks reviewed individual cases looking for similar issues across cases that could be best addressed by policy or other structural changes. Billy and Shanks talked about the importance of supporting and working with individuals while simultaneously seeking structural change. Billy said, “People’s

problems are also society's problems and if you treat only the person's problem then the problem's not gonna go away.... So you must simultaneously ... treat social problems."

Billy framed personal issues in the context of "historical, social, economic, and geographical factors that have played a role in that person's life." In her work Ellen identified the role of structures and government in the issues facing her youth clients. This level of analysis was no longer just about recognizing issues of oppression (stage two), but also being able to actively look for and analyze the connections and links between structures and personal issues.

Participants also made these links across their work and personal lives. Billy described barriers he faced at work regarding his structural practice and he talked about linking micro, mezzo and macro between work and personal activities. For example, he connected client issues with poverty and in his personal time joined an anti-poverty coalition. Annie made connections between research findings and her personal life experiences with oppression. This active analysis and linking of issues and structures was the first step in actively engaging in structural social work. The next step was articulating these connections and raising awareness with others.

### **Raising awareness or educating others about oppression**

Raising awareness about oppression is a key activity of structural social workers. It has also been referred to as consciousness-raising, although participants used this term only rarely. Most participants described it as raising awareness or educating others. While educating others is a traditional social work tool, the process of education as a consciousness-raising activity as described here is a specifically structural activity. There were two pieces

to this process, the first is naming the issue and the second is educating people about the structural context, although these two blur together at times.

The first step in raising awareness of structural issues is being able to recognize and name them, and this is reflected in stage two where participants learned how to see power and oppression both at work and in their personal lives. After recognition comes the need to name it as structural oppression, which can be difficult. In chapter five, Jamie described how her supervisor would not acknowledge the oppression that Jamie noted in the research data, yet, because she liked her supervisor, Jamie had a hard time naming this as a form of structural oppression. In talking about her own research with people facing discrimination, Annie described how she uncovered a reluctance by professionals to talk about the issues: “And no understanding, nobody wanting to, you know, even talk about it to a large extent; like a conspiracy of silence about it.”

Just because participants can recognize the effects of oppression does not mean that they can identify the oppression as a structural issue. If social issues are not named as structural oppression, then challenging and changing oppressive social structures can be difficult. Without identifying the structural context, there is the risk that oppressive experiences are left at the level of the individual: that one person made a mistake and that person should be corrected, rather than understanding that there is a larger structural context that needs to be challenged. The act of identifying and openly naming oppression, at individual, community and structural levels, is an overtly structural activity in itself. In writing up her research findings Annie identified the issues of oppression she found in her work, seeking to end the conspiracy of silence she identified.

Jamie did not stop talking about the findings of discrimination she saw in the research, even though her supervisor decided that experiences of discrimination were not a finding. However, near the end of the research project her supervisor stated that all of the research assistants could take the lead on writing an article of their choice out of the data analysis. Jamie decided she would write an article on the issues of discrimination found in the research findings.

Eleanor talked about using humour to point out discrimination in her workplace.

**Eleanor:** I remember we had this lady who lived there and her son ... did drugs and he was from the Downtown Eastside and he used to come in and see her. And one of the nurses ... said to me, 'Really I just don't like her family' ... and I said, 'Oh, are they not middle-class enough for you?!'

Using humour to identify classism made a point without alienating her from her colleague.

One of the unique texts analyzed in the research process is relevant to consciousness-raising activities; it is Sophie's Facebook page. Sophie faced numerous barriers to her use of structural social work in her workplace and so her contributions to the practitioner space were sparse. However, consciousness-raising around structural issues was important for Sophie and instead of engaging in it in the workplace she utilized the social media of Facebook to identify and challenge structural issues. An analysis of her Facebook page showed a variety of formats to identify and name structural oppression, such as cartoons, quotes and full-length articles by various authors such as Naomi Klein and others. Given the value of social media sites in recent revolutions (such as in Egypt in 2011), Sophie's use of Facebook to raise awareness of social issues seems particularly current and relevant. Melissa also described using her Facebook site in a similar manner, although her site was not analyzed for the research.

Other examples of identifying oppression have been mentioned previously in other contexts. In reports he wrote, Joe identified historic and structural issues of colonization, residential schools and racism that affected his clients' lives. Lilly identified the role of institutional racism in the spate of gang violence facing the community. In addition, Lilly raised structural connections to other policy issues in her reports to staff and city council.

Just identifying these issues publicly is the first step in raising awareness with others, although raising awareness consists of more than simply identifying the issue; it extends to explaining the contexts, debating perspectives and demonstrating linkages between issues and structures. This work is also creative as participants worked hard to learn and utilize various approaches so that they would actually be heard. Articulating these concepts could not happen until participants had first developed enough of an understanding of their own that they were then able to share the analysis with others. Lilly talks about this process being a difficult one:

**Lilly:** You could do a mathematical equation and come out with an answer at the end and you can't really debate the outcome, you know? That's the way it is and somebody wants to know how you got there, and here it is on paper. You can show them. Social issues are way more complex than that.... I feel like I struggle to articulate and understand and work through how to respond ... despite the fact that I've been doing it for 16 years.... Eventually you figure it out, right?

Eleanor echoed this statement and added that this work became easier with time and practice.

Consciousness-raising happened across people's lives, but participants often talked about engaging in it at work with supervisors and colleagues. Lilly said, "I spend a lot of my time ... trying to provide ... a social lens to the work of municipal government." In sharing structural perspectives with colleagues and practicum students Billy said, "I don't want to say educate, but I think just gently remind people." Eleanor stated, "there is an educational component to the work I do ... both ... formally and informal." She described

how understanding the historic and structural oppression her clients had faced in their lives was not only important to her practice, but she also shared this information with other staff in the organization so that they were better able to understand the issues facing clients, and thus be more effective in work with clients.

**Eleanor:** Many of our staff [are] not the same culture as our [clients] and I really try to bring in that piece in and let's talk about [it]. By talking about this person's history and the struggle they used to have and the things they lived through in life, so, I try to give—I think the structural approach gives me a bigger context to talk about problems and problem-solving.

Although Eleanor described working in a bureaucratic environment that was not particularly supportive of a structural approach, this was one of the ways in which she was still able to engage in structural activities within the context of her work.

Joe developed his own knowledge of Aboriginal issues in many contexts, and tried to share this information with colleagues in a variety of ways, such as by inviting them to pertinent conferences. As the executive director of a shelter, Melissa sought to educate and train staff on structural contexts for homelessness. John said that one way he raised awareness was to share clients' stories with others in the organization. Ellen was the participant who most actively used this method of raising awareness in her work as a child and youth advocate. On several occasions she negotiated for youth clients to meet with a manager in order for youth to describe their situation directly to the decision-maker. The choice of when to do this was made carefully, and each time she arranged for such a meeting, the person in charge reversed the decision in favour of the request being made by the youth. Ellen believed that these meetings were so powerful that they would influence the manager and their department to change the way they dealt with future similar decisions regarding other clients. Lilly's experiences suggest that patience and strategic sharing of information paid off when colleagues began coming to her for advice on structural issues.

Consciousness-raising also happened with clients. John talked about discussing structural issues with clients and educating them on the political system. Victoria described her group work with youth, part of which involved assisting them to understand the effects of racism, colonization and sexism in their own lives. Ellen described educating clients on their rights, on services that were available to them, on the ways in which structures could affect their situations, and how she could assist them. She found that non-structural professionals often did not share the same detailed information with clients. When clients faced barriers, Ellen also talked with them about structural contexts for those barriers and ways in which she could support them in challenging the system.

Educating others on structural issues also took place in public venues. Ellen was invited into organizations to explain the work and services of the advocate's office, including the ways in which she and her colleagues supported children and youth in challenging the system. Lilly held public information sessions on new municipal policies, to inform people about how the changes could benefit them. The committee that John attended shared information at a community level on structural connections to homelessness and potential solutions. Melissa often gave public presentations on homelessness that included informing people about structural connections.

Consciousness-raising was also a tool that carried over to participants' personal lives, as well as being well used in work contexts. Melissa described it best when she said: "I think you are always having to educate ... whether that is sitting around drinking beer [at] a campfire when camping, or whether that is putting on a presentation for your community." Annie described having conversations with her father and husband on structural connections to individual issues. Billy described trying, maybe too hard, to explain the concepts of

oppression and privilege to his family members and friends. Melissa talked about the need to be strategic in challenging family and friends on issues of oppression.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like many times what you're doing when you're ... educating people is that you're not only calling them on some of their stuff, but you're also ... not just saying here is the answer on the platter.... You're leaving them with stuff to think about and then you walk away.

**Melissa:** Yep, that is what I like to do in a way, because if you sit there and try to keep arguing your point, people will not hear you anymore. If you give people those little tidbits to chew on, I found that ... it goes a lot further.

Thus, the need to be strategic was also relevant to consciousness-raising for participants.

Consciousness-raising or education was the most common structural activity participants described, and it was a necessary precursor to the goal of social change. Before change could happen, social issues needed to be identified and understood in the context of structures, other people needed to be on board with the analysis, and a vision of what change looked like and what it could achieve needed to become shared goals. Consciousness-raising was a key activity in this process and participants were both strategic and creative in how they accomplished this.

### Building and participating in community

Collectivization, or working to build communities of people, is often described as a vital component of structural and critical approaches. These groups can have several purposes, such as consciousness-raising or working together for social change. Several of the participants described their efforts to build or participate in communities; this activity also occurred in both workplaces and people's personal lives.

John's interest in the community committee to address homelessness was his somewhat limited foray into community building. Lilly described her community role as being a facilitator of inter-agency collaboration. She brought social service and related



organizations together to talk about social issues affecting all of them, and ways in which they could work together to develop solutions. This was another place where Lilly talked about connections and linkages. Connecting social issues to structural contexts was related to connecting issues and organizations to each other in order to form a large enough group to be able to address issues at a structural level. Billy also expressed the importance of these communities of like-minded people.

**Billy:** I've recently started a group of ... social workers who want to be activists in their lives.... We've been meeting on a monthly basis to hash out ways that we can ... integrate activism into our jobs and if we can't, what can we do at a larger level. Is there certain policy work that we can be doing to jointly, draft a letter to the [government] or something like that, you know? We're still trying to figure out what we wanna do, but it's that kind of thing that keeps you going.

In this example, Billy described bringing professionals in similar fields of work together as a way to support each other and to address structural issues. Joe talked about collectivization in the form of unions, which he actively participated in both as a social work and before his university education as a labourer.

Developing and participating in community also occurred in people's personal lives. Billy, in particular, was very active in his neighbourhood as a form of community, and this was important to him as a way of living his structural social work perspective in all aspects of his life.

**Billy:** I really wanna have next door neighbours who are my friends so I don't have to hop on a bus to visit my friends on the other side of town, you know? Like I really want, I want a forged community because I think that community building is important.

This was the first step for Billy in challenging structures in and with his community of friends and neighbours. Melissa described coming together with other women through the local women's organization and with others concerned about homelessness. Joe talked about his volunteer time with anti-poverty coalitions, a local Amnesty International chapter and

nuclear disarmament groups. Community building occurred not just with like-minded others, but also with people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. In this context developing community was often connected to awareness-raising. While only a few participants identified community building, nevertheless it was a specifically structural activity that was a valuable tool in their structural practice.

### **Understanding and challenging the oppressive effects of ideology, capitalism, racism, sexism and other structures**

Understanding and challenging social, economic and political ideologies, as well as structures of inequality within capitalism, racism, sexism and others, are important components of structural theory. Many participants discussed these concepts in various ways, most often in the context of education and consciousness-raising. Not all participants had examples of actively challenging these concepts, and these actions were difficult for some to describe. Challenging the effects of ideology and capitalism were particularly difficult, although several participants did articulate the relevance of these to their structural perspectives and practice.

Challenges to racism, colonization and sexism are more easily seen in the previous sections in this stage. Melissa participated with the local women's organization in Take Back the Night marches. Joe challenged racism and colonization in his work with Aboriginal clients and in writing his reports for consideration by the courts in sentencing. Many participants challenged their communities or colleagues on their blind acceptance of oppressive ideas or actions and these challenges were described as educating others. Ideology and capitalism were more difficult for participants to identify and challenge.

Participants had an easier time linking political ideology to their structural analyses, than they did describing links to capitalism, although they were aware of the relationship

between ideology and market approaches. Debbie, Joe, Melissa, Billy and Lilly, among others, linked a structural perspective to a left wing or socialist ideology. Debbie, Joe and Sophie all identified ways in which the neo-liberal ideology of current governments resulted in decisions that were damaging for families or individuals and which caused or exacerbated problematic social issues. Debbie described neo-liberal funding cuts to her organization that resulted in reduced services to clients, preventing them from accessing sources of support. Joe described the differences in outcomes and thinking between neo-liberal and structural or socialist perspectives.

