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PhD Thesis

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Rhetoric and Anti-Racism in Social Work: A Study in the
Philosophy of Language

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the nature of understanding in multi-racial social work practice (MRP), and in particular with the philosophy of anti-racist social work. After a review of the past and present literature on MRP which charts the development of anti-racism and black perspectives in social work, it is concluded that new approaches are needed to take account of the importance of racism conceived as a linguistic resource. A consideration of the wider literature on race and racism leads on to an exploration of hermeneutic philosophy as a general guide to the analysis of problems of communication and understanding in social work. The work of Gadamer and Derrida is reviewed in some detail, in the context of wider developments in the philosophy of language and in literary criticism and textual analysis. It is argued that analysis of social work texts can offer new insights into the problems of formulating guidelines for anti-racist practice. Two exemplary analyses are presented: the first of Dominelli's text *Anti-Racist Social Work* and the second of Ahmad's *Black Perspectives in Social Work*. Finally, it is suggested that this analysis demonstrates the utility, and complementarity, of Gadamerian and Derridean perspectives in this effort - and that we must recognise that the positions we adopt on the best way forward are necessarily provisional, just as the commonly understood meanings of key terms in the debate about race and social work remain provisional.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is concerned with questions of understanding in social work, and in particular looks at how these are addressed in the context of multi-racial social work practice. My interest in this area was sparked during a period as a field social worker in an inner-city London borough, where a largely white staff of social workers and managers/administrators worked with a racially mixed client group. In the first instance, I had thought to set up a study which would look at the treatment of comparable groups of black and white users of social services, as they passed through the social services system from initial referral or presentation to allocation. The object of the study was to examine the similarities and differences between the 'career' patterns of white and black clients in order to clarify the processes whereby some individuals assumed or were inducted into the role of client, and to see if similar processes operated with respect to white and black users.

However, discussion of this proposal within the department, together with the reading I was doing on the subject of social work across racial, ethnic or cultural boundaries,¹ led me to reconsider the priority of this project. The personal discussions I had with both white and black colleagues made it clear that the whole area of communication and inquiry between white and black is potentially fraught with difficulty - and the scope for misunderstanding and communication breakdown, in turn, is immense. So before a study of the kind I had envisaged would be possible (both practically and politically), other issues needed to be addressed.

The kinds of questions that now presented themselves had taken a different, more philosophical turn: how is understanding between individuals from different racial, ethnic or cultural backgrounds possible, and (if it is) what is the nature of the understanding that can be achieved? How is the dimension of race conceptualised and treated and, arising from this, what understanding of racism informs social work practice? If racism plays a role in structuring the encounter between client and worker, and between worker and worker, then how (if at all) is it dealt with and challenged? Is 'anti-racism' - however this term may be defined - an appropriate or effective response? The social work literature suggested some answers to these questions, but left a number of issues unresolved. Indeed, the abiding impression from a study of a range of texts was that social work had not yet

satisfactorily got to grips with multi-racial practice. I therefore began to look for new ways to interpret and supplement this literature, and thus initiated the line of inquiry that has resulted in this thesis.

My starting point is an area of concern that has been much remarked upon, but remains problematic: namely, what is - or should be - the nature of social work practice, education and training in relation to ethnic minorities (workers, students or clients)? The 'what is' part of the question can be dealt with briefly. From the available literature, an argument can be constructed which says that social work in its present form is widely considered to be inadequate at best, and positively damaging at worst, to black people. The 'ought' dimension - that is, what ought social work to do or be like in relation to black people - has remained controversial. The debate about social work's involvement with ethnic minorities has at times been heated and has, in some cases, inhibited white workers who fear that 'incorrect' action or speech - however well-intentioned - may lead to them being accused of racism. Better then to remain silent. Even if we are not sure exactly what the current orthodoxy on 'anti-racist' practice entails or what its effects should be, it is better (that is, safer) not to make too much noise about it. But such inhibition is, in the end, unsatisfactory and this thesis marks the working out of my attempt to engage with the complexities of the race and social work debate by focussing attention on the philosophical bases of anti-racism.

That there is a problem in social work's relations and involvement with ethnic minorities has been noted by a range of bodies from the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS/CRE, 1978) to the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW, 1991), as well as by client groups, individual practitioners and academics. The first chapter examines a range of these accounts of multi-racial practice. Acknowledgement of racism as a key factor in the debate about multi-racial practice is a feature of the more recent literature discussed in chapter two. The texts that I suggest represent the 'state of the art' in social work thinking and theorising argue for two interconnected positions based on 'anti-racism' and the incorporation of 'black perspectives' into all aspects of social work education, training and practice. With the development of these positions, social work thinking moves into a new phase and becomes more self-analytical and self-critical. But neither the 'anti-racist' approach nor the adoption of 'black perspectives' are entirely straightforward, and I discuss the problems associated with each of these positions in the course of the second chapter.

I conclude that chapter by suggesting that it might be helpful to look outside social work for a way of re-conceptualising, and hence thinking of ways to intervene practically in, multi-racial practice. This conclusion is based on a rethinking of the terms of what I refer to as the 'race and social work' debate, using a framework drawn from and discussed in parallel with Harding's account (1986) of the trends in feminist critiques of science.

In chapter three, the concept of racism is taken up explicitly and examined from a range of perspectives to chart a shift from 'race' to 'racism'. I look at the history and range of ideas about race and how these have been organised in racist discourses. Next, I discuss the cognitive dimensions of racism, and follow that with a consideration of the political dimensions, including the construction of what has become known as the 'new racism' of the late 1970s and early 1980s. I also consider the way racism is reproduced through the operation of prejudiced communication structures and strategies, and suggest that an understanding of racism which ignores its linguistic dimension would be inadequate to explain its power and persistence. I arrive at a position where racism is presented as a cultural or linguistic 'resource', operating at the level of common sense - largely implicit, unthought, and untheorised, relying on its everydayness to maintain a purchase on a range of discourses many of which inform or structure the discourse of social work itself.

The view proposed above, that racism operates as a linguistic resource, has philosophical as well as methodological implications for the race and social work debate; these are worked through in the remainder of the thesis. To take the philosophical first: the linguistic turn directs the focus of the study onto the ways in which language operates, and understanding or meaning are generated. I take this, in general terms, to be the province of the branch of philosophy known as hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is concerned specifically with problems of textual interpretation which, I suggest, suits it to a study of social work - an activity that is irreducibly dependent on reading and writing, on the production and reception of text.

Chapters four and five are devoted to an extended exploration of what could be characterised as two 'wings' of hermeneutics - the hermeneutics of tradition associated with Gadamer, and the more radical deconstructive approach associated with Derrida - with a view to establishing whether these approaches could contribute to an understanding of social work with ethnic minorities. The Gadamerian hermenutics of tradition fits well with much

that is accepted as valuable in current social work practice, particularly practice based on the 'client-centred' models, and it offers a constructive way of conceptualising the interaction between worker and client and between colleagues.

However, I also suggest that there are limitations to this approach, namely that it can result in acquiescence in the status quo which, from the viewpoint of this thesis, is taken to be largely beneficial to the white majority at the expense of black and other ethnic minorities. The more radical process of deconstruction, though, offers no such opportunity for opting in favour of the status quo, since it involves the critic or reader in a rigorous analysis of the conceptual structures that support given (dominant) discourses and texts. Chapter five, therefore, presents an account of deconstruction, which considers it both in relation to the limitations attributed to Gadamerian hermeneutics, and in terms of its specific contribution to the race and social work debate.

In chapter six, methodological concerns are addressed. The practical or 'strategic' implications of the linguistic resource position are discussed in relation to an area of study that foregrounds reading and the study of text generally - literary criticism. Different approaches to reading are considered, each one drawing on a particular conception of 'the text' and the location and determinacy of meaning. I suggest that the methodological concomitant of the philosophical position elaborated in the preceding two chapters is a form of reading that locates meaning neither in the text nor the reader; indeed, it is a form of reading that abandons altogether the search for 'the' meaning, and focusses instead on the multiplicity of meanings and the processes of their production.

Two further chapters engage more directly with the hermeneutic approaches previously discussed and offer extended readings of two social work texts, one of which defines itself explicitly as 'anti-racist', the other as avowedly from a 'black perspective'. By analysing both the content of these books and the process of reading them, I return directly to the earlier concerns of the thesis, and consider the usefulness of a hermeneutic approach for an understanding of social work across racial, cultural or ethnic boundaries. I conclude by suggesting that hermeneutics does indeed have much to offer social work, but that it cannot provide a once-and-for-all answer to the problems of understanding and meaning. The search for such an answer is misconceived, being based on a misconception both of the nature of racism and, beyond that, of language itself. Hermeneutics does not tell us how to do social work in the 'right' way, but rather offers a way of thinking about, and opening up, the

conceptual frameworks within which we find ourselves. Only by recognising that our existing answers are always provisional can we hope to improve them.

INTRODUCTION

NOTES

1. It is clear, even at this early stage, that questions of terminology are going to be important. I use the terms 'black' and 'ethnic minority' more or less interchangeably, for example, and it is not the case that all ethnic minorities in this country are necessarily 'black'. However, I would justify the use of these different terms to refer to visible minority groups in view of the process, discussed in more detail in chapter three, by which the discourse of 'race' has given way to one based on the idea of ethnic or cultural difference.

CHAPTER ONE

SOCIAL WORK AND RACE

1.1 Introduction.

"The social worker wishing to understand and work with ethnic minority clients is presented with aspects of human experience beyond the usual range of casework theory or general social work training. ... In short, perceptions grounded in a different experience and a different reality" (Ely and Denney, 1987:69).

How are we to conceptualise social work with ethnic minority clients? If work with ethnic minority clients takes the social worker "beyond the usual range of casework theory", in what new or alternative theoretical framework can the worker base her practice? If present casework theory is not up to the task, is the answer a new form of casework or some other theoretical orientation entirely? How can the social worker, apparently now both inadequately trained and theoretically adrift, make any sense of a "different experience and a different reality"? What kind of understanding does the above quotation assume was possible hitherto if worker and client were from the ethnic majority?

The kinds of questions posed above set out the general concerns of this thesis: how do - and how might - social workers work across racial, cultural or ethnic boundaries? More precisely, as later discussion makes clear, my focus throughout is on language and text, on ways of thinking about social work reading and writing. To start to look at how social work has addressed - or, broadly, failed to address - the 'race issue' to date, the first two chapters present a discussion of the social work literature. The section below charts the development of ideas about social work with ethnic minority individuals and communities, and the changes in the understanding of the 'social work task' that have accompanied them. Then, in the next chapter, I look in more detail at the current state of the race and social work debate through a study of what I have called the 'state of the art' approaches that can be identified in the literature.

Before proceeding further, however, I should draw attention to a problem of terminology: even a cursory glance through the literature shows that a number of different terms are used to refer to what social workers are doing when they are working with clients from minority

ethnic backgrounds. 'Multi-racial' or 'multi-cultural' practice appear; 'ethnic-sensitive' practice is endorsed by some, while both 'non-racist' and 'anti-racist' social work have their adherents. Each term has its own subtleties and shades of meaning,¹ but at this stage I will not try to tease out all these nuances. Rather, I will adopt one provisional 'working usage' to describe social work practice across racial, ethnic or cultural boundaries: multi-racial practice (MRP).