**Joe:** As you know social work has always been a political football ... and now we are at the neo-liberalism ideologies of downsizing, contracting out, [and] devaluing structures like the [social work associations] or unions.... It is very political and once again when you work for the government, most people are cautious with what they say about policies that are happening and many people will quietly not say anything.... And you'll see someone like me who is a structural social worker who probably has a socialist way of thinking.... People ... think that I am trying to, you know, trash the system but as a true structural social worker, as you know we look at structures of society as causing the inequality, things that are happening the marginalizing of citizens as opposed to ... blaming the people for their problems.

Yet Joe also admitted that ideological perspectives were not always that clear-cut. He identified the ideological inconsistencies when commenting that the Harper Conservatives were the ones to offer an apology to Aboriginal people in Canada, while noting that this was the same government that cut funding to Aboriginal initiatives.

Ellen commented on how capitalism's unequal distribution of wealth was counter to structural social work, while admitting that challenging capitalism was difficult.

**Ellen:** We're a market-driven society, right?.... What they believe is that ... the people who work the hardest are going to get further ahead right, so. And it doesn't fit, ... like delivering social services doesn't fit well in a capitalistic society because we don't generate wealth, right.... And [capitalism] definitely is probably something we should be speaking out on more often, but probably for most of us in our day-to-day work, ... we probably just don't pay enough attention to it.

Billy commented on the funding ties between neo-liberal governments and organizations and how these ties often created barriers to doing structural work in these organizations. He also connected the structure of capitalism to an understanding of social issues. He talked about using this knowledge to inform his understanding of the structural contexts for the people with whom he worked.

**Billy:** In my own life I'm very much critical of capitalism and corporat[ions] and I think that plays a bigger role in people's lives [than] we're willing to recognize as a society. So how that kind of plays into my job—it's, it's kind of it's subtle in some ways because I don't necessarily bring it up with people when I'm talking with them. But ... it's just there to remind me that people are often victims of their social environment.

Billy and Joe both connected their volunteer time with anti-poverty coalitions to issues with, and a challenge of, capitalist structures. Participants understood that political ideologies and market economies were structures that were relevant and connected to social issues that they saw facing clients, family members and themselves. Although many participants struggled with how to challenge these structures in a meaningful way, they still attempted this work by voting, supporting left-wing political parties, and engaging in consciousness-raising efforts with others.

### Bringing a structural perspective into one's personal life

Participants were clear that a structural perspective was not just about their social work practice, it was also about their way of life. Many of the stories in the sections above are examples of the ways in which structural activities are prominent in people's personal lives. Participants had other examples of these, too. Ellen talked about being active in supporting her political party, writing letters to the government, voting in elections and raising her kids to be aware of structural connections and issues. Eleanor's choice of school for her daughter deliberately avoided the one in the wealthier neighbourhood touted as being

of a higher quality than schools in middle and lower income neighbourhoods. Lilly described her structural orientation as causing her to think seriously about potential structural issues in adopting a child.

**Interviewer:** Has the structural perspective approach changed you? Who you are or your life?

**Lilly:** I think it has. I think that it's affected some of the choices in my life. Probably one of the most explicit ones for me is, in terms of thinking about adopting kids and making choices in the adoption process.... If we were gonna have a multi-racial family, we wanted to do it in a way that it didn't add to a history of oppression. So we chose a country where there wasn't a history of white oppression.... Within BC ... primarily it's First Nations kids that need adopting in this area. And I really felt like I could not, in good conscience, attempt to raise an Aboriginal child because I would be contributing to that history, ... I would be contributing to that culture of oppression and domination and cultural kind of genocide.... So that's a way where it's profoundly affected my choices.

Billy identified a number of other ways in which he sought to address structural issues at a personal level.

**Billy:** Our job isn't only to help individuals develop their own strengths but to also challenge things in a larger level.... That's what I ... do in my personal life. I think I save a lot of the structural stuff for outside of work.... I'll be a part of antipoverty coalition and I'll go to protests and I'll write to my MLA and things like that. Stuff that isn't really part of my job at work. But I don't think I can only do my paid job without doing the other things 'cause I think the two complement one another.

**Interviewer:** So that's where ... you cross over between micro, mezzo and macro.... That's a community level piece you're doing in your personal life and the macro.... The micro piece is happening in your work life?

**Billy:** That's right.

In seeking to actively link the personal with the political, and to address structural issues, participants often talked about ways in which they addressed issues across micro, mezzo and macro levels, as Billy described here. For many of the participants a structural perspective was not just about doing social work, but it was also about constantly examining issues of power, oppression and privilege across the levels and throughout their own lives, and then

acting on those. Participants looked for ways in which to mitigate structural oppression wherever possible, personally as well as professionally. While a structural perspective in many ways becomes a way of life, participants reflected back to stage two when they talked about the need to balance all of these activities with self-care in order to avoid burnout and exhaustion.

### Working toward social change

Structural social work, and thus, all of the structural activities described in stage five, have social change as a goal. The ability to achieve this goal was problematic at times, more for some participants than others. Participants facing significant barriers to their structural practice were less likely to have examples of how they were working toward social change, although all of the participants understood that this was an important aspect of a structural perspective.

Joe talked about the ways in which anti-oppressive practice with Aboriginal communities and individuals could begin to ameliorate the structural and historic racism faced by First Nations peoples. Ellen identified her advocacy work with children and youth as having the potential to change the ways the system operated.

**Ellen:** The structural prospective is all about linking ... the larger system to, to the individual, how it affects individuals and having what happens to individuals impact work that we do to try to change systems. So, I think in this job, ... it's the place that I've worked that we're most easily able to do it [change the system].

Annie identified her research work as having the potential to identify not only issues of discrimination but also directions in which social change should move: "You need to know what you're working for or towards so I think doing the research study has helped get that clarity." In connecting organizations and groups across the city, Lilly anticipates that bringing groups together will allow for community-based solutions to social issues. In her

work of developing and recommending social policies, Lilly also saw policy decisions have concrete and positive effects on vulnerable populations in the community, which she identified as social change.

Social change is also directly linked to the structural activity of consciousness-raising. By raising awareness at work and with colleagues, participants were actively seeking to change the way those individuals viewed their work, but also to change the way the organization as a whole functioned. Lilly described her work as seeking to “expand the thinking” of the organization.

**Lilly:** I don’t make a lot of decisions. What I can do is influence decisions. What I can do is get people to think about, this is the awareness-raising part, to think about the implications of the decisions that they are making from the, kind of a broader perspective, from a higher level, from a 10,000-foot level.

Her attempts to raise awareness had the goal of influencing decisions that were being made, which had the potential to affect social issues by changing municipal policies and structures. Working toward social change also took place in participants’ personal lives. Billy believes that creating community was an element of working toward social change, and that this can occur in unusual and creative ways.

**Billy:** Like me, lately it’s been about gardening with my neighbours.... That’s social work.

**Interviewer:** Tell me more about gardening with your neighbours and how that is social work for you.

**Billy:** Well because it’s, it’s doing a few things at once. It’s, it’s building relationship ties with people.... That’s my goal is for us ... to connect over food but also ... to address some of the social inequalities. But I also think that in a whole other way, food security is a, is a goal that we’re working on as well, right? Like we’re recognizing that buying food at Safeway is not really contributing to social change, it’s, it’s making corporations richer and it’s making industrial agriculture more of a norm and we’re not changing anything but if we, if we try and build our own food systems, then we are, we really are extending it out to corporate power.

Billy described gardening as not only about building community, but the process also addressed social inequities and issues of food security as well as counteracting capitalism and corporate control over food systems. Community gardening was, for Billy, all about social change. Lilly agreed with the focus on food as a way to challenge corporate control of agriculture as well as build community. She described supporting the development of a community garden through her position with the municipality. Lilly also talked about participating in a food co-op which purchased bulk and local food as a way to bypass corporate control of food, much like Billy's reasons for participating in the community garden.

Many of these steps toward social change were small steps, or took place over time and at a slower pace. This in no way detracts from the importance of these social change activities, but occasionally participants also identified social change in larger increments. Melissa was an executive director with a structural approach and she worked with a supportive board of directors. Combined with the autonomy she had in her work, this meant that Melissa made significant social changes at an organizational level with repercussions at a provincial level. Melissa's organization was developed to provide shelter and food to homeless or transitioning clients and assist them with becoming self-sufficient. Melissa described how what they actually provided was much more than that.

**Melissa:** I see really what our funders expected of us was simply to provide people somewhere to sleep and to give them some food and if they said they needed help with something, point them to a direction for them to go and get it. And that wasn't what I created there. What I created was a home for people. And so by bringing services onsite to support them, actually having the support part, the food and the shelter was just 10% of what they actually got when they come to our building. So, you know what they actually got was people who cared about them.... Having services there, putting in a garden they can work on, you know, encouraging them if they liked different things on how to go do that and having crafts for them, having



movies, you know, and having—I think really creating a family was I think what we created, which was not remotely a part of what our contract was.

This organization made a decision to not only address the basic needs of clients, but also to recognize that people needed more than just shelter. Melissa describes creating an organization that provided a sense of home and family to clients who are homeless and who may not have any connections to family. In many ways this was about building community at an organizational level and it included both staff and clients in that community.

Melissa talked about making a deliberate choice around the use of language in the organization. According to the funding body, all shelters are responsible to meet with clients on a regular basis for what is normally called case planning. Melissa made a decision early on in her work to not use the term case planning but rather to call it a ‘support meeting’.

**Interviewer:** And by changing the language, how did that make a difference in the lives of the guests?

**Melissa:** Well I think for them, I think that was part [of] creating a home, we’re here to support you; we’re here to help you out.

One of the results of shifting language was to challenge traditional power structures and shift the way in which staff and clients interacted. In case planning, a staff person had expertise and power over clients, while using the term support meeting instead downplayed power differences. Staff and clients met on more of a partnership level where clients identified their own strengths and needs and staff members were there to assist them in achieving their goals.

Another shift in language that Melissa created was calling people who stayed at the shelter ‘guests’ instead of clients. As with the use of the term support meetings, this change in language also sought to actively shift traditional power and hierarchies in a way that built community and challenged oppression every time the word was used. Melissa was once cautioned on this language by a professional from another organization. He said to her that

losing power over clients could result in organizational problems if clients did not know their place. This exemplifies how power is ingrained, expected and comfortable for most professionals, and interacting with clients without this power over can be unknown terrain where people are not sure how to do their jobs. Melissa laughed when she talked about this experience, and stated that this new way of working that challenged power differences did not result in chaos in the agency, but reflected respectful ways of working that were effective for guests.

**Melissa:** That was something interesting too that I never had thought about until a guest, ... I heard them telling someone new ... 'Yeah, they want to come and sit down to talk to you every day to see how you are doing.' ... The guest told me that made them think we cared about them.... I was actually kind of worried that, that [the meetings] might feel intrusive, but them telling me that, ... that meant we cared about you [the guest].

Clients' experiences with language that sought to reduce power imbalances were positive.

Melissa also utilized a structural perspective in how she developed forms, policies and worked with staff. For example, instead of accruing sick days, the organization's policies talk about 'wellness' days. Staff members were able to take a wellness day for a variety of reasons, including if they were sick but also when they were well and just wanted a day off; Melissa saw this as a way to support staff in maintaining a healthy balance of work and life.

Melissa created two forms for the organization to be used with clients. While the analysis of the forms indicated a mix of structural and non-structural items, there was potential for staff to use them in a structural way. When challenges or barriers to finding shelter were identified, the form indicated that the client had an equal say in identifying these. Supports and strengths were also identified. There was also room for narrative information, which other participants said was important for writing about structural contexts for client issues. The page for action items included actions that both the client and the staff

member would engage in to assist the client in meeting her or his goals, rather than putting the entire onus on the client. These openings for a structural approach may have been small, but added to the many other structural components of the organization meant that the organizational change was significant; the entire organization was structural.

Melissa's efforts to create structural change at an organizational level in all areas of the organization were noticed by her funders. Although they perhaps did not understand Melissa's structural theoretical approach, funders saw that the organization she created was effective and unique in its approach to clients and organizational methods. They often asked Melissa to present on the organization at provincial conferences and meetings with other shelters, with the goal of shifting the way other shelters worked as well. In this example, social change at the organizational level was significant and had the potential to spread to other organizations, throughout the community and even across the province.

Many participants were able to identify ways in which they were working toward social change, as well as ways in which they felt they had already contributed to change. Believing in the importance of and the ability to create change, Billy said, "It feels really good knowing that all is not lost." Sometimes those changes were small, but always they came about by actively engaging in structural activities.

**Billy:** It's ... actively rather than passively resisting oppression, and creating alternatives rather than only being a resister because that can burn you out. I think making, just making little small changes in your community.

Participants indicated that there are times to resist neo-liberal or other non-structural societal and organizational directions, but that structural social work was about more than resisting; it was also about actively creating the world in which they want to live.