1.2 Multi-racial practice: a review of the literature.

The literature relating to multi-racial social work has been tackled by various authors intent on typologising or categorising the kinds of activity undertaken by practitioners working across ethnic, racial or cultural boundaries. Examples of three different kinds of texts are discussed here to see what light they shed on the somewhat shadowy entity of MRP. The first text I examine is an article by Jansari which offers a critical review of the social work literature relating to practice with ethnic minority clients, involving consideration of approximately seventy works (Jansari, 1980). The review draws attention to "the multifarious shortcomings of not only the literature, but also the practices and attitudes of practitioners that it purports to report" (Jansari, 1980:29). Jansari's approach is thematic: he highlights the "largest common denominators" in the existing literature, and comments briefly on the views about social work practice and the client groups concerned in relation to each topic. While not claiming to be comprehensive, this review is wide-ranging, and provides an interesting snapshot of the state of MRP at the end of the 1970's.

The second text (Devore and Schlesinger, 1981) takes existing social work practice as its starting point, identifying four predominant approaches or methods and then relating each one to what the authors term "ethnic-sensitive" practice. The third work to be examined is Ely and Denney's discussion of social work in a multi-racial society (Ely and Denney, 1987), in which the authors offer a historical account of developments in MRP, suggesting that it has gone through different stages, changing in parallel with government policy. They propose a typology based on five "perspectives", and analyse the positive and negative effects of each perspective both on social work practice and the client groups concerned.

Jansari's review identifies eight main topics or themes in the literature. The first is a "general" category which includes a number of texts written between 1945 and approximately 1960. Works in this group are characterised by the absence of reference to the specific or special

needs of ethnic minorities, and thus present little in the way of suggestions for an appropriate organisational response from the welfare system. There is, in this period, what Jansari calls an "institutionalised lack of acknowledgement of the needs of the ethnic minorities" (Jansari, 1980:17).²

This period of non-acknowledgement of the ethnic minority populations in this country was succeeded by what, for many 'immigrants', may have been an unwelcome burst of interest from the social work system. Having become aware of the presence of new ethnic minority communities, social work thinking took several steps: the existence of coloured immigrants with special needs was acknowledged; 'special needs' quickly became translated into personal problems or inadequacies of immigrant clients; and from there, it was but a short step to the formulation that Jansari identifies as the second main idea in the social work literature: "Colour = problem". As he notes, "Whenever there has been some acknowledgement of the existence of ethnic minorities and their special needs, authors have wasted no time in labelling these as problems. Social work literature abounds with examples of the equation, COLOUR = PROBLEM, and the trend continues" (ibid:18).

Some authors were clearly more aware of the dangers inherent in this approach, and could see the risk of reinforcing prejudiced or stereotyped views of coloured people as problems. Such writers suggested that a more fruitful approach could be the consideration of needs, as defined by the client groups themselves (ibid:17). This is a point that Jansari returns to when he considers the literature which specifically addresses the needs of ethnic minorities in relation to the social services.

Concentration on the problems of ethnic minorities in turn generated an interest in the cultural patterns of such groups - usually with the assumption (covert or overt) that these patterns were somehow deviant, causing or exacerbating the problems experienced by ethnic minority individuals in this country. Emphasis on the cultures of ethnic minority groups was reflected in the literature, forming the third topic in Jansari's review. He highlights the problem of over-generalisation in cultural explanation and the misleading or inaccurate conclusions it produces (Jansari, 1980:18-21). In addition, he suggests that much of the work on understanding the cultures of the now urban-based ethnic minority groups was skewed by an over-reliance on explanations based on traditional rural practices. At the time of writing (late '70's), he notes that "Very few writers have made the effort of understanding the cultures of ethnic minorities in terms of 'British sub-cultures'. The coloured populations have

become part and parcel of the British society, adopting many values of the host society yet retaining their cultural identities" (Jansari, 1980:20).

The fourth topic identified in the literature, culture conflict, can again be seen as a development of the preceding one: where ethnic minority culture is largely negatively evaluated, in relation, it is supposed, to some ideal formulation of 'British culture' or 'society', it is perhaps not surprising that the idea of culture conflict should prove attractive in explaining the 'problems' of ethnic minority youth in adjusting to a British way of life. The inherent superiority of the latter, and the backward-looking nature of the parent culture are readily assumed in such accounts.

An alternative, though perhaps not unconnected, response to the 'culture conflict' issue, which Jansari does not specifically mention, could be called the 'when in Rome' approach; that is, ethnic minority cultural practices are all well and good in their own habitat but should not be maintained in the new setting provided by settlement in this country. Such a view would put the onus on ethnic minority individuals to adopt majority group cultural practices and norms, and would explain subsequent difficulties among ethnic minority group members in terms of a failure to adapt or assimilate sufficiently.

The emphasis on cultural explanations of both the above kinds to explain disaffection or other problems among ethnic minority youth deflected attention away from the behaviour of the host society, and its responses to the visible minority groups, a point not lost on the authors McCulloch and Kornreich who observe, "... the primary difficulties they [i.e. black youth] face in contacts with social workers may no longer be difficulties arising from cultural differences, but rather difficulties associated with belonging to a minority groups [sic] within the society" (quoted by Jansari, 1980:22). Other writers who challenged the prevailing over-emphasis on cultural conflict include Catherine Ballard (1976), Ahmed (1978), and Roger Ballard (1979).³

As his fifth category or topic, Jansari considers the "gulf of communication" (1980:23). In the social work literature, this refers both to the basic problem of communication between an indigenous social worker and, for example, an Asian client who may speak little or no English, and also to the somewhat different problem of establishing a more general communication between the professional and the client. "Communication here is not necessarily just a matter of language ... for what is often at issue is the totality of cultural differences" (Ballard, quoted by Jansari, 1980:23). Jansari deals only

very briefly with this topic which, in a sense, forms the main concern of this thesis, and to which I will therefore return.

Jansari next considers the literature dealing with the needs of ethnic minorities in relation to the social services, as his sixth topic. He looks at the way three basic questions have been approached in the literature (1980:23ff): Are ethnic minorities making use of the social services? If they are not, then why not? And lastly, what are the needs of ethnic minorities? The bulk of research examined by Jansari indicated that ethnic minorities did not make good use of the statutory social services. Two main reasons are proposed for this: a lack of knowledge about existing services; and availability of alternative means of support. The literature surveyed failed to suggest a third possible explanation, namely that ethnic minorities found existing services either irrelevant or inappropriate, though it is worth noting that this suggestion has been given much greater prominence in more recent literature.⁴ On the needs of ethnic minorities, Jansari reported little research, but it is an area that members of ethnic minority groups have become increasingly articulate about. The needs of ethnic minorities have been explored to some extent in the later literature which also records examples of direct action, in the form of specific projects, taken by such groups to meet identified need.⁵

In contrast to the general lack of comment in the literature on ethnic minority needs, Jansari observes that the "question of technique" - his seventh topic - has received considerable attention. By "technique", he means the question of the methods to be adopted when working with ethnic minority clients. Should the methods employed be the same or different? Is casework an appropriate approach or is community work more suited to this client group? Should social service agencies attempt to involve ethnic minority individuals and groups in decisions about service provision and delivery? While these and other associated questions were debated in the literature of the 1960's and 1970's, Jansari finds little evidence of unanimity in the suggested answers. Moreover, he notes that "authors who wrangle with the question WHAT should be done, do not necessarily answer HOW it should be done" (1980:26), a situation that, I suggest, recurs in more recent literature, too.

The last topic Jansari discusses is "multi-racial social work" (ibid:28-29), under which heading he considers both the place and role of ethnic minority students in professional education, and the training offered to white students and practitioners to equip them for work with ethnic minority clients. In both cases, he concludes from

the literature that not enough is being done to meet the needs of these different groups, thus inhibiting the development of truly multi-racial practice.

Overall, Jansari's analysis of the existing literature suggests that at the time of writing, social work was not working for ethnic minority clients, and that shortcomings were evident at every level. However, his paper gives the social worker few clues as to ways of identifying successful multi-racial practice. His approach is simply to review, with some critical comment, the disparate literature addressing the question of social work with ethnic minority clients, and to draw attention to the limitations of both the existing literature and the practice it describes. He is clear that something needs to change in the way social welfare provision is organised and delivered, as the following statement demonstrates: "If Britain is to become a truly multi-racial society, fundamental changes are necessary both in the attitudes of the personnel and the provision of services in social services departments" (Jansari, 1980:29). But he himself is not in the business of offering guidance for the development of appropriate initiatives and he finds no signposts in the available literature to suggest the way forward. By 1980, to judge from Jansari, no-one actually knew what multi-racial practice looked like, or what it should look like if such a practice were to be developed, a point well made in the Association of Directors of Social Services/Commission for Racial Equality report of 1978 (in Cheetham et al (eds.), 1981:15).

Jansari makes no attempt to draw from the literature a historical or social context for his review. Themes are presented almost in the abstract, as if the kinds of ideas found in social work texts have no relation to the broader political and social framework within which both social work and its different client groups are operating. The 'snapshot' effect of such a review is to dissociate social work analysis and practice from the dynamic of social forces; changes happen, Jansari demonstrates, but he does not explain them and, I would argue, could not satisfactorily explain them without drawing on the concept of racism.

In the course of his article Jansari does not explicitly mention racism, reflecting, one assumes, the absence of the term in the texts under review. As he observes, *vis a vis* the social work literature, "The general environment did not seem relevant at the time" (Jansari, 1980:18), a view he seems almost to endorse himself. He does hint at the implicit racism of many of the texts he draws on and the practice it describes, through his choice of quotations, but stops short of identifying it directly. The closest he gets is the somewhat cryptic remark,

"ethnic minorities have particular difficulties of prejudice and discrimination that are not shared by the contrast [i.e. indigenous] group" (Jansari, 1980:20), and his reference to the McCulloch and Kornreich's suggestion that the problems of black people are more to do with structural inequality than personal inadequacy (1980:27).

The second text I examine here, *Ethnic-Sensitive Social Work Practice* (Devore and Schlesinger, 1981), takes a more overtly political stance in its analysis of social work practice with ethnic minority clients. Devore and Schlesinger are clearly aware of the impact of ethnicity and social class on the lives and opportunities of individuals, and coin the term "ethclass" to denote "the point at which social class and ethnic group membership intersect" (Devore and Schlesinger, 1981:16). Social work intervention that fails to take full account of this dimension of both the client's and the worker's lives cannot be thought of as "ethnic-sensitive".

Devore and Schlesinger outline the key characteristics of the four approaches they have found most frequently in a wide range of practice settings, these being the psychosocial approach, the problem-solving approach, the structural approach, and the systems approach. Each approach is analysed to assess its suitability for, as well as its practical application to, ethnic-sensitive practice. The authors conclude that, while there is little inherent in the assumptions of these different approaches that makes them inimical to ethnic-sensitive practice, in fact "limited attention has been paid to modifying or generating procedures which heighten the practitioner's skill in working sensitively with people of various ethnic or class backgrounds" (Devore and Schlesinger, 1981:128). They therefore try to take practice one stage further on, by proposing a model for ethnic-sensitive practice which builds on "(1) social work values, (2) the conception of the ethnic reality and its relationship to the life cycle, (3) the layers of understanding, and (4) the view of social work as a problem-solving endeavor [sic]" (Devore and Schlesinger, 1981:133).

The use of "social work values" as one of the four planks of this model is interesting, as Devore and Schlesinger seem quite confident that basic social work values exist, and that they can be readily itemised: "The dignity of the individual, the right to self-determination, the need for an adequate standard of living, and satisfying, growth-enhancing relationships..." (p128). The problem seems to be less to do with values, on which we are apparently agreed, and more to do with the application of the set they identify for us. Practice is further governed by the use of the four layers of understanding (discussed

in great detail in chapter three of their book). These can be summarised as follows:

- "1. A basic knowledge of human behavior [sic];
2. A self-awareness, including insight into one's own ethnicity and an understanding of how this may influence professional practice;
3. The impact of the ethnic reality upon the daily life of clients;
4. The adaptation and modification of skills and techniques in response to the ethnic reality" (Devore and Schlesinger, 1981:78).

Having set up their model and outlined the assumptions and principles that support it (ibid:133-134 and 156 respectively), they then present an analysis of the typical intervention process. Working on the understanding that "[e]thnic-sensitive practice is first and foremost good social work practice" (ibid:162), they identify the basic skills that are relevant at each stage of the intervention and suggest guidelines for their adaptation to the ethnic reality. Their reliance on the idea of a shared definition of 'good social work practice' commits them to a relatively unproblematic view of the process of change towards more ethnic-sensitive service delivery and minimises the opposition any attempts at change meet, for example, in the form of entrenched racism.

Ely and Denney's examination of social work in a multi-racial society (1987) promises great things for the worker in pursuit of help or guidance in this area. According to the description on the cover, Ely and Denney will provide "basic information for the development of anti-racist social work practice and agency policy". They have amassed a large amount of information - which they present, in highly condensed form, in the first part of the book - about the lives and circumstances of black people in this country. Three chapters, approximately one third of the text, are devoted to 'scene setting', in the sense of locating black people as multiply disadvantaged members of a racially structured society.

Ely and Denney acknowledge that black people in this country have a wide range of economic and cultural backgrounds and that, as they settle, they will diverge according to wealth, housing, and social/geographic mobility. Nonetheless, it is axiomatic to them that, in comparison with the white population, blacks are "in aggregate a disadvantaged group" (Ely and Denney, 1987:68), and that this may, in turn, affect the way black clients perceive themselves - not just as individuals but "as members of a relatively disadvantaged community" (ibid:68). This, Ely and Denney suggest, may have implications for social work practice in that the black

client may distrust the worker and the agency, anticipating unfair treatment or unequal access to resources. They argue that the black client's suspicions may well be justified given the structural racism of white society and therefore the tendency of white agencies, including social services departments, to comparatively disadvantage black people, and the probability that white staff will share the perceptual framework of the majority society.

Having thus 'situated' black people within British society, Ely and Denney then examine some of the social work literature dealing with MRP, using a typology which recapitulates and extends the one presented by Denney in an earlier article (Denney, 1983). In that instance, Denney identified four "dominant perspectives" in the literature: anthropological, now re-named cultural deficit; liberal pluralism; cultural pluralism; structuralism. To the above, Ely and Denney now add one further perspective, black professional. Each perspective is tied to a particular political ideology and has particular practice implications.

Ely and Denney start from the position that the social worker involved in MRP is engaging with "aspects of human experience beyond the usual range of casework theory or general social work training ... perceptions grounded in a different experience and a different reality" (Ely and Denney, 1987:69). They seem to assume that white social workers are a reasonably homogeneous bunch, holding the views that they ascribe to the majority of the white middle class, namely "a belief in the primacy of the two-parent nuclear family, and a general assumption of the desirability of self-reliance and self-realisation" (p69). It is not clear on what basis Ely and Denney make this generalisation.

According to this first perspective, cultural deficit, the problems of black families derive from supposed weaknesses or deficiencies within their cultural patterns and practices - though these, as critics of this approach argue, are measured against an idealised white middle-class norm. Differences between black and white family structures, for example, are deemed to make the former inherently more problematic, potentially pathological, and therefore more liable to need intervention from the statutory social services. The form of intervention associated with this approach is intensive casework, designed to assist the black person or family in assimilating ever more closely into white society. Cultural difference is acknowledged, but seen as a temporary phase. Thus, the goal of social work with black clients is clear: "instilling the values and norms of British society" (Denney, 1983:152).

Criticisms of the cultural deficit approach point to a number of shortcomings. First, it adopts an idealised view of society's norms and values which is then used as the yardstick for judging black families. So authors operating within this perspective are comparing unlike phenomena, that is, white cultural ideals with the actual behaviour of some working-class black families. Taking Fitzherbert's (1967) text as an example, Ely and Denney argue that if the behaviour of the black client group had been compared instead with that of working-class whites then the contrast reported by Fitzherbert might not have been so stark, and the cultural differences might have assumed a lesser importance (Ely and Denney, 1987:74).

Second, this view operates with a very limited view of culture (see Denney, 1983:153). Third, there is an over-reliance on assumed cultural preferences which does not locate the actual practices of black families within their particular economic and social circumstances, and limited range of options. It is assumed, for example, that certain groups have a cultural preference for fostering, which accounts in part for the large numbers of black children in local authority care. But such 'explanations' fail to acknowledge the need of many black mothers to work outside the home in order to support their families, and the inadequacy of daycare provision for young children. And finally, this perspective focusses on the supposed personal failings of individuals, and gives insufficient consideration to the issues of racism and discrimination and their effects on black people.

Denney (1983:155) locates the second perspective, liberal pluralism, in the "mood of consensus-based social harmony and optimism" prevailing at the end of the 1960's and beginning of the 1970's. Assimilation had given way to integration, which was seen as not only a desirable, but also an achievable, goal for Britain's black population. Roy Jenkins, the then Home Secretary, described integration as "equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance" (quoted in Denney, 1983:154). The assumption here was that intolerance toward racial minorities could be reduced through anti-discrimination legislation, and that in the developing atmosphere of mutual tolerance, equal opportunities would naturally follow.

Cheetham's first major contribution to the MRP literature (1972) belongs within the liberal pluralist framework where society is seen as containing a number of elites, each influential in different spheres of social and political life. Power is diffused through society, and no one group has overall control. However, Cheetham herself is very aware that access to the various elites is not

available uniformly to all groups within society and, particularly, that black people often meet discrimination that prevents or impedes them in gaining access to sources of power. Discrimination, then, is seen as a real factor in the lives of 'visible', that is, black, minority group members. Cheetham's response is a form of social work that comes down to conflict management between indigenous and 'immigrant' groups. With individual families, the social worker can act as a 'bridge' or link between them and other outside agencies such as schools, and within the family can mediate between parents and their perhaps more 'British' children.

In Cheetham's analysis, blacks share some problems with poor whites, notably in the areas of housing and education, but they also face additional problems and stresses arising directly from their experience of emigration. Cheetham sees a role for social work in helping immigrants to cope with the strains of migration, particularly homesickness and adjustment to the new society. She recognises the possibility of 'culture conflict' between social worker and immigrant client, but her case examples suggest a belief that, with time, productive relationships can be established, and that the worker can successfully mediate between the black family and public agencies, or the outside world more generally.

Denney points to contradictions and difficulties in Cheetham's pluralistic stance that are neither adequately explored nor resolved. For example, he suggests that Cheetham emphasises "the importance of the social worker's ability to translate the 'rules' of interaction, or put more simply help the parties involved to make sense of what is happening" (Denney, 1983:157), but as she does not explain the process by which this interpretation takes place "it would appear that the worker must rely on common sense in attempting to negotiate reality and the rules that govern that reality with the client" (Denney, 1983:157). This omission begs the question of relative power in the transaction between social worker and client: whose version of 'reality' finally prevails? An appeal to 'common sense' is not unproblematic, as common sense is itself not a neutral concept; common to whom, one could ask? The power to make one's definition of reality stick is clearly not evenly distributed through society.⁶

Cheetham acknowledges the issue of the distribution of power and, with it, of resources, and would see it as a valid social work task to link 'disadvantaged' people to appropriate resources and the systems that control their allocation. But she does not then proceed to a more thorough structural analysis of the place of the black person in British society. Without a clear expression of the structural factors which hinder racial minorities from

gaining access to limited resources, the 'problem' once again devolves onto the individual black person. Intervention is focussed on the individual; social workers will use a variety of methods to help black people use other services effectively, and obtain their full entitlement to available resources. Departmental practices and procedures for work with black clients are less central to Cheetham's analysis.

Writers within the third tradition or perspective, cultural pluralism, again share a basically consensus oriented view of society, while acknowledging that different ethnic groups are competing for power. "The importance of cultural differences and of ethnicity is stressed above all other factors, including perhaps race, and it is the business of the cultural pluralists to show how these many ethnicities serve as a support and a buffer against the injustices and misfortunes of a racially inequitable society" (Ely and Denney, 1987:84). Roger Ballard (1979) and Catherine Ballard (1979) emerge as champions of this particular approach.

The main messages from the cultural pluralists seem to be that professional agencies should accept a degree of cultural relativity, so that each ethnic group is judged by its own standards, not those of an 'alien' group imposed from outside; and that culturally specific practices of ethnic minority groups which may seem confusing and even irrational to the outsider should be seen as part of a systematic totality.

Two points arise for social work practitioners within this framework. Firstly, ethnic minority cultures should not be viewed as inherently pathological or aberrant, but rather as internally coherent, functional structures that can offer group members a unity and strength in the basically hostile environment of white British society. Secondly, and as a consequence of this more positive assessment, social workers should be under an obligation to learn about, and operate in sympathy with, the cultural practices of the ethnic minority groups they encounter.

It is not clear how deep this understanding is expected to run. Ballard, for example, suggests that social work practitioners would become more effective agents in their dealings with ethnic minority clients, once armed with "a limited amount of relatively simple cultural information" (Ely and Denney, 1987:88) - this, presumably, to stop them treading on too many cultural 'toes' - and an awareness of the dangers of cultural imperialism. Quite how the social worker should adjudicate between conflicting claims of his or her⁷ own and the client's social world is not explained. An awareness of the dangers of cultural imperialism may not be sufficient to counteract the basic

presumption in favour of the majority culture that reinforces the position and power of the social worker in relation to the client. Adopting a stance of cultural relativism disguises the power relations between majority and minority cultures. Thus, within this perspective, there is minimal consideration of the impact of racism on the lives of ethnic minorities. Explanations of the negative behaviour displayed by some whites are couched more in terms of "cultural hostility" than even inadvertent racism, shifting the focus away from structural inequalities, and towards the malign, or simply misguided, behaviour of individuals.