## Summary

In stage five, participants utilized explicitly structural tools and activities both within and outside of their workplaces. Sometimes the activities were actively supported by the organizations where participants worked, although much of the time the organization was simply neutral, leaving doors open to the approach. Participants also engaged in structural activities outside of their workplaces, including in their personal lives. See Table 15 for a summary of stage five.

**Table 15. Summary of Stage Five: Structural Activities Inside the System and Working Outside the System**

- a) Connecting individual issues to societal structures
- b) Raising awareness or educating others about oppression
- c) Building and participating in community
- d) Understanding and challenging the effects of political ideology, capitalism, racism, colonialism, patriarchy and other structures
- e) Bringing a structural perspective into one's personal life
- f) Working toward social change

## Sixth stage: Adapting and developing structural theory for practice

A few of the participants who were actively engaged across the first five stages of structural practice also described grappling and engaging with the structural perspective itself. These participants not only applied a structural perspective to their practice but they used their practice experience to address the gaps they saw in the theory. The two main issues participants identified with structural social work theory in the previous chapter, were the underestimation of the individual in deference to the structural, and a lack of specific practice tools on how to actually do structural practice. Participants' responses to these gaps form the basis for the two sub-categories in stage six.

## Developing structural social work tools and activities

Jamie described the lack of structural practice tools or activities as a “disconnect between theory and practice.” Melissa described being frustrated with the lack of what she described as a “tangibles toolkit” of concrete activities or tools that she could use in her practice. Both of these participants, and others, talked about getting into the field with their social work degrees and just trying things out, by trial and error, as they worked to identify practice activities that were compatible with a structural approach. At the end of the interview, Melissa said she was hopeful that the research would identify structural activities that could be useful to future students, so that they would finish school and begin social work practice with a clearer understanding of concrete structural activities to utilize in their practice. The many examples in this chapter suggest that most of the participants had found or developed at least a few activities that they could identify as structural practice tools. The depth and complexity of this chapter suggests that these participants were adept at developing concrete ways in which to incorporate structural theory into practice, despite feeling that they had little guidance or preparation to do so.

## Balancing the individual and the structural

Although structural theory, and critical theory as a predecessor, includes an understanding of the dialectic between individual and structural, most of the participants felt that the structural approach underestimated the place and role of the individual. Finding a way to integrate the individual and structural occurred in a variety of ways for participants.

Many of the participants talked about recognizing that there was a place for both structural and individual responses to issues. In describing the community issue of escalating gang violence, Lilly identified how historic racism in the community was a contributing

structural factor that needed to be addressed, and that this was balanced by a simultaneous need for an immediate response by police or others to reduce violence and protect people. Annie talked about how social workers need to acknowledge and work with both structural and individual factors in their work with clients, and in her research she was trying to integrate and balance both of these perspectives in her questions and analysis. In her work with victims of sexual abuse, Shanks described how she worked to ensure support and treatment services for these children so they could heal from their experiences: “I can’t ignore an individual approach in favour of a structural approach.” Supporting and working with individuals and families needs to occur concurrently with efforts to challenge patriarchy, violence, poverty and racism, according to Shanks. Many participants made efforts to work across micro, mezzo and macro levels. Ellen acknowledged that this may not always be possible for everyone, but that at a societal level it was important that there were social workers in all micro, mezzo and macro fields, and that social workers needed to ensure connections between workers to bridge these levels.

Billy talked about how, in his experience, people often tended to lean either toward a structural explanation for social issues, or toward an individual explanation. He described talking with others about the ways in which both structural and individual contexts were important. Billy also talked about how looking only at structures to the exclusion of the individual actually took power away from people: “Life is not black and white you know it’s not like everything is socially determined ... and you have no free will.” Billy felt that a lack of understanding of the power held by individuals could lead to a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness around addressing structural issues.

In addition to supporting clients while challenging structures, several participants mentioned that they worked with clients to initiate personal change, and that this was also a way of balancing structural and individual work. Joe worked with Aboriginal youth facing legal issues and many of his clients had convictions related to being violent. Joe described balancing an understanding of structural factors of colonization and racism with the need to assist clients in finding strategies they could use in their personal lives instead of violence. In her role as an advocate for children and youth, Ellen suggested that at times she knew that the youth were not going to get what they had requested for legitimate reasons, such as safety concerns. While her job was to continue to encourage youth to speak out, she also tried to assist them in understanding the reasons why their requests may not be granted.

Individual level work was not just about addressing clients' weaknesses. Billy and Joe both described assisting people to recognize and develop their strengths. Joe talked about looking for clients' protective factors, which may have included family support or connections to their culture.

It is important to note that all of these activities working with clients at the individual level always occurred in the context of understanding and addressing structural contexts as well. For participants, these two levels were interconnected, and it was the balance between them that was important. In addition, participants did not expect clients to be the only ones in need of personal growth and development. As structural social workers they had been working on their own personal growth as described in part in stage two. Participants were also prepared to learn from their mistakes with clients and sought to continually improve how they worked with others. Part of their approach to practice was to incorporate structural analyses and practices with individual work, and with expectations of personal development.

In seeking this balance participants sought to address what they saw as the underestimation of the individual within a structural perspective. In no way, however, did their attempts to balance this work undermine or downplay structural analyses and practices. Instead, this balancing of structures and individuals reflects an understanding of the agency-structure dialectic that is a crucial component of structural social work.

Participants did not allow their concerns about possible gaps in a structural approach detract from their efforts to engage in structural social work practice. Although they were able to critique the perspective, they did not do so passively. As with other stages in the practitioner space, participants actively grappled with their concerns around structural theory and worked hard to develop ways to address the challenges and continue with their work. Not all of the participants were active in this stage, however. My analysis suggests that 7 of the participants were at stage six, 2 were engaging with stage five activities, 4 were primarily at stage four and 1 was at stage two. The stages built on the ones before in a developmental fashion. The participants were not all at the same level of development in their structural practice, and so not all of them were actively seeking to adapt and develop their structural approach. Some were instead still focused on learning or developing ways to apply it to practice. See Table 16 for a summary of the sixth stage.

<b>Table 16. Summary of Stage Six: Adapting and Developing Structural Theory for Practice</b>
a) Developing structural social work tools and activities b) Balancing the individual and structural



## **Findings that Span the Developmental Stages**

The stages of structural theory-practice integration are separate from but inextricably linked to the categories of chapter five. It is the activities of the participants in this chapter that bring the theoretical framework of theory-practice integration to life, exposing the processes involved in integrating structural theory with practice. The categories in the previous chapter are comprised of barriers and supports to integrating structural theory into practice, but it is this chapter that demonstrates how participants actively use the supports, resist the barriers, and manipulate contexts in order to incorporate structural theory into practice. There are two findings from the data analysis that are relevant to the practitioner space as a whole.

### **Movement across developmental stages**

The analysis indicated that there was a developmental progression to the stages found in the practitioner space. The stages were intertwined, and participants were typically active in two or more and sometimes all the stages, at one time, but there was an order to the stages. The analysis of the data indicated that the stages built on each other, and that the earlier stages were usually necessary for the participants to be able to become active in an effective way in the later stages.

The stages were also additive. Once participants had achieved some degree of understanding or effectiveness at one stage, they then typically also began exploring or operating within the next stage. The earlier stages provided a foundation upon which the following stages were built. Missing a stage appeared to create a gap in participant knowledge that likely made understanding and engaging in later stages more problematic. For example, John talked about his frustration of wanting to do more structural social work in

his practice, but was unsure of what that meant. My analysis placed him at stage two, where he was still engaged in learning to see the effects of oppression. He had not yet developed alliances, the work of stage three, in any depth. This, in addition to the barriers he faced, may have been one of the reasons he was unable to engage in structural activities, which occurs in stages four and five.

A component of stages being additive is that the earlier stages were never finished or exited. Participants continued to engage with each stage regardless of the level to which they had progressed, and their depth of understanding at each stage continued to deepen over time. For example, Lilly was one of the participants with a strong structural practice and she was clearly at stage six. Yet she also gave one of the most profound examples, in the section on stage two, of her struggle with understanding the effects of oppression and the interactions between her personal life and her work. She was still grappling with these stage two concepts, albeit at a much deeper and more developed level than many of the other participants. Other participants at stage six also described activities from previous stages that were still evolving and deepening.

Follow-up interviews also demonstrated support for the additive nature of the stages. When the findings were discussed with participants, those further along the stages were very clear that the stages were developmental, additive and happened in order. These participants also insisted in the follow-up interviews that stages were never exited, but rather that work at each stage continued and deepened. They described it in different ways with some suggesting that there was a constant back-and-forth movement, while others suggested it was like a spiral where they cycled through all the stages over and over, gaining depth each time. Going back through earlier stages was for the purpose of improving their knowledge,

analysis, skills or theory-practice integration at earlier stages. It was as if the depth of development of the earlier stages limited the participants' depth or level of growth at latter stages. Going back to deepen their work at previous stages allowed them to move forward in deepening their work at the next stages.

While all of the participants were utilizing a structural perspective in their work, not all of them were engaging in structural practice in the same way or to the same extent. The reasons for this were a combination of structural and individual. First of all, the participants were at different places in their lives and work. Some had been practicing from a structural perspective for many years. Their extensive experience meant they had had more opportunity for figuring out how to incorporate theory into practice. These participants were more likely to be actively engaged in most if not all of the stages and they were more likely to have a deeper sense of understanding of each stage. Second, participants also experienced varying degrees of barriers and supports in the categories in chapter five. The more barriers and fewer supports that someone experienced, the less likely the person was to be at an advanced developmental stage in the practitioner space. When a person had less experience and time in social work practice and was experiencing numerous barriers across a number of the external spaces, this person was even more likely to be at an earlier stage of development.

### **History and time**

The participants' use of structural theory in practice, while appearing to be standing still at the moment in time at the time of the interview, was actually in motion. While some participants described how their use of structural theory in practice changed over time, the follow-up interviews also sometimes showed this change, as some participants were at a different stage by that time. Their use of theory in practice changed over time, and the

external spaces also changed over time; this movement across time is connected to the movement of participants across stages. Shanks discussed how her first supervisor had been open to a structural perspective, but that her second supervisor was not so open. The shift from one supervisor to the next meant that over time Shanks experienced an increase in barriers to her use of structural theory in practice. External spaces can also shift in the other direction as coworkers, friends or others become more open to a structural perspective. Lilly described how, in her move from one job to another, she shifted from micro-focused work to more macro- and mezzo-level work. Within her current job she often shifts between more- or-less macro and mezzo over time.

The changes discussed the most by participants were the changes in themselves. Almost all the participants described their process of learning about and utilizing structural social work as a gradual process that took place over time. Shanks described learning more about structures over time. She also began her work in a very micro context. As she worked, she realized more and more the connections between micro and macro. As this understanding developed, she began to seek out ways in which to address macro issues that would improve situations for clients. Lilly also explained how her understanding of the linkages between individual issues and structures improved with practice and time. John talked about spending time at work watching and learning, suggesting that, in combination with his limited work experience and only recent completion of his BSW, that he was still spending most of his time at stage two and still learning to see and recognize structures. Interestingly, he was also able to describe that his understanding of a structural perspective had developed and improved over his 3 years post-BSW. As John, who was raised in a

conservative and fundamentalist religious context, learned about the structural approach, he also changed as a person, as did some of his values and beliefs.

As participants' understanding of structural analyses developed, so did their ability to utilize this perspective in their social work practice; over time it became more natural and implicit. Billy's use of a structural approach became less conscious and deliberate over time and more natural: "I think that, as time goes by, things become more unconscious and habitual." Melissa described how her structural analysis took time to develop, but that, as it developed, she was able to respond to structural issues more quickly: "As I was in my work longer I, you know, became more self-confident to just act on those [structural analyses] instead of questioning where it was coming from or what was I thinking." She also described how initially it was difficult explaining her structural perspective to others and how she would have conversations about it in her head, but not necessarily be able to articulate her thoughts. Over time she developed her analysis and her ability to articulate her analyses. In addition, she used her accrued experiences with clients as useful examples to explain a structural perspective to others. Melissa talked about needing to work at articulating her thoughts and that, slowly, over time, it became easier for her to do.

Eleanor also talked about being able to articulate structural analyses better over time and with practice.

**Eleanor:** I would say I am ... more confident about talking about power and oppression and position and race and gender and class and all those things I said before. I am more confident about—I think I was more reluctant or scared to talk about it before. I think I was scared to be too political or to be too annoyingly 'social worker' [laughter]. And now I feel I am more confident about it, I don't care.

**Interviewer:** What is that about for you?

**Eleanor:** I have been practicing social work for 15 years and I am confident, you know, I feel that everything makes sense.

Eleanor was not only more confident in her ability to articulate her thoughts, she was also less likely to worry about sounding political later in her practice. Ellen agreed that her use of a structural perspective became easier and more effective over time. She also developed an understanding of how effective it could be to be less blunt and more strategic in her approach.

**Ellen:** I've always tried ... to state things the way I see them. I think maybe one thing that's changed though as I've gotten older is I've gotten smarter about how I do it. I think when I was a brand new case worker I could get away with a lot of stuff just by feigning ignorance ... [laughs].... I think ... when you're brand new you can get away with some gaffes, because, 'Oh, I don't know any better.' But once you're already told, well it's not appropriate to do a certain thing, then you have to find other ways of doing it.

As Ellen became better at articulating her thoughts on structural analyses, she also had more patience and less frustration in sharing her analyses with others.

**Ellen:** I'm just, ... over a couple of decades, just developing more skill in trying to influence people to see things from a different perspective. And probably that's more having to do with ... I'm more mindful now of who my audience is and what they're more likely to hear.... When I was a new practitioner, if people didn't see things my way, I would just, you know, get really frustrated and maybe not be very articulate. And maybe write them off [laughs] as, you know, not worth talking to about this anymore. But I think maybe now I'm more willing to listen to what other people have to say and then gearing my comments accordingly.

All of these pieces worked together over time. Structural analysis became more natural, being able to articulate one's analysis came easier, there was increased understanding about how to engage others in education on structural issues, and participants improved their skills in pushing within the system. All of these developments meant that participants were using a structural perspective more easily and more effectively over time. Thus, all of the spaces are flexible and contain movement through time. As things change, doors can either open or close to a structural approach and the participants' ability to watch for new opportunities also becomes a structural skill in integrating theory into practice.

## Conclusion

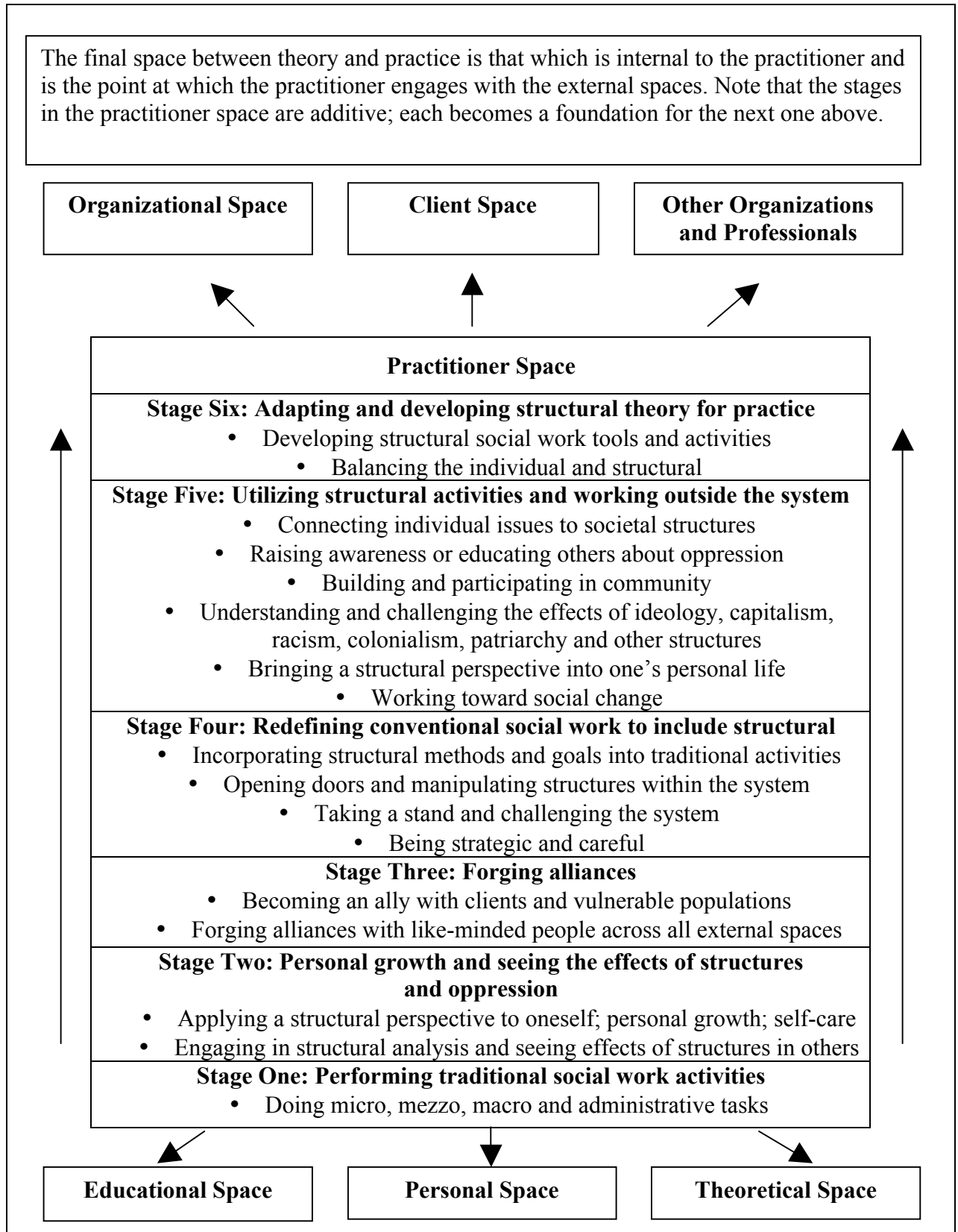
The practitioner space is where participants actively engaged with factors in the other, external, spaces in the theoretical framework of practice-theory integration. The chapter identifies how participants actively used a structural approach in their work and identifies developmental stages of structural practice (see Figure 12 for a visual summary of the stages in structural practice). Participants were at varying stages depending on the barriers and supports they were encountering to their use of a structural approach, and depending on their skill and knowledge development over time.

It is important to note that participants also described their use of a structural approach as difficult much of the time. They sometimes faced backlash or reprimands from colleagues or supervisors who did not understand or support structural practice. Even without resistance to their work, making the connections, understanding the structures and developing ways to challenge the status quo was time-consuming and difficult. Melissa described structural work as “exhausting” and Lilly said, “It’s really hard work.” Ellen said doing structural social work “takes ... some bravery and willingness to maybe sometimes be lonely because there aren’t a lot of people around you and in our profession that, that look at things that way.” Yet participants also had positive experiences. Several of them said that the work was very important and once the structural connections were understood it was not possible to stop utilizing a structural approach. Billy said about structural practice and community building that they “really serve to ... fulfill you inside.” Joe talked about how the alternative to doing structural social work was to work from a perspective that maintained and justified the status quo. For him, that was more difficult to do and so he felt that a structural approach was easier than other ways of working. Yet, Joe also admitted that there

is no “magic wand.” It took time and hard work for participants to become skilled at integrating theory into practice, but it was important, necessary and worthwhile work.



**Figure 12. Details of the Practitioner Space**



## **CHAPTER SEVEN. DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Galper wrote in 1980 that radical social work offered an analysis of the connections between societal structures and social issues, but not a solution for moving toward structural change; the solution would come, he believed, through the processes of empowerment, collectivization and consciousness-raising. Thirty-plus years later, through this research I have identified the processes structural social work participants engage in to challenge social structures and engage in structural practice. My analysis of participants' practices has led to identifying and developing steps toward the solution that Galper said would come. The theoretical framework I present here, based on an analysis of participants' activities and interviews, is an important and unique development. The framework describes and explains the processes involved in engaging in successful structural social work practice including social change.

In chapter seven I begin by recapping the purpose of the research and providing a summary and synthesis of the framework described in detail in the previous two chapters. The core of the findings is the practitioner space. This space contains the stages of development of structural theory-practice integration, which have come out of the analysis of participants' activities, and so this will be the focus of the discussion in this chapter. I will continue by explaining and discussing how participants move through the stages and the various factors that influence this movement. Finally, I will describe the limitations and the potential of the research findings, and conclude with recommendations.

## **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of the research was to better understand the processes involved in the successful integration of structural social work theory into practice. There were two main goals. The first goal was to discover, construct and explore a theoretical framework that explains the processes involved in effective structural theory-practice integration. The second goal was to understand the ways in which structural social work theory works at the operational level. The research questions flowed out of the research goals. How do participants' stories, actions and examples offer insights into the processes involved in theory-practice integration? How do social workers think and talk about structural social work theory and the ways in which it informs their practice? What are the processes that support or discourage practice being informed by structural theory, as identified directly by participants or indirectly through their stories of practice? The summary of the theoretical framework below holds the answers to these research questions.

## **Overview and Synthesis of the Theoretical Framework**

### **The core of the theoretical framework**

The core of the theoretical framework for structural theory-practice integration lies within the practitioner space described in chapter six. This space hosts the stages of development of structural theory-practice integration where the actions and processes of the participants and the relationships between categories come alive; both of these are vital and necessary to grounded theory in order to move the developing framework from mere description to one of theorizing. Yet these actions and processes take place within the context of external realities. The interactions between the participants (i.e., the practitioner space) and their environments (i.e., the external spaces of chapter five) reflect the agency-

structure dialectic, which is crucial to critical and structural theories. Before discussing the core of the theoretical framework I will describe the external spaces, or the contexts in which the framework unfolds.

### **External spaces between theory and practice**

The six categories, or spaces, external to the practitioner were discussed in chapter five. These categories are: organizational, client, other outside organizations and professionals, educational, personal and theoretical. Each category contains numerous factors that can be either supports or barriers to the use of the structural social work theory in practice. The participants described how they lived and worked within many contradictory contexts that sometimes expedited their use of a structural approach, while at other times were barriers to this work. For example, in the organizational category, participants worked with supervisors and colleagues and each organization had a vision statement, goals and mandates. There was also an unspoken culture within the organization, participants had varying degrees of autonomy in their work, and organizational funding bodies identified service goals and boundaries. Any of these factors could be a barrier or a support to a structural approach, either overtly or covertly. For example, participants working in organizations with cultures of autonomy, broad vision statements, and open program goals combined with a respect for professionals to exercise appropriate judgment in their work, typically had the freedom to practice structural social work. On the other hand, tightly controlled work environments with a bureaucratic culture operating from a medical model, combined with a supervisor opposed to a structural approach, resulted in participants feeling that their hands were tied and their ability to use a structural perspective was severely constrained.

These differences were reflected in the other categories as well. For example, in the personal space, participants' families of origin and upbringing may have been consistent with or contradictory to a structural perspective. Participants had spouses and friends who either supported or challenged their structural views. As well, participants' life experiences and worldviews may or may not fit with a structural approach. Even the theory itself, the theoretical space, has strengths and weaknesses that affect its use in practice.

Each of the six categories contained a number of factors experienced by participants as supportive of or challenging to their structural work. These categories are complex; any one category could contain both supportive factors as well as others that were barriers, and this was true across the categories. Some participants faced mostly barriers, others experienced more supports and many fell in the middle with a combination of experiences.

### **Stages of structural social work theory-practice integration**

While the barriers and supports in the environment were important in the ability of participants to effectively utilize structural social work theory in their practice, the crux of the newly developed theoretical framework was located in the actions and processes of the participants themselves, described in detail in chapter six. Participants illustrated numerous ways in which they sought out and utilized supports to structural practice, and also their actions in resisting and challenging the barriers. None of the categories or spaces is static. The processes and activities in which the practitioners engage result in a dynamic and active theoretical framework, one that is constantly changing and developing as the environment around the participants change and as practitioners engage with the barriers and supports they

encounter. This embodies the agency-structure dialectic of critical and structural social work theories.

The activities of the participants can be located along a continuum of developmental stages. These stages are additive in that participants never finish a stage and move on to the next, but rather when they grasp enough of an initial stage, they then add to their continued work at that stage with developments from the next as well. Thus, the participants' successful use of structural social work theory in practice depended on navigating these stages of development and mastering the activities at each level. Developing skills and confidence at one level in turn builds a foundation necessary for developing skills and confidence at the next level.

The first stage involves understanding and becoming competent at traditional social work activities. These are activities all social workers participate in, regardless of theoretical orientation. They include such things as assessing a client's needs, developing a treatment plan, counselling, writing reports, facilitating meetings, educating or training others, conducting a community-needs assessment, completing a literature review, engaging in research, developing policies, and others. Participants had to understand social work in a broad sense first before understanding how to incorporate structural activities into their work.

In stage two, participants begin to see the effects of oppression and privilege. Participants sought to understand the effects of oppression experienced by others, but also to explore their own identity in the context of both privilege and oppression. It makes sense that in order to engage in a structural approach, a social worker has to first understand the oppressive effects of structures and reasons for the relevance of structural perspective. Personal growth, development and self-care were also important at this stage.

Stage three is about forging alliances. Participants first described becoming allies with vulnerable populations and clients. They also talked about forming alliances with other like-minded people, including colleagues, fellow students, family members and friends. Several participants stressed the importance of forging alliances as a foundational stage, stating adamantly that having a support network of others who understood a structural perspective was crucial to their work. Without this support they felt that practitioners were likely to experience stress and burnout, and be unable to be effective in their structural practice.