The structuralist position is considered next. The broad term 'structuralist' covers a range of writings within a Marxist framework, which emphasise the class and racially structured nature of British (capitalist) society. Within this perspective, racism is analysed in the context of existing capitalist relations of production. "Structuralists locate the 'problem' in deficient material resources, in racist attitudes and practices within social work agencies, and in the current dominant ideologies of the state" (Ely and Denney, 1987:89). Dominelli's work falls into the structuralist camp and is discussed by Ely and Denney, while Denney (1983) also refers to Husband's discussion of race in social work (in Brake and Bailey (eds.), 1980). I sketch in the outlines of Dominelli's (1979) arguments below, and present a fuller account of her later (1988) work in the next chapter where her prescriptions for 'anti-racist' social work are discussed. I will then return in greater detail to Dominelli's work in chapter seven, where I present an analysis of this later text.

Dominelli wants to demystify the social work relationship, by emphasising its material basis: social work here is about access to resources. She criticises the way casework personalises problems and pathologises individuals who are, as she sees it, victims of structural inequality and inadequate resources. Her reframing of social work practice commits the practitioner to action that shifts power and resources towards the ethnic minority communities. "Dominelli suggests that a non-racist social work practice would expose the racist ideology embedded in current practice and would reveal the structural role occupied both by ethnic minority clients and social workers working with them" (Ely and Denney, 1987:90). Her approach would lead to the development of "client-centred, community-based" provision, which would depend on using ethnic minority groups' organisations, resources and expertise to build services to meet the expressed needs of these groups within their own communities. Further, it would entail an overhaul of agency employment practices and all departmental procedures, leading to the

recruitment of more ethnic minority staff, and greater involvement of black community organisations.

Clearly, traditional social work practice would need a thorough shakeup to bring it into line with the structuralist position. And it would seem that much of what has hitherto been valued by many workers - the ability to empathise, to establish 'caring relationships' with clients, in short, the features commonly associated with the client centred approaches⁸ - no longer has a place in this radically revised practice. Dominelli has debunked what she sees as the myth of the social work relationship and exposed it as merely another instance of the exercise of white power, with the client placed firmly, albeit benignly, in a position of dependency. But she does not say exactly what form of working relationship would emerge between social worker and client within the structuralist framework. Is the relationship to be purely instrumental, or must there still be a role for, and an understanding of, the personal interaction between individuals?

A different concern is raised by Ely and Denney: if social work is about redistribution of resources, how is such re-allocation to be achieved in a situation of limited, and often now decreasing, provision? Who should give up their share of possibly hard-won resources in order to provide the increase required by presently disadvantaged black groups?

The last perspective presented by Ely and Denney, the black professional, is associated particularly with the work of the Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professionals (ABSWAP). The establishment of ABSWAP can be seen as a move by black professionals to start taking an active role in the formulation and articulation of policies and practices within the social welfare field, as these directly affect black and minority communities. Black people are no longer being 'enabled' by concerned whites but are taking the initiative and approaching social policy issues from a specifically 'black' point of view. White ideology and assumptions are not to be taken as givens, but are being radically re-assessed and placed alongside newly articulated and competing black ideologies and assumptions.

As an example of this approach, Ely and Denney present ABSWAP's analysis of trans-racial fostering, and the Association's views of a more correct way of arranging substitute family care for black children. A view has emerged from within black communities that trans-racial fostering fails to equip black children adequately for dealing with the reality of living in a racist society. The argument against trans-racial placement contends that

a black child in care needs to develop a strong identity as a black person, and that this sense of identity can best be nurtured in a loving black family where the child will daily see strategies for coping with the racism of white society.

Trans-racial fostering has been a high profile and lastingly contentious issue, and the debates about it have been conducted with great energy not just within the profession but also in the wider public media.⁹ As one of the aspects of practice that has been considered from a black perspective - the key to which seems to be its emphasis on initiatives to challenge and reduce racism in social work - trans-racial placement has been an issue around which some of the broader concerns about 'cross-racial' social work have crystallised. Does 'white' social work have anything to offer black families, or is it approaching these families with the wrong questions, based on stereotyped and misleading information, producing faulty assessments of the 'problems' and therefore, necessarily, offering inappropriate and even damaging 'solutions'?

It is not clear from Ely and Denney's brief discussion whether they see the black perspective as promoting a form of 'separate development', something on the lines of 'different therefore equal' services running in parallel, or whether it is assumed that this newly articulated position is in some sense thought to be generally better - with this black perspective pointing to possible improvements in existing white practice, as well as immediately benefitting black clients. That is, are the criticisms made by black workers and clients indicative of general failings in the welfare services, such that the kinds of remedies envisaged, initially in relation to black service users, will lead to a broad improvement in services for all? Although such issues are not addressed by Ely and Denney in the two and a half pages they devote to consideration of the black professional perspective, they are fundamental to a general understanding of what is considered 'good' practice for any/all client groups.

Having outlined these five positions, Ely and Denney suggest that they differ along three main axes: the location of the 'problem'; treatment of the issue of power; and the extent to which social work is seen as free from or tainted with racism. Ely and Denney do not formally adjudicate between the different positions, but suggest that their perspectives follow a sequence that reflects developments in wider government and social policy and acknowledges the effects of the coming of age of generations of ethnic minorities born and educated in Britain. Each new approach has its roots in a particular historical, political and social configuration - which

would apparently leave the possibility of new circumstances encouraging or precipitating a further redefinition of both the 'problems' facing multi-racial social work, and their solution.

What then, in Ely and Denney's own assessment, are the characteristics of MRP? As they do not explicitly set out their own position, an answer has to be pieced together from comments made through the book, particularly the section dealing with social work provision for ethnic minority client groups and its relevance and effectiveness for ethnic minority clients. MRP would, it seems, involve at least the following elements: social work and social workers must acknowledge the impact of racism on the lives of black people in British society. More staff from ethnic minorities should be employed within the social services system. Training for all staff involved in social welfare provision should pay more attention to ethnic minority issues (p154).¹⁰ Two-way communication should be promoted; that is, "there should be cooperation and communication with ethnic minority communities in making provision" (p155), and also Social Services Departments should be more open and transmit more information to the local population.

Social workers should be able to recognise the strengths of the different practices of ethnic minority groups, for example in relation to differing parenting styles (p156). In connection with this, the social worker must be aware of her own social class experience and the difference between that and the experiences of many of her clients (p156). She also needs to be cautious of over-reliance on "cultural" explanations, ensuring that these do not disparage ethnic minority cultural preferences "and obscure the need for understanding class, race, financial and individual aspects of both nuclear and extended family" (p158). Finally, social workers should take account of the social and economic realities of the black client's position; at the simplest level, this means, for instance, arranging meetings at times that working adults can attend, even though this may be less convenient for the social worker.

Ely and Denney (pp125ff) discuss a number of situations where power is being exercised - for example, when the social worker is acting as gate-keeper, limiting access to scarce resources, or is acting under statutory powers of investigation or intervention - to illustrate "some of the complex ways in which ordinary transactions of everyday social work can operate to discriminate against and disadvantage the black client even though there is no policy to do so" (p125). They therefore urge that in such situations, the objective for social work with ethnic minority clients at this stage in the development of MRP

should be "damage limitation". In the end, then, Ely and Denney are making a plea for each 'case' to receive individual assessment, which will include consideration of what, to borrow Devore and Schlesinger's expression (1981), could be called the client's "ethnic reality".

Ely and Denney themselves seem to operate broadly within a structuralist framework, emphasising the multiple disadvantage suffered by the black communities in Britain, economic and social hardship exacerbated by the experience of personal and institutional racism, although they do not adopt the 'consciousness raising' approach favoured by Dominelli. Although at points in the book, Ely and Denney have appeared to endorse a very practical, resource-oriented form of social work, and have expressed pessimistic views about the possibility of "relationship-based work" (see p96 and p125), nonetheless they do still seem to think that it is desirable for social workers to attempt that form of activity characterised as "time-consuming, consensus-based discussion" (p97). They go on: "Hopefully, social workers in inner-city areas are still able to spend some of their time in this way ... Perhaps this is still the most personally rewarding and productive part of their work." (p97)

So the suggestion remains that there is in social work something that involves establishing a relationship that goes beyond the simply instrumental involvement of A with B, in which A (who has power) acquires resources on behalf of B (who lacks equivalent power). However, the present level of analysis does little to illuminate the nature of that relationship, nor the kind of understanding between the participants on which it depends.

In this chapter, I have charted the changes in approach in the social work literature to what I originally called multi-racial social work practice (MRP) - looking at the socio-political assumptions and implications of the different approaches outlined in texts that covered the range from Fitzherbert's *West Indian Children in London* (1967) to *Social Work with Black Children and their Families* (Ahmed, Cheetham and Small (eds.), 1986) and ABSWAP's (1983) analysis of trans-racial fostering. I concluded my examination of the literature with the belief that MRP had somehow 'escaped' from the existing attempts to pin it down and analyse it, despite Ely and Denney's promise (Ely and Denney, 1987) to tell the bemused social worker how to proceed.

Devore and Schlesinger (1981) have started to re-examine social work with the object of adapting present practice in a more ethnically sensitive direction. But they seem to

stick at an attempt to reshape existing practice rather than moving beyond present definitions to a reconceptualisation of both the social work task and its execution. Ely and Denney provide an analysis of the change in the way MRP has been conceived and acted upon, but break off at the critical point in the story - ie what next? The book has the feel of an extended trailer for an inexplicably delayed main feature. Ely and Denney leave us at the stage in the development of practice where a "black perspective" is being defined, a process that has continued during the intervening five or six years since the publication of *Social Work in a Multi-Racial Society*.¹¹

My reading of the literature suggests a discernible shift across time in the way social work with ethnic minorities has been conceptualised and presented. As Jansari (1980) noted, the earliest position adopted by the social work establishment was "Colour = problem". Social work itself was not implicated as part of the 'problem'; this was held to reside solely with the 'coloured immigrants' who were having trouble adapting to life in Britain. Once the idea was accepted that ethnic minorities were the victims of structural inequalities endemic to British society, social work could have a role in making sure that the distribution of available resources was as equitable as possible, and also in arguing for the provision of more or 'better' resources for all disadvantaged groups. Again, the focus was not on social work practice but on the position of ethnic minorities in the broader (structurally unequal) society.

Even the emergence of the idea of racism as a causal factor in the disadvantage suffered by ethnic minorities did not immediately challenge social work to any great degree. If social work was distorted by racial bias then this could be overcome by training and the availability of culturally appropriate information. This seemed to be the position taken, albeit in slightly different ways, by both the "cultural pluralists" discussed earlier and by Devore and Schlesinger. The fundamental integrity of the social work enterprise was not threatened; although local examples of 'bad practice' could be found, these could be corrected if the tenets of 'good practice' were once again applied. So social workers could concentrate on eradicating 'bad practice' rather than start questioning the assumptions of the whole enterprise.