In stage four, participants were incorporating structural goals, analyses and activities into traditional social work practice and working within the system. One example of this process came from Melissa, who said that an assessment of a client's issues and needs looked very different if it included questions about oppression, and the connections of personal issues to structures and systems. The assessment is the basis for developing client goals and treatment plans, and so without a structural assessment the rest of the work with that client is also less likely to be structural. At stage four participants worked within the system to manipulate it to meet client needs, as defined within a structural understanding. Therefore, Shanks decided to assist a client in accessing dental care for her child, something that normally was not within Shank's job description. Shanks identified the issue as one of poverty and lack of access to services. She then found a back door into a dental program at no cost to the client. At stage four participants sometimes challenged the system, albeit in ways that did not threaten their own positions. They also learned the importance of being strategic and careful in order to address structures related to client problems.

Stage five is where participants began engaging in explicitly structural activities both in the workplace and in their personal lives. Activities here include connecting individual issues of oppression to structures, articulating these connections to others, participating in and building community, challenging the effects of structures (racism, colonization, patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism, ageism and ableism), incorporating structural actions into one's personal life, and working toward social change.

At stage six participants were exploring the coming together of structural theory and practice. They were developing an understanding of structural tools they could use in their work, and they were seeking to balance the individual and the structural in both theory and practice. The stages of development of structural theory-practice integration in the practitioner space suggest a return to the literature to examine Fook, Ryan and Hawkins (2000) work on the stages of skill development for social work practice in general. Although the model proposed by Fook, Ryan and Hawkins is significantly different than that developed here, there is potential for a relationship between the two and this could be pursued in future analyses and research.

### **Movement across the stages**

Participants were at different stages for several reasons. Sometimes they were further along in their development because they had been social workers for a longer time or had spent more time on personal growth. However, movement, or the lack of movement along the stages, was also due to the amount and force of the supports or barriers participants were encountering to their use of structural theory. Some participants were able to manipulate or push past the barriers they faced, while others had little or no scope for such resistance.



Participants facing more barriers were usually less far along the stages of theory-practice integration, while those with more experience and supports, and fewer barriers, were typically more advanced. When participants faced both supports and barriers simultaneously, even having a small number of strategic supports was at times enough for them to pursue their structural activities, thus giving them room to manoeuvre around some of the barriers.

Each set of interactions between participants and the factors or structures they encountered was unique, and the theoretical framework accommodates these diversities of experience. Melissa, Lilly and Ellen experienced many supports to their use of a structural approach, and these supports were found across all or most of the spaces. John and Sophie, on the other hand, identified numerous barriers to their use of the approach, although both could identify a small number of supports. Most of the participants had a mixed experience of barriers and supports. In spite of these differences, all of the participants were actively working at utilizing a structural approach in whatever ways and contexts possible.

### **Recognizing shifts between stages**

In follow-up interviews I presented a synopsis of the findings to the participants. While participants agreed with the description of barriers and supports in the contexts facing them, they were the most excited about and interested in the stages of development. All of the participants in the follow-up interviews found the stages useful. Those participants who were the furthest along in the stages and the most confident in their practice, were the clearest about the importance of the order of the stages. In thinking back on their experiences, many participants could identify obvious shifts between stages in their past, and were able to share these examples. Shifting to stage two, being able to see and identify the

effects of oppression, occurred for many participants during their social work studies, although it continued into the workplace as they encountered people struggling with structural issues.

Several participants said the shift to stage three, forging alliances, happened when they left school and began their first job. Eleanor described one of her first jobs working with a client who was a compulsive hoarder. The client was at risk of losing her apartment and the client's brother was pushing Eleanor to get the place cleaned out, which Eleanor did. When Eleanor and the client met later, the client told Eleanor, "You never listened to me." Eleanor said that in that moment she realized she had acted with the brother's concern in mind and had not taken the time to connect with the client. This jeopardized her relationship and ability to work with her client. While Eleanor likely would have still have ended up taking the same action (cleaning out the apartment so the client did not lose her home), she would have handled it much differently if she had come from a position of ally. Eleanor said that was an eye-opening shift for her in understanding how to be an ally with clients, and it still guides her practice now, years later.

The shift from stage three to four happened for most people after they had been working in the field, post-degree, for a while. For Lilly this shift was gradual and subtle. She said she began realizing that being an ally was not enough and that she actually had to act to try and make things better for clients and others. Learning the skills involved in this and figuring out what actions worked, took time. For participants who had learned about social justice and structural analyses before beginning a social work degree, the shift to stage four sometimes happened more quickly as they left school and entered the work force. Joe said that during his BSW practicum he participated in a pilot project with structural activities

to meet the needs of street-involved youth. At this point he began to identify structural activities, and he identifies this as his shift into stage four.

The shift to stage five was a more difficult, and therefore more dramatic, shift to make for some participants. Lilly said for her this shift was about becoming more public in her structural analyses, and she remembers this shift clearly. She was working at a women's centre during a time of severe cuts in funding to women's centres across the province and country. Lilly realized that since she believed these cuts were structural issues resulting in increased hardship and oppression for women, she had a responsibility to protest the cuts. As a part of her work and personal life she began attending protests, often as a guest speaker, to articulate why these cuts were problematic for women. Lilly said the public nature of these activities led her to feel like she was "coming out" in terms of her structural stance. She suggested that there is risk involved in moving to stage five, particularly in a time of neo-liberal austerity; therefore, not everyone may be able to get to this stage.

Shifting to stage six was a much quieter affair for most. It seemed to happen as participants became more confident in their structural work, and therefore could spend less time wondering what to do next and more time contemplating their work. Not all of the shifts in the previous stages were dramatic either. Although Eleanor did describe a few recognizable shifts in her work, she also said her work at each stage was deepening constantly and was never finished. Eleanor said she was always experiencing "little shifts" and they were "not always seismic."

### **Moving backwards through the stages**

Several participants talked about constantly circling back to previous stages to deepen their knowledge or skills there, and then moving forward again to deepen their work at the

next stages as well; they saw all this movement as moving forward in their growth along the stages. However, movement through the stages was not always in a positive direction; some participants talked about encountering barriers that were serious enough that they moved backwards because they could no longer do the work of the stage they had been at. After reviewing the stages, Ellen described an event from much earlier in her life. She felt she had moved to stage five, but did not do a good enough job of taking care of herself and balancing her work and personal lives. She said she experienced burnout and could not keep up with her social activism, so she moved back to stages three and four for a while until she had recovered.

Billy had just moved to a new job, with a new organization, in a new community at the time of the follow-up interview. He felt that his new place of work put up many more barriers to structural practice than his previous one, and that he had been forced to step back from stage five and six to stages three and four. He hoped and believed that with time and learning how to navigate the new system that this would change and he would move forward again, but the experience was frustrating for him. Interestingly, he also talked about how the move to a different community offered more structural opportunities in his personal life. So while he moved backward down the stages professionally, his change in community had opened doors to moving forward in the stages at a personal level. The ability to be at different stages professionally and personally was echoed by other participants.

### **Findings across the categories**

The first finding across the categories is that of the interactions between all of the spaces. People do not live their lives in distinct boxes with a clean separation between spaces; the overlap in people's lives showed up as interactions between and across categories

in the framework. An example of this interaction is when international organizations pressure governments and agencies to address issues of oppression identified at a global level; this in turn creates opportunities for structural practice within local organizations. Perhaps the most obvious overlap for participants occurred in stage five of the practitioner space. It was at this point that the participants' descriptions of their structural activities moved freely and easily across all of the spaces; they understood that a structural approach was applicable in all areas of their lives.

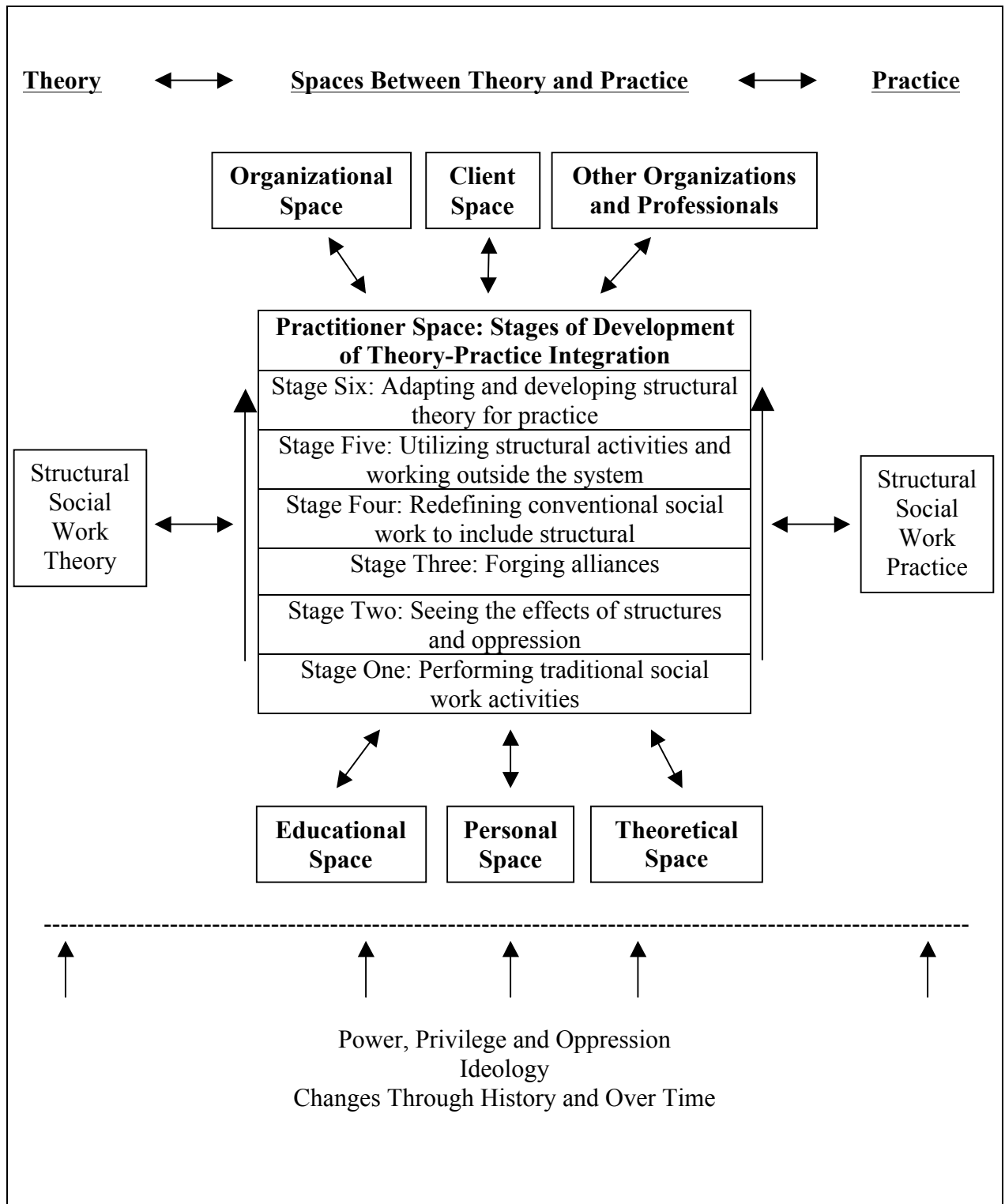
Although I am describing the connections between spaces using the words interactions and overlaps, it is not that these theoretical categories are vague, uncertain or lacking in differentiation from each other. Instead, these interactions between and across categories are a strength of the framework in that they acknowledge the reality of blurred boundaries in participants' lives. It also identifies the ways in which the actions and processes present in the dialectic are constantly pushing up against, interacting with, and changing the structures experienced by the participants, as well as changing the participants.

There were other key findings that ran throughout all of the categories in the theoretical framework. The second was that participants identified issues of power, oppression and privilege in all facets of their work and personal lives, and they knew that recognizing and challenging oppression were key components to learning about and practicing a structural approach. This included identifying issues of oppression and privilege in their own lives and experiences. Third, although ideology was in some ways more complex and elusive for participants, they still acknowledged it as being an important component of structural theory, and it also appeared across the categories. Ideology was linked to family beliefs, organizational mandates and government decisions around funding,

among other factors. The fourth theme to cross the theoretical framework was about history and changes over time. The barriers and supports to structural practice were not static. Organizations change, people come and go, governments change with each election, and people as individuals change. Shanks described her supervisor as being closed to a structural perspective although the previous supervisor had been open to the approach. This change meant that Shanks experienced increased barriers to her use of a structural approach within this organization over time. On the other hand, Ellen chose to leave a position in a department she felt was stifling her structural work, and moved to a different program and office that was more supportive. Participants talked more about changes over time in the context of themselves. Their use of a structural perspective changed, grew and developed over time, and they became more effective in their use of a structural approach the longer they used it in their practice.

Figure 13 synthesizes elements of the charts and findings from both chapters five and six into a unique chart, which is the complete and final diagram of the theoretical framework. This chart shows the stages of structural theory-practice integration, the interactions between participants (the practitioner space) and the various contexts in which they live and work, and includes the findings that cross the categories. However useful a chart can be in synthesizing information and providing a visual overview, it has a tendency to suggest a static picture of what it is trying to depict. It is important to see the diagram as a snapshot in time where the reality is one of constant movement and change.

**Figure 13. Theoretical Framework for Structural Social Work Theory-Practice Integration: The Spaces Between Theory and Practice**



All of the various components of the theoretical framework, particularly the agency of the participants, result in a framework that is dynamic and changing in a way that reflects the experiences, situations and point in time for each participant. As participants move into and out of various positions and situations, and as organizations, governments and other spaces change and develop, each person's ability to actively engage in structural practice also changes. While most participants generally progress along the developmental stages, participants at times also regress for various reasons. The framework acknowledges the complexities, diversities and changeability of situations and spaces, while also providing a way to understand how theory-practice integration can take place successfully.

### **Use of the term 'spaces'**

The use of the term spaces itself reflects the abductive analytic process of this research. The initial literature review on the topic led to an understanding that the dynamics affecting the integration of theory and practice could be organized into categories. In order to understand and articulate how these affected theory-practice integration, I described the categories as *spaces between theory and practice*. One of the uses of this phrase was to demonstrate that theory-practice integration could not just be presumed. By teasing theory and practice apart and asking what was taking place between them, the actions and factors that facilitated or challenged theory-practice integration became more visible. The term spaces identified that these actions and factors took place in multiple settings and situations.

At first the term was simply useful in organizing and describing the literature review. However, the concept of spaces also came out of the data analysis in an inductive process as participants described their experiences with learning about, utilizing and living a structural perspective in various contexts. The diverse settings in which structural theory-practice



integration took place included physical locations such as the organization in which participants worked, abstract contexts across locales such as the effects of international bodies on national governmental decision-makers and frontline organizations, as well as virtual spaces such as the Internet and Facebook. Thus, the practice of structural social work theory is not just about place, or a specific physical location with concrete boundaries, but instead is complex, dynamic and occurs across time and space.

During the analytic process, Harvey's discussions of his spaces of hope influenced and clarified aspects of the analysis (David Harvey, 1989; D. Harvey, 2000). Harvey describes the current shift in societal and economic structures as conditions of post-modernity, and he argues that these arise from corresponding shifts in capitalism and the market economy. He suggests that current economic conditions are not a new, post-capitalist market structure, but rather continue to be capitalism albeit in a state of change, which is then mirrored by changes in social relations (David Harvey, 1989; D. Harvey, 2000). In modernist economies, capitalism was challenged in the context of *place*, such as unions developing within a factory and expanding to factories in other locations (Harvey, 1989 & 2000). Harvey states that with the shift to post-modernity and the resulting economic and social conditions, capitalism has in many ways reduced the power of geographic place in the context of the collective challenge to capitalist structures. The new situation is one that crosses boundaries, both literal geographic boundaries as well as moving into space as a more abstract concept than place. Harvey argues that, in order to challenge structures in these new times, it is necessary to move from a focus on place to one of space and working across spaces. He identifies ways in which micro and macro spaces must be connected and

in which capitalism, and social structures, are to be challenged from collectives across spaces. Harvey calls these spaces of hope (2000).

It is these spaces of hope that have a connection to the data analysis and findings. Just as structural social work is about challenging social structures, including capitalism, so does Harvey argue that positive changes in social conditions and social relations will only occur by challenging capitalism and other structures (2000). Thus, there is a common goal between the two. As indicated above, for participants, theory-practice integration occurred in multiple settings and contexts, in physical locations and across abstract spaces. This is consistent with Harvey's (2000) conclusion that capitalism in conditions of post-modernity can only be challenged by working across spaces. Participants also consistently identified their efforts to connect micro and macro, which Harvey describes as an important aspect of the spaces of hope for social change. Lastly, Harvey is optimistic that change is possible; thus these spaces contain hope for him. Likewise, participants identified ways in which structural social work practice was possible and effective for them, including their efforts toward social change, and so the spaces where structural theory-practice integration occurred were also ones of optimism and hope. The concept of spaces between theory and practice that contain opportunities for structural change came out of the data analysis process, and similarly these findings support Harvey's assertion that activities across spaces are the way to create change. These consistencies suggest that the use of the phrase *spaces between theory and practice* is more relevant and powerful than initially understood.

### **Additional comments on findings**

There were two other aspects of the findings that warrant specific comment. The first is the strong activity by participants across micro, mezzo and macro levels, which is an

important component of structural social work. Nine of the participants had worked at all three levels of practice throughout their careers, with only 1 participant having worked at only one level, and that person had the least amount of social work experience. Eleven of the participants were working across at least two (five of them across three) levels of practice in their current position alone. Several of the participants talked about volunteer activities that incorporated work at additional levels outside of their paid work. For many of the participants, connecting micro, mezzo and macro levels in their work was linked to their decision to work from a structural approach, which identifies the importance of understanding links between structures and social issues facing individuals, families and communities, and thus recognizes the importance of challenging macro structures.

Participants whose paid work focused on micro-level work often chose to be involved in other ways and in their personal lives across the levels. Billy in particular felt that his structural practice needed to include his paid work with clients facing oppression, combined with volunteer community development work in a community garden, as well as macro-level advocacy by writing letters to government advocating for social change. He felt that his community-garden activities addressed macro issues by seeking to address inequalities and food security issues while challenging corporate control over agriculture. According to participants, working across levels is an important component of structural practice.

The second finding of interest is the practitioners' use of other theories alongside or in the context of their structural social work approach. Many of the participants talked about utilizing a variety of theories and perspectives in their work. There has been debate in the literature over the use of theory in practice, and social work practitioners at times have said that they prefer to use their common sense rather than rigid theories that do not reflect real

life (Mullaly, 2007), while others have stated they prefer an eclectic approach to practice, picking and choosing from whatever theory seems right in the moment (Robbins et al., 1999). Both of these perspectives have been critiqued as being problematic (Mullaly, 2007; Payne, 2005). Participants in this study identified the importance of theory to their practice, and although they could often identify other theories they used in addition to structural, they did not describe an eclectic practice. Instead, they seemed to fall in a middle ground between the two extremes described above.

For most participants, structural social work theory served as their main or overarching practice theory, while other theories were incorporated within a structural framework. Mullaly describes theories as falling within either order or change (also called conflict) perspectives. He argues that a theory will fall within one or the other. Order theories are those that see the causes of social issues as lying within individual, family or sub-culture units. These theories seek equilibrium within society and do not challenge societal structures. Change or conflict theories, such as structural and other critical theories, see the causes of social issues as lying primarily within broader social structures, and so these theories seek social change. At times, the other theories participants mentioned using were those that would also fall within the broader critical theoretical framework such as feminist, anti-racist and anti-oppressive theories. However, participants also mentioned utilizing theories from the order perspective, which have an opposite view of the causes and solutions to social issues. Examples of theories participants mentioned that are often described as being compatible with an order perspective include family systems, cognitive behavioral therapy and systems theory (Mullaly, 2007). Sophie was one such participant who described

incorporating a number of theories into her structural perspective including ones from both the order and conflict perspectives.

Yet, participants were also clear that structural social work theory was in many ways providing the overall context to the use of any other theory. Sophie said, “I think all of my theory backpack is consistent with structural theory and much of it is included within structural theory.” Joe described a similar approach: “All theories or approaches I use ... have been filtered through my structural brain.” Annie stated of the structural approach: “It’s just sort of just been there behind the scene still filtering in the different theories I’ve used.” Mullaly suggests that structural social workers do sometimes use other theories, including those from an order perspective, but that order theories or aspects of order theories are then utilized within a structural context for structural practitioners (2007). Payne (2005) also suggests that social workers may need to draw on several theories in their work, particularly if working with diverse clients, contexts and social issues. However, Payne also indicates that such practice should be done cautiously, acknowledging the potential pitfalls, and selecting theories for practice in a thoughtful and planned way. Payne distinguishes between thoughtful and casual eclecticism. Thoughtful eclecticism chooses theories or aspects of theories in a careful and planned way, while casual eclecticism refers to utilizing techniques from many diverse sources without understanding the theoretical framework one is working within, thus often being internally inconsistent in one’s approaches (p. 31). While most participants agreed with the perspective of utilizing various approaches as were useful in their practice or to their clients, they also indicated that they did it without losing the overarching structural context for their work. Thus their approach began with a predominant

structural context that incorporated other theories, or aspects of other theories in a planned way, maintaining consistency with a structural analysis.

## **Limitations, Potentials and Recommendations**

### **Limitations and consistency with grounded theory and critical theory**

Every piece of research, no matter how groundbreaking, has limitations and raises questions that should be pursued further. It is important, however, to place a discussion of limitations in the context of the purpose and goals of the research, what was accomplished in the study. No one study is able to cover everything, and so limitations do not necessarily identify faults within the research, but rather have a role in explaining the parameters and boundaries of the research; that is, what the research accomplishes and does not accomplish, how the findings may be applicable to practice and social change, as well as the ways in which the findings should not or cannot be used. Once the parameters and accomplishments of the research are understood, identifying the limitations of the research is useful in planning next steps and future research opportunities.

As is often the case with qualitative research that uses sampling methods other than random, one of the limitations is the lack of generalizability to others beyond the participants. Therefore, it is not possible to suggest that all structural social workers (or all critical social workers) engage in theory-practice integration in the same way as these participants. However, it is important to recall from the methodology discussion that this research was not seeking to generalize the findings in this way. The purpose of grounded theory, and this study, is to develop a theory particular to the research focus. Charmaz (2006) states that theoretical sampling in grounded theory is distinct from, and should not be confused with, sampling for representation or generalizability. The goal of the research is to sample until

the theory under development is complete and each category is saturated; that is, there are no new components or aspects to the categories or to the relationships between categories. In this study, theoretical saturation has been achieved, and so one of the next steps for future research is to explore the relevance of the theory to other contexts. This could potentially include moving toward a deductive testing of the theoretical framework.

One expectation or test specific to critical research is that such studies should contribute to social change. Findings themselves do not have the capacity to actually create change; however, the question is whether or not the findings contribute to or support people in working toward social change. In addition to linking oppression to structural contexts, the framework specifically articulates the activities and processes in which the participants engage for the purpose of creating social change. While the framework is not generalizable at this stage, it has the potential to become a guide for structural practice including social change. Thus the findings do meet the criteria of supporting social change, as is expected of critical research.

### **The potential of the theoretical framework**

In addition to examining the research and data for limitations and for whether or not the guidelines for grounded theory were adequately met, it is also important to identify the ways in which the findings have potential for eventual application in the integration of structural social work theory and practice. While other structural and critical literature has identified concepts and tools for structural practice, the development of a complex theoretical framework that takes into account structures, agency and stages of progressive structural practice development is unique. Although more research is needed to explore the generalizability and usefulness of the framework in larger settings and with other social

workers, the framework has the potential to create new ways of approaching structural practice.

The most important potential benefit of the framework and the one most directly related to the research is one that counters the criticism that structural social work theory is useful as an analysis but unclear as a practice methodology. The framework identifies a number of structural activities or tools for practitioners, which is one of the gaps in the theory identified by the literature as well as participants. These activities are not just about how to interact with clients and within practice contexts at individual, community or policy levels, but they also include suggestions for how to find and create opportunities for structural practice. These activities include ways to search for and utilize supports to structural practice, and ways to challenge or manipulate barriers to practice. In addition, the framework potentially offers a series of concrete steps or stages that practitioners can choose to follow as a way of developing and improving their structural practice. The data analysis suggests that, when participants are comfortable and accomplished with the activities of the earlier stages, it is easier for them to move into the activities of later stages and they are more likely to be successful. Thus, the stages of structural practice have the potential to transform the ways in which practitioners incorporate structural social work theory into their practice contexts, thereby increasing the likelihood for successful structural practice.

A second potential benefit of the framework is that it may be useful for educators in teaching the approach. It has the potential to serve as a starting point in teaching structural theory and practice integration in the classroom. Lilly teaches an occasional introductory social work course for the college in her community. After our discussion on the stages of development for theory-practice integration, she talked about how the framework would be



useful in her teaching. Not only could she teach students about the stages so students had a sense of what to do when they left school, she also felt that the framework took pressure off her as an educator. Lilly said that sometimes as an educator she has felt that she has to teach students everything, as if she is trying to get them to stage five in one course. Having seen the framework, she realizes that her main role in the introductory course is to assist students with getting to stage two, not stage five. Understanding this could assist Lilly in being more effective as an instructor.

In addition, the findings on the external categories suggest that learning about structural social work does not just happen in a formal educational setting. Time after time participants linked their formal education on structural thought to their personal experiences. They were clear that experiences and formal education were both necessary to their learning process, and that neither was sufficient without the other.