But having introduced racism into the equation, there is scope for the relationship between social work and ethnic minorities to shift dramatically as demonstrated by the articulation of a range of black and/or anti-racist perspectives. And it is to these more recently formulated positions that I now turn.

CHAPTER ONE

NOTES

1. See, for example, the comment on the use of "non-racism" and "anti-racism" by the Social Care Practice Committee, 1988:25.

2. The behaviour of welfare organisations noted here by Jansari is perhaps equivalent to what has elsewhere been called the 'colour-blind' approach; see, for example, the Introduction to *Social Work with Black Children and their Families* (Ahmed, Cheetham and Small (eds.), 1986). Colour-blindness can appear in either of two guises, passive or active. In the passive form, the colour-blind individual claims not to notice the colour of the people with whom he is dealing; in the active form, colour differences are noted, but the individual tries to 'treat everyone the same'.

3. These latter two essays appear in an anthology edited by V.S.Khan (1979), which includes a chapter by Weinreich reflecting the same concerns as those attributed to McCulloch and Kornreich. Weinreich looks at the development of ethnic identity in adolescents and suggests that the special psychological pressures faced by ethnic minority adolescents are different from those faced by their majority ethnic group peers. His study concludes that "[t]hese differences result from their position in the wider society and not, as it is often assumed, from problems inherent in the minority populations." (Khan, 1979:88)

4. See the following articles: Williams (1988); Jolley (1988); Ahmad (1988c); Sharma (1991); Ranger (1989); Scott (1988); Anon. (1988a); and also Draper (1978) and Jackson (1979).

5. See, for example, Horn (1982); Dutt (1989); CRE (1980); the following are discussions of projects run by and for ethnic minority clients: Anon (1988b); Arnold (1982); Guru (1986); Hopkins (1987); Melville (1985); Sheik (1986); and Sondhi (1982).

6. See CCCS, 1982:46-88.

7. For expositional ease hereafter, I vary the gender forms randomly throughout the text.

8. The client-centred approach is associated in particular with the work of Carl Rogers (discussed in Howe,

1987:98ff); other writers adopting their own variants of the client-centred approach include Egan (1975) and Wilkes (1981).

9. The following give an idea of the range of the debate: ABAFA (1977), Ellis (1979), Arnold (1982), Bagley and Young (1982), White (1983), Mennell (1986), Small (1986), Tubbs (1986), Dale (1987), Evans (1987), Longmore (1987), Burningham (1988), Arnold and James (1989), Chambers (1989), Hayes (1989), Tizard and Phoenix (1989), and Anon (1990). Most recently (July 1993), trans-racial placement was highlighted when a Norfolk couple were refused permission to adopt a mixed-race child. This case was well-publicised in the national press and other media.

10. This simple statement gives no hint of the heated debate that surrounded the issue of race-relations training, once this kind of training went beyond the level of simply providing culturally relevant information about different ethnic minority groups, and the range of approaches proposed. See, for example, Katz (1978), Peppard (1980), Newby (1982a), Newby (1982b), Jones (1983), Peppard (1983), Sivanandan (1985), Coombe and Little (eds.) (1986), Dummett (1986), Jervis (1986), Jervis (1987), Race Equality Policy Group (1987), and Alibhai (1988).

11. For example, Ahmad (1988), Ahmad (1990), CCETSW (1991), NCDP (1991), and Wilson (1991).

CHAPTER TWO

THE STATE OF THE ART: ANTI-RACISM AND BLACK PERSPECTIVES
IN THE SOCIAL WORK LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction.

In the first chapter, I looked at the ways in which social work with ethnic minorities has been conceived. Jansari adopts a thematic approach while Ely and Denney present a broadly historical account of the changes that have been recorded in social work practice. Devore and Schlesinger take a different tack, identifying four approaches current in social work and analysing the potential of each one to bring about "ethnic-sensitive" practice. But, as I suggested then, these different analyses of practice suggest that, to date, social work has not responded adequately to the challenge of providing appropriate and effective services to ethnic minority groups. The implementation of the Children Act 1989 and its requirement, for the first time, on social workers to consider children's needs in relation to religion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background focusses attention on social work involvement with black families and brings new urgency to the question of appropriate intervention in these cases.

Social work, then, cannot stand still or rely on old ways of 'making do' in relation to work with ethnic minorities. As I suggested at the end of chapter one, new approaches are being formulated and among the recent contributions to the race and social work debate, two predominate: anti-racism and the incorporation of black perspectives into social work education, training and practice. In this chapter, I shall examine these two approaches in greater detail, starting with a discussion of the most challenging and uncompromising statement of the anti-racist position, Dominelli's *Anti-Racist Social Work*.

2.2 Anti-racism.

If MRP is at present more of a hope than a reality, what are the options for practitioners struggling to develop ways of working that challenge the racial/racist status quo and allow for more equitable service provision? One answer could be that if MRP is not yet possible, then an aggressive form of anti-racism¹ may prepare the ground for its future development.²

The failure of white social work to tackle racism is

Dominelli's starting point and the strength of her feeling that racism is an evil that must be eradicated is present throughout the book. She opens, in typically forthright fashion, with the statement: "white social workers have not come to terms with the ethnically pluralistic nature of British society nor have they reflected this in their practice by making available services which cater for the specific needs and demands of ethnic minorities (ADSS/CRE, 1979). Their failure to do so has made countering racism a most pressing issue in social work education, training and practice" (1988:1).³ She observes that white society has tried a range of approaches in its dealings with ethnic minority communities: assimilation, integration, multi-culturalism and, finally, multi-racialism. But in her assessment, each of these approaches has been found wanting, and therefore something new is required: "Racial inequality has not disappeared because white people understand better the customs, traditions, and religious activities of ethnic minority groups" (p2).

What Dominelli requires of social work is that it becomes a campaigning, outward-reaching activity, challenging racism overtly and working positively to bring about personal and organisational change that will promote the reduction, and finally, the elimination of racism in British society. An appreciation of the multi-cultural richness of contemporary British society may be a necessary part of good social work, she argues, but it is not a sufficient condition for the establishment of anti-racist social work - and anti-racist social work is, for Dominelli, the way forward.

She works within a structuralist perspective that emphasises the class- and racially-structured nature of British society. Racism is a structural fact in the context of existing (capitalist) relations of production; it is endemic in society and is manifested in different forms - personal, cultural and institutional. Dominelli acknowledges that efforts have been made to counter racism, but argues that they have so far proved insufficient to deal with the problem and in some cases have even proved damaging to the very groups whose position they were designed to improve (p1). She accepts that it is difficult for white people to know how to respond appropriately to the challenge of fighting racism as different 'orthodoxies' have come and gone. But this does not remove the white social worker's responsibility for engaging in the struggle: "we must tackle racism at its core by combining change at the personal level with organisational change. Anti-racist approaches to countering racism have attracted those of us wishing to transcend the limitations inherent in the other approaches open to white people" (p2-3).

So, what is racism? Dominelli provides this assessment: "British racism is about the construction of social relationships on the basis of an assumed inferiority of non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic minority groups and flowing from this, their exploitation and oppression. Racism is apparent in the minutiae of everyday life as well as institutions and legislation and permeates every aspect of our personal and professional lives whether we are black or white, making confronting it difficult and complex" (p6).⁴ Racism, in her view then, suffuses and structures all our personal, social and professional relationships, but is so deeply embedded in the social fabric that its presence cannot always be consciously articulated.

Her argument against racism is a moral, as well as a social/political one: racism deforms and demeans the perpetrators and beneficiaries of racist practices as well as those on the receiving end. Therefore, to become more fully human, generally 'better' people, there is no choice: we must take up the struggle and join the battle against racism. For Dominelli, this moral imperative is clear, and cannot be avoided, particularly by those who would claim a serious involvement in a so-called caring profession like social work. A strategy for engaging with racism is therefore required.

Dominelli addresses the macro level of organisational and social change where personal change is a necessary but not the most important component. However, she thereby obscures or diminishes the importance of the micro level - the nature of the social work 'encounter'. After reading this book, the social worker will know which campaigns to engage with, what organisational changes should be pursued, even what kind of training or re-education she should seek. But a characteristic feature of social work, the direct interpersonal contact between social worker and client, has been left unexamined. What, as a social worker walking into an interview with a client, do you do after you have said hello?

One answer would be that the social worker establishes an "egalitarian relationship" with the black client. But how? How does the social worker unilaterally offload power and disown her position of dominance? What would an equal or egalitarian relationship look like? What difference would it make to the form and content of the interaction between the parties? Dominelli stops short of defining a process for developing such relationships - or even for identifying when one has been successful - and remains at the level of exhortation. Such relationships are necessary and we must engage in them. The ends are clear. The means for achieving them remain somewhat less so.⁵ Nonetheless, Dominelli continues, "If white social workers start relating to black people on the basis of equality,

not only will they be transformed into better practitioners all round, but their agencies' policies and practices will be similarly affected" (p15). This all sounds so straightforward it is hard to understand why MRP has proved so elusive! To be fair, this is only the introduction, and Dominelli has the rest of the book to make her case in detail, but this kind of throwaway comment is not reassuring.

The main text starts with a chapter aimed at unravelling the dynamics of racism in social work, and confronts the reader with a chapter heading reminiscent of a Chinese Communist 'thought reform' slogan: "Racism permeates social work ideology and practice" (p21).⁶ Dominelli convincingly debunks the view that social work is in some mysterious way untouched by racism as social workers are themselves, as individuals, not terribly - or overtly - racist in their behaviour and attitudes. Racism is not adequately explained as the irrational or prejudiced views of a few intolerant individuals. Prejudice is undoubtedly a component of individual racism, but the pernicious characteristic of racism is the way it pervades all aspects of personal and social life. It is "an integral feature of British society" (p21) and social work has not been inoculated against its effects.

Having looked at the theoretical role and the practical manifestations of racism in British society (pp22-29), Dominelli focusses on racism in social work practice: she argues that, especially during a period of decreasing resources, social work's caring function becomes eclipsed by its social control function, and power shifts from those demanding or requiring resources to those providing them (p26). Thus far, Dominelli's position does not differ markedly from other broadly Left/Marxist or radical social work texts.⁷ However, she takes her analysis a stage further and says that social work is caught in a trap between its professed aim of promoting people's welfare and at the same time "rationing resources among those 'deserving' help" (p28). Racism, then, allows for the creation of a category of "undeserving" poor who can be systematically disenfranchised from welfare provisions. By failing to address the inherent racism of both the welfare system as presently operating and the wider society, social workers collude with the reduction of black people's access to welfare services despite their already apparent position as victims of structural inequality and inadequate resources.⁸

She concludes, "White social workers working in anti-racist ways have to consider racism in service delivery within a context in which the welfare state is being dismantled and restructured to exclude more and more people from receiving welfare provisions" (p31). This

conclusion places social work firmly and openly in the political arena, and challenges what Dominelli sees as the prevailing self-definition of social work as broadly an apolitical activity. Anti-racist social work must confront this misleading self-presentation and acknowledge the inherently political dimensions of a situation dealing with the unequal distribution of, and access to, power and resources (p31-32).