The framework may also be useful in bridging courses on theory with courses on practice skills, which is a gap sometimes noted by students in the classroom. It may ease the transition of new structural social workers into social work practice, and may be useful to practicum supervisors as they seek to support students in transitioning into practice settings. It potentially allows structural social workers to better understand and actively develop a structural practice in a planned way, rather than entering the field unsure as to how to proceed. Ellen said that when she first started in the field after completing her BSW, she felt that she had to try to do everything all at once. This was when she experienced burn out and regressed back down the stages temporarily until she had recovered. If newly graduated social workers understand that they do not have to do all the stages immediately, and that successful practice involves having a strong foundation in the early stages, they may be more

likely to progress slowly and as they are ready. This may prevent experiences of pressure to do it all right away and reduce the potential for burnout.

In addition, given the similarities structural theory has with other theories within the critical theoretical umbrella, there is the potential for the framework to be applicable to these related theoretical approaches as well. The framework suggests a flexible road map that social workers can use in moving toward the common social justice goal of challenging structures and working for social change.

The connection to Harvey's (2000) work on the spaces of hope also offers up a unique opportunity for structural social work theory. The theoretical framework, with its inclusion of concepts of space and time, suggest similarities with Harvey's spaces of hope. There is potential for this aspect of the framework to open up opportunities for the further development of structural social work theory itself by incorporating the concept of spaces into the theory.

### **Recommendations for future research**

The potential areas for application of the framework indicate areas for future research. In order to determine if the framework is relevant to a broader group of social workers, research is needed into the applicability of the theoretical framework to other structural practitioners, as well as to those using various theories within a critical theoretical umbrella. Exploration into the ways in which the framework can inform social work practice is also important. There is potential for the framework to offer a concrete link between structural theory as a form of analysis and as social work practice. It would be useful to teach the framework to students and then examine the ways that their experiences in field placements, or their jobs after degree completion, may be different due to having an

understanding of the stages for theory-practice integration. In addition, if the framework is useful in assisting social workers to utilize a structural approach in their practice, then research into the best ways to teach the framework would also be beneficial. Research and analysis into the potential for the concept of spaces to become a component of structural social work theory is also of interest.

## **Conclusion**

The development of a theoretical framework to explicate the integration of structural social work theory and practice is a significant and unique contribution to structural social work literature. The research fulfills the requirements for quality grounded theory research while making a valuable contribution to the social work field. The spaces between theory and practice, including the incorporation of the stages of development, combine in a way that incorporates an understanding of the agency-structure dialectic, which is important to structural social work theory, while also offering the potential to assist new structural social workers in planning and developing their structural practice in an effective way. Although additional research is needed to explore the various arenas to which this framework may contribute, it is hoped that this research offers both theoretical and concrete steps toward solutions regarding the ongoing issue of structural theory-practice integration in the social work field.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A. Email or Letter Invitation

#### **Wanted: Social Workers to share their stories of working in the social work field and the ways in which a structural perspective affects their work.**

I am a PhD student with the School of Social Work at UBC and my research is on social work practice, how structural ideas affect practice, and what fosters the use of a structural approach in practice.

I am interviewing social workers who are using (or trying to use) a structural approach in their work, and I will ask them to tell me stories from their social work practice. I am interested in what factors may support or prevent the use of this perspective in practice. The research includes an initial interview and a possible follow-up interview.

Research parameters:

- you decide what structural means to you and your work
- you may be working in ANY field (eg: clinical, group work, community development, administration, teaching, research, policy, or any other area)
- participants need to have either a BSW or MSW, and have been working for at least 2 years post-degree
- interviews may be conducted by telephone anywhere in Canada

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact me using the contact information below. If you know of others who may be interested in this research, please share this email or letter as well as my contact information with them. A poster is also attached which may be hung at your organization or shared with others.

If you have any questions about the research feel free to contact me.

Thanks, Heather Peters

Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxx.xx Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Dissertation supervisor: Dr. Paule McNicoll, School of Social Work,  
University of British Columbia,

Office phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx, Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxx.xx



Note: When the previous email invitation was sent out to an organization which is asked to pass it on, a preamble to the above email was often necessary. The preamble was one of the following examples, or was very similar in structure to the following examples. In each case the previous email was attached, as was the poster (Appendix B).

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Draft Email or Letter Invitation: To faculty members:

To: <name of faculty member or school of social work>

I understand that you are a faculty member who may be teaching a structural social work approach to social work students, or who may be teaching and researching from a structural perspective yourself.

OR: I understand that your School of Social Work may have faculty members who are teaching structural social work perspectives.

If appropriate, please pass on the following information to social workers you know, including past social work students or current MSW students. Also, please share the information with other faculty members who may be able to share it with others, or who may be interested in participating in this research. A poster is also attached which may be hung in your organization or shared with others.

Research description:

<The “draft email or letter invitation: General” (as on the previous page) to be inserted here in its entirety>

---

Draft Email or Letter Invitation: To social work organizations, list serves, organizations which employ social workers, current social workers, or others who work in the field or have connections to social workers :

Dear <name of person or of organization>

I understand that you or your organization is in contact with professional social workers. If appropriate, please pass on the following information to social workers who may be interested in participating in this research, or who can share the information with others. A poster is also attached which may be hung in your organization or shared with others.

Research description:

<The “draft email or letter invitation: General” (as on the previous page) to be inserted here in its entirety>

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## Appendix B. Participant Recruitment Poster

# Social Workers Wanted



**Want to help  
bridge the gap  
between knowledge  
and practice?**



## Social Work Practice with a Structural Approach

The aim of the study is to better understand what factors support or prevent the use of a structural perspective in practice. By participating in an interview and a brief survey, you can tell me your stories of social work practice and how a structural perspective affects your work. This information will help improve the ways we bring social work knowledge and practice together.

**All interviews are completely confidential and take 1 - 2 hours to complete.**

### When is this study happening?

**Interviews will take place Winter - Spring 2010.**



**For more information:**

## Heather Peters

**Phone: x-xxx-xxx-xxxx (Quesnel, BC )**

E-mail: xxxx@xxxxx

Interviews can be conducted by phone  
anywhere in Canada.

**Contact me to learn more about the study  
and find out if you are eligible.**

**Research parameters:**

- people needed from all fields of practice
- you decide what structural means to you
  - 2 years post-BSW or MSW work experience needed to participate

### Who is conducting this study?

**This study is being carried out by Heather Peters as a part of her PhD research at UBC. Her supervisor is Dr. Paule McNicoll at the UBC School of Social Work.**



Dr. Paule McNicoll  
School of Social Work, UBC  
Office phone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx  
Email: [xxxxxx@xxxx](mailto:xxxxxx@xxxx)

[illegible]



## Appendix C. Information Sheet (Description of Research)

### THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



**School of Social Work**  
UBC  
2080 West Mall  
Vancouver, BC  
V6T 1Z2  
(604) 822-2255

#### **Information on the Research Study: Social Work Practice with a Structural Approach**

**Study Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to better understand how a structural perspective may affect social work practice, and what factors may support or prevent the use of this perspective in practice. You have been invited to participate in this study because we are interested in hearing about your stories and perspectives of social work practice and the ways in which a structural perspective is useful for your work.

The researcher is located in Quesnel, BC and will travel to your location to conduct the interview if possible. Alternatively, the interview may be conducted over the phone. By participating in this interview you have the opportunity to share your stories of social work practice as well as your thoughts and insights about practicing with a structural approach. This research will be used to guide the development of structural social work theory and methods for teaching the theory.

#### **Study Methods:**

**Initial Interview:** The initial interview will give you an opportunity to describe your stories of social work practice and the ways in which a structural perspective affects your social work practice including such things as your choice of activities or interventions. You will be invited to share your thoughts in your own words and your own way. The interview is expected to take 1 – 2 hours to complete. With your permission, the interview will be recorded. Participation in all stages of this research is completely **voluntary**.

**Potential follow-up Interview:** Once the researcher reads over the interview and if she has additional questions of you, she may, with your agreement, call you and request a second interview to ask for clarification or more information. Participation in this possible second interview is also **voluntary**. You may choose not participate in a second interview, or may stop either of the interviews at any time.

**Opportunity to respond to the analysis:** After the initial data analysis has been completed, the results will be shared with you in writing, if you wish. At that time you will be invited to respond to the analysis with your opinions on what works and what does not work, based on your experience. You may respond to the analysis in writing, by phone or by requesting another meeting with the researcher. Responding is **voluntary**, and if you do respond this information will be used in the final data analysis. If you are interested in

receiving the initial analysis, we will get in touch with you using the contact information of your choice.

**Confidentiality:** The identity of all participants will be kept strictly confidential. Interview recordings will be transcribed, identified only by pseudonym, and will be securely locked in a filing cabinet at the researcher's office. The tapes will be erased after having been transcribed and checked for accuracy; this will occur within 5 years of the completion of the research. No names or other unique identifiers will be included in the transcripts or used in any published report. The individuals who will have access to your tapes and transcripts will be: (1) Heather Peters, (2) her dissertation supervisor Dr. Paule McNicoll; and (3) the person who transcribes (types out) the audio-tapes. The typist will only receive the pseudonym on your audio-tape and will not know your actual identity. Other dissertation committee members (Dr. Deborah O'Connor and Dr. Gillian Walker) may have access to the data, but will also only receive pseudonyms.

“Your rights to privacy are also protected by the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act of British Columbia. This Act lays down rules for the collection, protection, and retention of your personal information by public bodies, such as [universities]. Further details about this Act are available upon request.”  
(Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act of British Columbia)

If you are interested in participating in this research, please contact Heather Peters at the phone number or email at the end of this information letter. Please feel free to share this information with anyone else who may be interested in the research.

Thank you.

Heather Peters

**Co-Investigator:**

Heather Peters, MSW, PhD (Candidate)  
UBC School of Social Work  
Office phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx  
Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxx.xx

**Dissertation Supervisor**

**& Principal Investigator:**

Dr. Paule McNicoll  
School of Social Work, UBC  
Office phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx  
Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxx.xx

## Appendix D. Informed Consent

### THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



**School of Social Work**  
2080 West Mall  
Vancouver, BC  
V6T 1Z2  
(604) 822-2255

#### **Informed Consent Form Social Work Practice with a Structural Approach**

**Study Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to better understand how a structural perspective may affect social work practice, and what factors may support or prevent the use of this perspective in practice. You have been invited to participate in this study because we are interested in hearing about your stories and perspectives of social work practice and the ways in which a structural perspective is useful for your work. By participating in this interview you have the opportunity to share your stories of social work practice as well as your thoughts and insights about practicing with a structural approach. This research will be used to guide the development of structural social work theory and methods for teaching the theory.

#### **Study Methods:**

**Initial Interview:** The initial interview will give you an opportunity to describe your stories of social work practice and the ways in which a structural perspective affects your social work practice including such things as your choice of activities or interventions. You will be invited to share your thoughts in your own words and your own way. The interview is expected to take 1 – 2 hours to complete. With your permission, the interview will be recorded. Participation in all stages of this research is completely **voluntary**.

**Potential follow-up Interview:** Once the researcher reads over the interview and if she has additional questions of you, she may, with your agreement, call you and request a second interview to ask for clarification or more information. Participation in this possible second interview is also **voluntary**. You may choose not participate in a second interview, or may stop either of the interviews at any time.

**Opportunity to respond to the analysis:** After the initial data analysis has been completed, the results will be shared with you in writing, if you wish. At that time you will be invited to respond to the analysis with your opinions on what works and what does not work, based on your experience. You may respond to the analysis in writing, by phone or by requesting another meeting with the researcher. Responding is **voluntary**, and if you do respond this information will be used in the final data analysis. If you are interested in receiving the initial analysis, we will get in touch with you using the contact information of your choice.

**Confidentiality:** The identity of all participants will be kept strictly confidential. Interview recordings will be transcribed, identified only by pseudonym, and will be securely locked in a filing cabinet at the researcher's office. The tapes will be erased after having been transcribed and checked for accuracy; this will occur within 5 years of the completion of the research. No names or other unique identifiers will be included in the transcripts or used in any published report. The individuals who will have access to your tapes and transcripts will be: (1) Heather Peters, (2) her dissertation supervisor Dr. Paule McNicoll; and (3) the person who transcribes (types out) the audio-tapes. The typist will only receive the pseudonym on your audio-tape and will not know your actual identity. Other dissertation committee members (Dr. Deborah O'Connor and Dr. Gillian Walker) may have access to the data, but will also only receive pseudonyms.

"Your rights to privacy are also protected by the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act of British Columbia. This Act lays down rules for the collection, protection, and retention of your personal information by public bodies, such as [universities]. Further details about this Act are available upon request."  
(Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act of British Columbia)

If you have any questions about this study at any time, please contact Heather Peters at the phone number listed at the top of the first page of this consent form.

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, please contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at (604) 822-8598. You may also contact the researcher's supervisor, Dr. Paule McNicoll at her contact information at the end of this consent form.