One factor militating against the adoption of a more overtly political stance - apart, that is, from the threat to the individual's continued employment by the 'local state' - is "professionalism". Dominelli offers her description of the prevailing professional mode, based on Compton and Galaway's premise that social workers largely have 'faith in the system'. So Dominelli proceeds, "A professional social worker is not interested in challenging the social structures in which the social work task occurs and remains objectively neutral on the major social concerns of the day during work-time" (p32).⁹

Nonetheless, she exhorts social work practitioners and educators to grasp the political nettle. To combat racism, they must produce theories of welfare which recognise that social work's position within the state system fulfils two functions: care and control. With a grand rhetorical flourish, she states, "*Thus, to develop anti-racist social work, we need to cut the Gordian knot of social work as a complex and contradictory form of social control*" (p35),¹⁰ and argues for a re-definition of the idea of professionalism in terms of taking sides against practices that perpetuate racial oppression and inequality, and eschewing a neutrality that condones the maintenance of the status quo.¹¹

The last aspect of the racism permeating social work ideology that Dominelli examines here is the "colour-blind approach" and its claims that social work offers universality of treatment (p36).¹² Dominelli argues strongly against treating everyone the same, in the colour-blind sense, and also against treating all members of a particular ethnic group as if they were all the same. In short, she wants individual assessment, but within a framework that acknowledges the objective disadvantage faced by all black people as a result of racism.

Dominelli's next target is social work education and training which, as the slogan heading the chapter proclaims, is "imbued with racism" (p41). She castigates the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), as the controlling and validating body for the social work profession, on several counts (p41): first, it "has failed to ensure that anti-racist measures become a compulsory part of the curriculum" allowing for

the continued dominance of anglocentric subject matter; second, it has failed to adapt its own internal structures along anti-racist lines by employing "sufficient numbers" of black people in policy-making bodies and in its staff composition; and third, it has failed to insist that teaching staff on CCETSW-validated courses reflect the racial/ethnic makeup of society.

Consequently, an anglocentric bias is maintained in the theoretical material presented to students, limiting and distorting their understanding of 'non-white' culture, history and achievements. And practice placements similarly fail to equip the student for anti-racist social work: "practice placements are not geared to training students in anti-racist social work since countering racism is not specifically included in the student's programme. Anti-racist policies are usually lacking in placement agencies" (p41). There are not enough black practice teachers to provide adequate supervision in anti-racist work, and white practice teachers are, in the main, poorly equipped for this task, lacking a basic anti-racist perspective themselves.

Dominelli examines the social work curriculum, with the intention of exposing the racism inherent in the social work literature. She notes, with Jansari (1980) and Denney (1983), that the social work literature has paid little attention to the question of racism *per se*. But for Dominelli, "the issue transcends this, for *even literature aiming quite hard not to do so, unintentionally reproduces racist stereotypes and biases*" (p42), and she cites a passage from a relatively recent text - by Coombe and Little (1987) - by way of example. She chooses several "exemplary classic texts"¹³ on social work with black clients to demonstrate the ways in which the impact of racism on black people is largely ignored, allowing - possibly even encouraging - the white worker "to think of black people as *the problem* to be addressed, thereby unintentionally harming black people's interests" (p43).

This tendency is exacerbated by the application of traditional casework models in work with individual black clients. The casework approach personalises clients' problems, and mystifies the social work relationship: "it ignores the fact that it is primarily *white* social workers constructing a casework relationship with *black* people, thereby decontextualising 'race' and obscuring the power differential and privileges accessible to white professionals but not black clients" (p44). White people do not understand black people's daily experience of racism and rejection in British society and continue to respond, through traditional casework, as if black people had largely the same problems as other (white) people - except for having more of these problems. Such a response,

for Dominelli, is entirely inadequate, and it downgrades the black person's formative experience of racism.

Casework is not the only approach to be criticised, and no area of social work practice is found to be free from racism. Dominelli is equally critical of those using groupwork or community work with black clients (p46) for their failure to address the issue of racism. Even the more 'progressive' approaches in the social work literature are found wanting. For example, Pincus and Minahan fail to specifically address racism; feminist and Left/Marxist texts have fared no better and are equally lacking in relation to their analysis of racism. Dominelli then turns to an analysis of the different aspects of racism "inherent in current definitions of social work" (p47). She looks again at the "problematic of the casework approach", cultural racism, multi-culturalism, and ways in which black resistance to racism is pathologised.

Having launched an attack on virtually all aspects of white social work's organisation, Dominelli looks to the establishment of autonomous black groups and their role in an anti-racist strategy. The sub-heading tells the reader her view of the importance of these organisations: "Autonomous black organisations must be respected by white anti-racist social work educators and practitioners" (p56). In the face of white people's fears as they start to loosen their hold on power by according to black people their legitimate right to organise separately, Dominelli makes a strong case for the necessity for black people to develop their own structures and organisations for mutual support and to oppose racism. She argues that social work training positively requires the establishment of such groups and outlines the benefits that will accrue to both black and white students and qualified staff (pp56-60) when these groups are allowed to flourish.

She then reinforces her earlier critique of the social work curriculum by listing the range of changes necessary to bring social work training into line with anti-racist thinking (pp60-65). Further, she proposes a radical shift in the organisation of practice placements, putting forward what she calls "the anti-racist apprenticeship model" (pp65-67). Essentially, this would involve the student working with a black placement supervisor - and such placements would be a requirement rather than an optional extra in the training package. Dominelli does briefly consider the particular position of black students in social work training, but the emphasis of her work is on the necessity for white people, who occupy positions of power and influence *vis a vis* black people, to rethink fundamentally the theory and practice of social work education. Clearly, very significant changes in existing practice would be necessary to allow for the widespread

use of the apprenticeship model in training; most obviously, large numbers of black people would need to be drawn in to social work agencies and allied community groups, and CCETSW would need to re-examine its criteria for suitability of practice teachers, ensuring that these were revised in anti-discriminatory ways.

Social work has traditionally set great store by the "use of self", the ways in which social workers "use their personalities, sense of self, and experience in establishing relationships with users of their services" (p18). So the ways in which the social worker constructs her understanding of herself and her world must be subject to close scrutiny. As has been noted, Dominelli's interest in 'the personal' lies less in her belief in the efficacy of individual casework than in her strong concern that unexamined attitudes are very likely to be racist attitudes and will therefore affect the individual's practice with, and relation to, black clients and colleagues.

But white people can employ a variety of strategies to avoid examining their own attitudes and practices regarding racism. Dominelli therefore argues that a specific form of training must be undertaken by all white social work staff with the aim first of all of exposing the ways in which white people use or are constrained by these strategies and prevented from initiating and developing anti-racist action. The form of training she advocates is called anti-racism awareness training, and is designed to connect "the individual, organisational and structural elements of social interaction. Taking changing the system as its central point, anti-racism awareness training attempts to deconstruct racism by demonstrating how personal change affected through increased consciousness of what one does as an individual fits into organisational and social policies and practices" (p73). For Dominelli, involvement in consciousness-raising activity and taking personal and organisational steps to challenge and eliminate racist practice are moral imperatives, rather than pragmatic/social options (pp76 and 129).

Having argued that anti-racist training is a prerequisite of personal and organisational change, Dominelli adds to this a number of other areas in which training would be required by white social workers wishing to work with black families in an anti-racist way (p123). The imperative nature of the commitment to anti-racism is further reinforced in the following statement: "white social workers wishing to develop anti-racist social work practice have no option but to initiate the organisational process of changing the perceptions, commitments and behaviour of colleagues, managers, employers and clients

in this direction" (p124).

I suggest that this leaves open the question of whether individuals can be made to have their consciousness raised. According to Dominelli, consciousness raising is a first and necessary step on the way to achieving anti-racist goals, but does it have logical as well as chronological primacy? Can individuals follow anti-racist policy directives (if such things exist) without having a 'heart and soul' commitment to the anti-racist objectives? Could going on a course have an effect, in and of itself, if the individual were not already prepared at some level to allow for the possibility of change in himself? Dominelli's assumption seems to be that once presented with the evidence, the individual experiences a 'gestalt switch' and cannot be the same again, and yet, at the same time, "the power for white social workers to decide to accept the anti-racist struggle remains within them" (p79).

How does social work cope, in the meantime, when white social workers come into contact with black 'clients'? The short answer, for Dominelli, is - badly. To demonstrate, she concentrates on social work practice with black families, arguing that most social work intervention takes place against the backdrop of the family (p93). She looks at the ways in which black family forms and ways of relating have been stereotyped and pathologised, and documents the damaging effects which social work using these (racist) parameters inflicts on the families concerned.

Her working approach seems to be one of damage limitation - minimise the amount of harm white social workers can do by effectively restricting their opportunities for direct work with black clients. In the case examples she presents (pp97ff), Dominelli restricts the white social worker's involvement in relieving the client's personal distress to referring him to an appropriate black organisation, though she allows that there may be useful practical tasks that can be handled for that individual (e.g. ensuring that he is receiving full entitlement to state benefits). But the main thrust of the worker's intervention would more properly be directed at bringing about organisational and political change - for example, demanding adequate translation and/or interpreting services and employment of ethnic minority social workers, or campaigning against immigration laws that divide black families. Clearly, the individual social worker is going to be a very small voice calling for change, so Dominelli urges the development of collective forms of working.

The theme of collective action to bring about organisational change is developed in a discussion of

different ways of working on agency policies and practices. Dominelli highlights two broad directions for organisational change: employment policy and practice; and service delivery. The situation of black staff in social work agencies is examined from different angles - the contradictory position of a new black professional middle class created by the race relations "industry" (pp131-35); the role of equal opportunities policy in setting the appropriate climate for anti-racist work and possible blocks on its effective operation (pp135-39); the use and abuse of Section 11 posts. Dominelli's conclusions about suitable approaches to structural change are again encapsulated in a slogan to draw the chapter to a close: "collective strategies and methods are imperative in implementing organisational change" (p143).

Despite the impetus towards collective action, white social workers who want to engage seriously in the development of anti-racist practice are faced with a daunting set of tasks involving nothing less than "the transformation of existing social work practice and the social relations expressed through and within it". And, she continues, in fighting racism, white anti-racist social workers "will have to work simultaneously on the individual or personal level, the institutional or organisational level, and the structural level. This will require anti-racist social workers to work both on their own and collectively to deal with individual distress and structural constraints (p146)."

Dominelli presents a series of case studies to suggest how the anti-racist social work advocate can operate in a variety of contexts (p146ff). But again, the personal context, the relationship between social worker and client is largely ignored, being reduced, in Dominelli's account, to a referral to an appropriate mother-tongue or black organisation. She tells us later (p155) that white anti-racist social workers would "devote their energies towards bringing black and white people together on the basis of equality" but for me the mechanics of this undoubtedly useful and satisfying activity remain hazy. Nonetheless, the reader is cheered at the end by finding another slogan: "Anti-racist social work practice is good practice".

Dominelli is clearly intending to light a fuse under social work, for, despite recognising its failings towards black and ethnic minority clients, social work has remained largely unchanged at the bureaucratic and professional levels. There are examples of positive changes in policy and practice, but these remain sufficiently rare for Dominelli to feel justified in launching her attack on the whole edifice of social work - and beyond that, on society at large.

It is perhaps here that the book starts to come unstuck. Dominelli's antipathy to racism is evident and deeply felt, but the focus of her attack gets blurred by sliding between social work and wider society. I am not trying to depoliticise social work as an activity, or hide the repressive characteristics of social work as social control. But there are particular features of social work to do with the fact that it is relationship-based work that bear close examination, and which differentiate it from other forms of social/agitprop activity; and by choosing to allow these features to escape serious scrutiny, Dominelli has left a gap in her text that reduces its impact as a statement about social work.

Dominelli's prescription for the development of anti-racist practice involves demystifying the 'social work relationship' emphasising, rather, its material basis; social work here is about access to resources. Her reframing of social work practice commits the practitioner to action that shifts power and resources towards ethnic minority communities, leading to the development of "client-centred, community-based" provision in the control of the service users. I would share Dominelli's criticism of the way casework, as traditionally practised, has tended to personalise problems and pathologise individuals who are, from a different perspective, victims of structural inequality and inadequate resources. But where does her account leave what has up to now been considered a key feature of social work, namely the social work relationship - which includes the use of self, the ability to listen and to empathise? Exactly what form of working relationship would emerge between social worker and client, and between social worker and colleague, operating within Dominelli's framework?

Having dispensed with the traditional casework relationship, Dominelli proposes the establishment of "egalitarian relationships" but, as I have said earlier, she does not explain how this state of affairs is to be achieved. And this is because her concern is not really with the individual - at least, not at the intimate level of interpersonal communication, the conversation between A and B. I suggest that Dominelli's analysis does little to illuminate the process of communication and understanding encapsulated in the experience of dialogue with an Other.

2.3 Black perspectives.

Having looked at how anti-racist social work is conceptualised in the literature, I now move on to consider the second broad approach outlined in the introduction to this chapter, and start by considering a

text whose title proclaims its orientation to the race and social work debate: *Black Perspectives in Social Work* (Ahmad, 1990). Early on in this slim volume, Ahmad sets out her position: "Within the overall framework of good social work practice for Black families, the content of this book is placed in the context of the basic principle of care, including some of the main principles of social work and professional ethos and values" (Ahmad, 1990:3). And, later on the same page, "Racism and oppressive social work practices are in conflict with the 'caring' notion of social work profession. It is impossible to be a caring practitioner and be racist or oppressive at the same time, however unintentionally".¹⁴

Ahmad is critical of arguments that reduce racism to 'racial disadvantage' and equate 'victims' with 'the problem', and concludes, "Without identifying the pervasive forces of racism in the identification and assessment of Black client' (sic) needs, social work profession may not only contribute to risk their credibility and accountability, but also jeopardise their own principles" (p8). So, from the beginning, Ahmad is setting out a position that includes an anti-racist as well as a black perspective.

She nominates four key areas for attention: identification and assessment of need; empowerment; resources for change; and legislation. In each area, she uses case studies first of all to examine existing practice with all its (racist) flaws, and then to present an alternative way of working or thinking about working that does not, she argues, fall into the same racist traps. In the first section, for example, there is a discussion of the "Open File" system in one anonymous social services department (SSD) and the problems encountered by that SSD in introducing the policy, especially in relation to black clients (pp6ff).

In Ahmad's analysis, the failure to implement the open file policy is taken as symptomatic of a more general failure in social work to respond adequately to black clients and to promote anti- or non-racist practice. She makes the point that "clientisation" could be conducive to the welfare of black people if it meant increased access to SSD-controlled resources and services, and "self-control and self-development" (p8); but in practice, the opposite tends to occur, and black people simply experience greater institutional control of their lives. If the basic processes of identification and assessment of need are wrong, skewed by racist assumptions, then social work cannot do otherwise than continue to fail black clients. And Ahmad shows how white social workers' judgements, in this case in relation to the open file policy, can be seen to misrepresent fundamentally those clients.

She looks at the accounts of the implementation and subsequent failure of the open file policy given by white social workers and reframes them from a black perspective; the 'reasons' given by the social workers come to look more like excuses for inaction and maintenance of the status quo (p8). By shifting responsibility for the success of the policy onto the clients' shoulders, the SSD can appear blameless, and effectively continue to operate in the same old ways. For Ahmad, this is an opportunity wasted: white and black could have become allies "in tackling manifestations of racism, in particular, personal racism in assessment and recording, which is primarily at the root of cause factors" (p8).

As I have indicated, Ahmad relies on extended analyses of casework with black families in different circumstances to bring out what, for her, are the salient features of social work from a black perspective. Her first example turns on the involvement of a Sylheti family with the health and social services (p9ff). Having noted the ways in which white professionals intervened both insensitively and unsuccessfully with both Mrs B. and her husband, Ahmad suggests that the assessment in this case was impaired by the inherent racism of the workers who were operating with a distorted view of black families, a view which she characterises as "pathological framework" (p9).

In her proposals for improving practice, Ahmad emphasises the importance of making positive use of clients' and community resources: social workers need to be able to recognise the (different) strengths and positive contributions of black individuals and groups, and move away from the assumption that differences - for example in family forms or roles - are pathological. This message recurs through the book and is an essential component of the approach to practice that Ahmad is endorsing, namely, empowerment. Like Dominelli, the social work she approves moves away from the personalising of problems commonly found in traditional social casework in the psychodynamic mode, and towards "joint ownership" of the issues to be resolved (p14).

She notes the use by black professionals and groups of a de facto community social work approach, though it is not necessarily identified by the 'users' in those terms, and she sees such an approach as essentially more open than traditionally practiced 'white' social work. Breaking down the power of social work expertise or specialised knowledge by moving toward more cooperative ways of working is also a feature of empowerment, but can rebound on black workers who may be accused of over-identification with black clients and be forced to choose between that way of working and making a commitment to a more

traditional form of professionalism.

In the second case study (p15ff), Ahmad describes a case involving a black family where the widowed elderly mother gives up her own accommodation to live with her married daughter. She charts the interventions by the different agencies involved, and the unhappy outcome for the various family members. Ahmad's account of the actions of the Social Services, the Housing Department and the family G.P. in 'dealing' with Mrs. J. is deservedly critical, and she offers an alternative strategy based on a different assessment of the actual 'problem'. Ahmad's approach emphasises the element of community involvement and participation that she sees as integral to a black perspective. Four very brief case examples are provided and discussed (pp23-6) to show the damage that can be done by white social workers who fail to give due consideration to questions of race and racism when making assessments of black children.

Following the discussion of identification and assessment of need, Ahmad devotes the next chapter (almost half the book) to an extended exploration of the concept of empowerment. The definition of empowerment that Ahmad adopts is drawn from a work by Solomon entitled *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities*. In Solomon's usage, empowerment is a "process whereby the social worker engages in a set of activities with the client or client system that aim to reduce the powerlessness that has been created by negative valuations based on membership in a stigmatized group. It involves identification of the power blocks that contribute to the problem as well as the development and implementation of specific strategies aimed at either the reduction of the effects from indirect power blocks or the reduction of the operations of direct power blocks." Ahmad comments on this quotation in the following terms: "Since racism is one of the major powerful forces that blocks social work empowerment in relation to Black clients, it is necessary to establish a framework for non-racist social work practice" (p34). So again, the articulation of a black perspective is linked with the development of anti-racist ways of working.¹⁵

Ahmad then looks at the possible application of the principles of empowerment to other social work approaches, in much the same way as Devore and Schlesinger (1981) discussed the extension of ethnic-sensitive practice to different forms of social work. The discussion of a "radical social work approach" (p45ff) shows that, for Ahmad, the principles of empowerment can be successfully incorporated into existing practice frameworks, a point further borne out by her case studies and examples relating to the "Task-centred approach" (pp50-55), the

"Unitary approach" (pp55-60) and the "Group Work approach" (pp61-69).

Next, she briefly considers the "resources for change" that are available to the social work profession (pp74-84). Top of the list and, in Ahmad's estimation, the "most valuable resource for social work change for racial equality", is "'good practice'" (p74). She identifies six "necessary components of good practice resource" (pp74-75), and is then able to maintain confidently that "non-racist practice is good social work practice and good social work practice is good for all, whether Black or White" (p75). The other resources for change that she considers are the black community (pp77-78), black voluntary organisations (pp78-81), black workers (pp81-83) and anti-racist white workers (pp83-84).

Ahmad devotes her final chapter to drawing out the implications of various pieces of legislation - in particular, the Race Relations Act 1976 and the Children Act, 1989 - and the White Paper on Community Care for the advancement of race equality in social work and social services' provision. She concludes on a positive note, arguing that while social workers cannot take responsibility for resolving the racism of British society, they can at least take on the challenge of trying to resolve the racism in their own profession and practice. Indeed, she claims that social workers have an obligation to work against the perpetuation of oppressive practices, and that this obligation will only be met through work that empowers the black families who come into contact with social services.

Two other recent texts that take up the themes of anti-racism and black perspectives in social work are the collections of essays entitled *Setting the Context for Change* (NCDP, 1991) and *One Small Step Towards Racial Justice* (CCETSW, 1991). The writings in these two collections meet some of the criticisms that Dominelli (1988) levelled against CCETSW in relation to its position on anti-racism. In order to successfully complete the new DipSW, students must be deemed to have acquired a range of practice competences, and with the introduction of CCETSW Paper 30, a specific attempt has been made to introduce anti-racist requirements into the training programme. Each of these texts deals with the inclusion of anti-racist and black perspectives in social work education, training and practice, using contributions from black academics, students and practitioners to pursue the curricular implications of CCETSW's explicit stance on anti-racism.

As these texts reveal, the articulation of a black perspective on social work takes us into new territory and is an important challenge to the existing bases,

assumptions and values in social work. The previously unheard voices of black professionals and service users move the whole social work enterprise into a more critical and self-analytical mode. But how - for both black and white - to proceed, using that perspective, to the development of constructive and ethnically sensitive welfare services? MRP will, I suggest, involve something other than the acknowledgement by whites of the validity and necessity of the 'black perspective' in social work - though as my later analysis of Ahmad's text indicates (chapter eight), there may be difficulties and challenges aplenty for the (committed) white reader trying to engage with a text written from a black perspective.

The idea of a black perspective depends on the possibility that there may be a way of looking at the world - more particularly in this context, at social work - that is essentially different for a black person by virtue of being black.¹⁶ From this position, the 'problem' is not about being black *per se*; indeed, this is celebrated as a source of strength and cultural richness. Rather, the 'problem' is redefined as residing in the attitudes and practices of (white) social workers and, beyond them, the social work institution which is in turn a product of the wider (racist) society. Social work itself - its beliefs, assumptions and procedures - is now a legitimate target for black dissatisfaction. Criticisms of social work training and practice have been hard-hitting and reinforce the view that it is the institution of social work that is inherently problematic.