By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in this study. You understand that your participation in this study is entirely **voluntary** and that you may refuse to participate, refuse to be recorded, or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. You also acknowledge that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records, and that you may be contacted in the future to be invited to follow-up interview or meeting and/or to receive a copy of your transcripts and a preliminary draft of the results of the study.

You understand that the interviewer has a legal responsibility to report abuse of minors and to report any other illegal activities that may harm others, as required by legal authorities and social work codes of ethics.

Please note that if you review the researchers' results you may disagree with some of the analysis or interpretation of your statements. It would be useful to the research if you would share any thoughts you have with the researcher, and your comments and thoughts may become a part of the research data, with your permission. There is no anticipated harm from participating in this research. However, if some of the interview discussion raises difficult issues for you, the interviewer can refer you to someone local who can assist you (e.g., counsellor, psychologist, social worker). You can also refer to the resource list provided to you during the consent process.

**Co-Investigator:**

Heather Peters, MSW, PhD (Candidate)  
UBC School of Social Work  
Office phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx  
Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxx.xx

**Dissertation Supervisor & Principal Investigator:**

Dr. Paule McNicoll  
School of Social Work, UBC  
Office phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx  
Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxx.xx

Consent for first interview:

Are you willing to participate in an interview for this research? \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

Do you agree to have today's interview recorded? \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

Do you wish to receive a copy of the transcripts from this interview? \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

Do you wish to receive a copy of the preliminary data analysis in order to share your thoughts on the preliminary findings? (Any comments you may make on the preliminary findings will form a part of the data collection and further analysis).  
\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

May the researcher contact you after the first interview if she has additional questions for you?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

(Please note that if you agree here, you may still change your mind at any time in the future).

If you've answered yes to any of the above three questions, please provide contact information (email, mailing address or phone – whichever is your preferred method of contact):

Email:

Phone:

Mailing address:

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's false name:

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Consent for second interview:

Are you willing to participate in a second interview for this research?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

Do you agree to have today's interview recorded? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

Do you wish to receive a copy of the transcripts from this interview? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

Do you wish to receive a copy of the preliminary data analysis in order to share your thoughts on the preliminary findings? (Any comments you may make on the preliminary findings will form a part of the data collection and further analysis).

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

May the researcher contact you after this interview if she has additional questions for you?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

(Please note that if you agree here, you may still change your mind at any time in the future).

If you've answered yes to any of the above three questions, please provide contact information (email, mailing address or phone – whichever is your preferred method of contact):

Email:

Phone:

Mailing address:

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Consent for meeting to discuss initial data analysis and themes:

Are you willing to participate in a meeting to discuss the initial data analysis for this research? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

Do you agree to have today's discussion recorded? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

Do you wish to receive a copy of the transcripts from this meeting? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

May the researcher contact you if she has additional questions for you?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

(Please note that if you agree here, you may still change your mind at any time in the future).

If you've answered yes to either of the above two questions, please provide contact information (email, mailing address or phone – whichever is your preferred method of contact):

Email:

Phone:

Mailing address:

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E. Interview Guide

### Interview Guide

#### First Interview

At the start of the interview:

- Introductions
- Thank the person for participating
- Ask participant for a pseudonym
- Review informed consent; Confirm consent is signed; ask if there are any questions
- Estimated interview time of up to 2 hours – is this ok?
  - o If not okay, ask how long they have and remind them that they can stop at any time
- Does the participant want copy of transcript? If so, how can I best get it to them?
- Ask participant to let me know if they need a break or if they need to stop
- Is it okay for me to record the interview?

#### Opening:

What made you interested in doing this interview?

Tell me about what you do as a social worker.

- Where do you work? (Which agency or type of agency)
- What is your job title? What do you do?
- What kinds of things do you do that aren't covered in this title?
- Describe a typical day at work and the activities you engage in.

#### Organizational:

In what ways does the organization at which you work support your use of a structural approach in your practice?

- What organizational directives, mandates, job descriptions, assessment or intake tools, etc support the use of structural theory in practice?

In what ways does the organization at which you work NOT support your use of structural theory in your practice?

- What organizational directives, mandates, job descriptions, assessment or intake tools, etc undermine the use of structural theory in practice?
- Have you ever tried to incorporate a structural social work approach in spite of encouragement to work from a more traditional framework?
  1. Tell me about a time when you tried this.

What combination of micro, mezzo, and macro practices are you involved in, in your work?

- Can you share some examples of each?

What role, if any, do politics or ideology play in the organization?

- How does this influence your use of structural social work?



### **Daily social work practice stories:**

Tell me about an example from your social work practice that you consider to be successful.

- Describe the situation.
- What did you do?
- In what ways do you determine success in your practice? How do you describe success in this particular example?
- How did you feel about this situation at the time or in hindsight?
- How did a structural approach influence your actions and decision-making at the time? In hind sight, are there other ways in which you now see a structural approach in the story you described?
- What other approaches or theory/ies were relevant for you in this example, if any?

Please share an example of deliberately and overtly using structural social work approach in your work when it was successful. (Ask this if this was not evident in the answer to the above question).

- Probes as in above question

Describe an example in your social work practice that you thought was not very successful.

- Describe the situation.
- What did you do?
- How did you determine that this was not successful?
- How did you feel about this situation at the time or in hindsight?
- What do you think you should or could have done differently to make it more successful?
- What role did a structural approach play in your actions and decision-making?
- What other approaches or theory/ies were relevant for you during this example?

Please share an example of deliberately and overtly using structural social work approach in your work when it was NOT successful, or less successful than anticipated?

- Probes as in above questions

Tell me about an experience of trying a different approach or theory:

- Describe a time when this was successful.
- Describe a time when this was not successful
- What other theories or approaches do you use in your practice? How do those fit or not fit with a structural approach?
- Probes as in above questions

### **Personal:**

In what ways does SSWT fit or not fit with who you are?

Tell me about a personal story you have that is related to (or set the stage for) your interest in a structural perspective.

- How does a structural social work approach fit with your personal values and views of the world and who you are as a person?

Tell me about a personal story you have that makes it difficult for you to incorporate a structural approach.

- In what ways does a structural approach not fit with who you are and how you see yourself?

What kinds of thing in your personal life support your use of a structural approach?

- What kinds of things in your personal life are barriers to a structural approach?

How did you decide to work from a structural approach? Is there a moment you can remember when you made a decision about this?

### **Clients:**

Tell me a story from your practice about a client or clients who were open to or encouraging of a structural approach in your work.

Tell me a story from your practice about a client or clients that challenged or disagreed with a structural approach.

How much, and in what ways, do clients influence your choice of approaches or theories you use in practice?

Please describe the clients that you work.

- In what ways do clients characteristics (gender, culture, age, class, ability, sexual orientation, other characteristics, etc) effect your choice of practice approaches?

### **Education:**

How and where did you learn about structural social work?

Tell me about a learning experience that was an “aha” moment for you – when you felt that structural social work made sense and that you would want to use it in your work.

Tell me about a learning experience that made you reluctant to use a structural approach.

How did you learn about other approaches or theories that you use in your practice?

What worked best for you in learning about structural social work?

- What was the least effective?
- What were your feelings when learning about a structural approach?

### **Theory:**

How would you describe a structural approach?

- How does it explain the issues you seek to address in your work?

- How does it suggest that such problems be solved or addressed?
  1. How does this work and/or not work?
- How have your views of structural theory changed after working in the field?
- What is the goal of structural social work?

How do you use a structural social work approach in your practice?

- In what ways does it influence your practice?
- In what ways does it not influence your practice?
- In what situations (or types of work) is it the most useful?
- In what situations (or types of work) is it the least useful?
- What do you like about structural theory?
- What do you NOT like about structural theory?
- How do you decide when to use it and when not to use it?

What other theories or interventions do you use in your practice?

- How do these fit with or complement structural social work?
- In what ways do these not fit with (or are in contradiction to) a structural approach?
- How do you manage these contradictions or lack of fit?

Has using a structural social work approach changed you as a person or as a practitioner?

### **Wrap up:**

I've been using the terms structural approach, structural perspective and structural theory interchangeably. Are these terms interchangeable for you? If not, how are they different for you?

- What about radical, anti-oppressive, feminist, critical, anti-racist or other progressive approaches? How are they similar or different?

What advice would you give to a new social worker who wants to use a structural approach to practice?

What is the role of professional associations in your use of a structural approach?

How important, or not important, is the use of theory in practice to you? Why or why not?

How does what you've been taught about theory fit or not fit with your actual work experiences?

What would you change about structural social work, if anything, to make it more useful for practice?

Of all of these areas we've talked about (the organization, your personal context, clients, education experiences, the theory itself) which of these is the most important for you in being able to use structural social work effectively?

- Which is the biggest barrier to your use of the structural approach?

In what ways do you feel that you are contributing to social change?

Is there anything else about your practice experiences or use of theory that you'd like to share?

Do you have anything else to add?

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### **Follow-up Interview Guide (Second and/or Third Interviews)**

These questions were varied as they were based on information that came up during data analysis. Questions from the guide to the first interview (above) that may have been missed with some participants during the initial interview, and were found to be important in conversations with other participants, were asked in the follow-up interview. Where the second or third interview occurred after data analysis was well underway, I began the interview with a description of the findings and asked participants for their thoughts.

#### **Follow-up questions**

Tell me more about... (something the person said during the first interview).

Other interviewees have suggested that \_\_\_\_\_ is relevant to their use of a structural approach. In what ways is that relevant or not relevant for you?

- Tell me about an experience you may have had that is an example of this.

Tell me about your experiences of privilege or oppression.

In what ways do you think that your use of structural social work has changed over time?

Initial data analysis identified these themes or categories (these would then be shared with the participant). In what ways do these fit and / or do they not fit with your experiences?

- How do you see these categories fitting together or relating to each other in your experience of using structural social work in your practice?
- What works and does not work for you from these findings?
- Do you have suggestions for adding to or changing the findings I've shared?

In what ways do you challenge structures causing oppression?

- Probe: Structures such as racism, classism, poverty, sexism, etc.

Is there anything else that comes to your mind about your use of a structural approach in practice now that you've heard about some of the initial results of the research?

## Appendix F. Socio-Demographic Questionnaire

### Socio-Demographic Questionnaire Structural Perspectives in Social Work Practice – Research Study

Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Please choose a false name which will be used to track the data in order to maintain your confidentiality.

As with all of the questions in this study, this questionnaire is voluntary. If you are uncomfortable with any of the questions you may leave them unanswered. You may also ask the researcher about any of the questions.

Purpose of the questions: Data will be analyzed for differences and similarities in processes of theory-practice integration based on field of work, level of practice (micro, mezzo, macro), gender, age, culture, etc and so this information is necessary in order to examine the data in this way.

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1. What is your job title? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Who is your employer? \_\_\_\_\_

3. How long have you worked in this current position?

\_\_\_\_\_ years OR \_\_\_\_\_ months

4. Which of the following social work fields would you say your work involves (tick all that apply):

- ☐ Micro (such as: clinical or therapeutic; work with individuals, families, couples or groups).

List micro work you do: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ Mezzo (such as: community development; community organizing; community education; teaching).

List mezzo work you do: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ Macro (such as: policy research or development; research; administration).

List macro work you do: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ Other fields that do not fit the above categories: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. If you have ticked more than one of the above categories, please estimate the approximate percentage of your time you spend in each type of work (in your current position):

\_\_\_\_\_ % in micro activities

\_\_\_\_\_ % in mezzo activities

\_\_\_\_\_ % in macro activities

\_\_\_\_\_ % in other activities

6. In thinking about all of your social work practice, please estimate the percentage of your work, over your career to date, in each of the following categories:

\_\_\_\_\_ % in micro practice

\_\_\_\_\_ % in mezzo practice

\_\_\_\_\_ % in macro practice

\_\_\_\_\_ % in other practice

7. What is your sex?

\_\_\_ Female

\_\_\_ Male

\_\_\_ Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

8. What age group do you fall within?

☐ 18-29

☐ 30-45

☐ 46-64

☐ 65 and over

9. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

☐ Gay

☐ Lesbian

☐ Bisexual

☐ Heterosexual

☐ Intersex

☐ Transgender

☐ Transexual

☐ Two-spirited

☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. How would you best describe your ethnicity?

☐ Aboriginal

☐ First Nation (status)

☐ First Nation (non-status)

☐ First Nation band membership (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Inuit

☐ Métis

☐ Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean)

☐ South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Punjabi, Sri Lankan)

☐ White (Caucasian or Euro-Canadian)

☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

11. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

- ☐ Yes. Please describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No

12. Do you have post-secondary training? If so, please indicate your field of study, institution, degree or certificate held, and if the program taught a structural perspective:

<b>Name of degree or certificate</b> (e.g. BSW, MSW, other. If Arts or Science degree please indicate your major.)	<b>Year graduated.</b> (If you haven't completed, how many years/months have you done?)	<b>Name of university or institution</b> you attended.	<b>Did you learn about a structural perspective in this program?</b> (Yes or No)

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**Thank you for participating in this study.**