The articulation of an anti-racist perspective also questions the status and nature of the social work enterprise. Social work's self-image may be caring and even-handed, but this is no protection from the realities of practice in a racist environment. Anti-racism challenges social work to re-examine both its premises and its priorities and to ally itself in the most practical way with the oppressed. In this way, anti-racist and black perspectives become part of a more general, anti-discriminatory position which is concerned with questions of broader social justice and equality.

I will look in more detail in the next chapter at the development of the concept of racism and its peculiar entrenchment in our cultural language or currency, but the point I wish to draw out here is that the emergence of racism as a factor in the analysis of social work practice has changed the nature of the discussion at its heart. It has pointed to an alternative way of conceptualising 'the problem', and thus invites the development of different strategies for understanding - and, ideally, improving - social work practice.

With the formulation of black and anti-racist perspectives, then, the terms of the debate about social work and race have changed: "colour = problem", i.e. the problematising of ethnic minorities, has given way to a set of positions that have the capacity to problematise social work itself. Having summarised the stages that social work has gone through, the question of course remains, "what next?" The discussion of the process of change that led from problematising ethnic minorities to the problematising of the social work enterprise itself has many resonances with feminist critiques of other institutions, critiques which move attention away from a "woman = problem" formulation and direct it towards the institutional procedures and practices that oppress women in different ways. In the light of this, therefore, it may be instructive to examine a parallel debate that seems to have followed a similar history.

2.4 A comparison of perspectives on race and gender.

The area I have turned to - women in science - offers a useful structure for the analysis of social work practice in relation to ethnic minority clients. Most importantly, perhaps, it may also suggest a new direction for our thinking about the development of MRP. The following discussion draws extensively on the work of Sandra Harding (1986), from which all otherwise unattributed quotations in this section are drawn.

Harding's task is to examine 'science' as currently constituted and practiced, and to ask whether science is sexist. To answer this question, she looks at evidence from different feminist critiques of science, ranging from the reformist to the more revolutionary; these move from a position that identifies only 'bad' science as the problem, leaving the basic value framework intact, through to a more radical reappraisal of the whole scientific enterprise where all assumptions are open to challenge. Her analysis involves a shift from what she terms "the 'woman question' in science" - that is, an emphasis on the question "what is to be done about the situation of women in science?" (p9) - to the new question being posed by some feminists: "'Is it possible to use for emancipatory ends sciences that are apparently so intimately involved in Western, bourgeois, and masculine projects?' - the 'science question' in feminism" (p9).

In an analogous way, I think the social work literature can be examined and the question asked, "Is social work racist?" While not seeking a perfect fit with Harding's conceptual framework, addressing this question will involve trying to draw up a parallel structure to explore the way in which assessments and critiques of social work

practice have changed over time and in response to different political/ economic/social circumstances.

The focus is on a move away from "the 'race question' in social work" - that is, asking what is to be done with/about black clients presenting at Social Services Departments? - towards consideration of "the 'social work question' in ...". Here the problem of terminology presents itself again, making this formulation hard to complete. What is the 'race' equivalent of 'feminism', as in Harding's construction "the 'science question' in feminism"?

'Feminism' does not simply signify the absence of androcentrism but has gained a more active sense. It is not just the swapping of a state of affairs that is pro-men for one that is pro-women. Feminism has, in some senses, involved challenging and attempting to refigure traditional male/female, masculine/feminine hierarchies with a view to allowing the development of new forms of social relations. At the same time, Harding's formulations denote a shift in the locus of the 'problem' - away from women, in the first case, and to a new location in the actual practice and structures of science, in the second. In a similar way, I have proposed an analysis of social work practice that shifts away from an assessment of black people as 'the problem', to a situation where social work itself is the problematic, viewed in relation to sets of behaviour that challenge white/black hierarchies of dominance and inferiority. For this reason, perhaps, the construction adopted earlier on the text, multi-racialism (as in the usage MRP), should be questioned as it does not adequately express the element of confrontation or challenge inherent in the active conception of feminism proposed. Therefore, at this stage, it may be that 'anti-racism' is the more appropriate, although not entirely problem-free, term.

My procedure in what follows is to present each of four basic critical approaches to science and scientific practice in the terms used by Harding, and to follow each such brief account with a discussion of its possible relevance to an analysis of social work and social work practice.

i) Equal opportunities position.

Harding observes that, "The criticism thought least threatening to science's self-understanding is that of unfair educational employment, and status-assigning practices" (p58); however, little has been done to ameliorate this situation and bring in fair practices - and this despite the view held by many that eliminating such inequities would not alter the fundamental nature and practice of science.

Her analysis of women's continued poor showing and lack of public reward in this field is not directly related to straight numbers of women employed in science; that is to say that an increase in numbers did little to improve the general position of female scientific employees, although of course, in every age, some 'exceptional' women have always managed to break through and achieve status and acknowledgement for their contributions to scientific knowledge. Rather, Harding noted the following: "The broader social and political context in which discrimination against women in science occurs is part of gendered social relations more generally, and is part of the psychic landscape within which individual masculine scientists think about themselves as well as about the nature of science" (p59). Thus, an understanding of the continued down-graded, subordinate position of women in science is intimately bound up with issues of gender identity and relative power in the broader society which governs and validates scientific activity.

To turn to a consideration of an equal opportunities position in social work: the argument is made that if recruitment and employment practices within Social Services Departments (SSDs) were made more fair, that is were not either intentionally or unintentionally discriminatory then this would open the way for more black workers to come into the social work system. At present, ethnic minority group members are underrepresented in the profession, and moves to change this, and bring the workforce more into line with the composition of the general population are being pursued. A 'representative' service, in this sense, is held to be a better service.

However, assertions of this kind leave open more questions than they answer. Why should increasing the number of any one particular group within the SSD necessarily be a 'good thing'? Is there any automatic or necessary link between the size of the ethnic minority staff group in a given local authority and an improvement in the service provided? As Harding has already indicated, numbers, in themselves, do not tell the whole story. Other issues would need to be addressed before it could confidently be said that any real change in the SSD had occurred. For example, what is the likelihood of an ethnic minority individual being promoted to a senior management post? Are the admittedly larger numbers of ethnic minority staff found mainly in clerical or low-grade professional posts, with little chance of movement? Do black staff stay with the local authority?

And perhaps the most important issue that the equal opportunities position fails to address - what is, or should be, the role of ethnic minority staff within the

SSD organisation? Do black staff 'succeed' in social work by becoming 'honorary whites', or is there a role for such staff simply by virtue of the fact that they are black and not white?¹⁷ Do they have to become cultural experts or take on the role of departmental 'resource', obviating the need for white staff to engage with issues of race and alternative cultural norms? A simple head-count will not reveal the answers to questions such as these.

ii) Feminist empiricism.

In Harding's discussion, this view holds that there may be instances of sexism within science, but that these are not indicative of a problem within the scientific enterprise itself; they are simply examples of 'bad science'. "...[S]exism and androcentrism are social biases correctable by stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific enquiry" (p24). Thus a certain amount of tinkering will remove these peripheral problems, leaving the underlying structure of norms and values untouched by - perhaps even beyond - criticism.

An equivalent construction in terms of social work and race could run something like this: there is, in social work, a core of values that is universal and fundamental - perhaps relating to the essential 'human-ness' of all people, whatever the differences in their appearance or circumstances; an example here could be the colour-blind approach. There may be instances where social work practice with ethnic minority individuals has been insensitive, even racist in its effect, but such cases have arisen where the canons of 'good practice' have not been rigorously enough applied. Thus "social work" as an enterprise avoids the taint of racism, leaving the 'problem' as one which could be removed if basic social work principles were maintained. Devore and Schlesinger seem to find themselves drawing similar conclusions about social work, though they would certainly not accept that ethnic-sensitive practice could start from a colour-blind position.

While at first glance such a position seems very appealing, closer scrutiny shows that, at present anyway, it is both impractical and flawed. Good intentions, and an earnest desire to treat people fairly are not protection against the inadvertent racism of certain behaviours. Perception of another individual can never be entirely neutral in that the ability to make sense of what/who one is perceiving depends on a prior framework of meanings and experiences. So it seems implausible, as advocates of the colour-blind approach would claim, that race/racial appearance - a very obvious physical marker - can be ignored, though an individual may make the effort not to attach negative significance to such information about a client. An inherent problem of the colour-blind approach

is that 'treating everyone the same' has frequently been a euphemism for treating everyone as if they were - or should be - white. And this, in practice, denies the particular circumstances and needs of black people, becoming racist in effect if not by intention.

To look at the broader empiricist position, aside from the particulars of the colour-blind approach, three further difficulties can be noted: first, can racism, any more than sexism, be reduced to a "correctable social bias"? Any analysis of the concept of racism would suggest that it occupied a far more deep rooted and integrated place in our cultural map than such a description would allow. Second, is there any agreement about what should constitute the 'value core' of social work?¹⁸ And third, the status of what social work chooses to problematise is not itself neutral, but reflects the norms and biases of the wider (racist) society.

iii) The feminist standpoint.

According to this feminist critique of science and its organisation, "Briefly, this proposal argues that men's dominating position in social life results in partial and perverse understandings, whereas women's subjugated position provides the possibility of more complete and less perverse understandings. ... The feminist critiques of social and natural science, whether expressed by women or men, are grounded in the universal features of women's experience as understood from the perspective of feminism" (p26).

Without trying to contrive a too-perfect fit, I would suggest that translation of this approach into race and social work terms could take either of two forms, a 'soft' or a 'hard' version. The 'soft' version would assert that the social worker needs to understand the ethnic minority perspective and to be sensitive to the social experiences of minority group clients, as such experiences provide a unique starting point for the discovery of racial bias. The worker adopting this approach would be in the tradition described by Ely and Denney as "cultural pluralism" (1987:83-89). The form of practice envisaged by writers within this framework lays emphasis on the worker having knowledge of the client's racial/cultural/ethnic background, and using this knowledge in a culturally sensitive way.

As the discussion of cultural pluralism in chapter one noted, this approach has its limitations, chiefly that it downgrades the role and impact of racism on the lives of black people. Devore and Schlesinger (1981), while emphasising the importance of adequate cultural knowledge, take their analysis one stage further with their ideas of "eth-class" and the "ethnic reality" which incorporate an

understanding of the structural factors affecting black people in a racist society.

The 'hard' version would start from the position that the whole social work edifice is suspect and riddled with eurocentric and/or racist biases. This view recognises the central and devastating effects of racism, and the structural position of ethnic minority groups in British society. It leads either to a form of structuralism or to the development of a 'black' alternative framework and practice in social work. Such an alternative could be conceptualised as different but not necessarily better than existing 'white' social work, or as 'better' in some sense yet to be defined. Practice examples can be found presenting criticisms of, or proposals for, social work from a specifically 'black' perspective.¹⁹

The 'standpoint' approach has a lot to offer current social work thinking in that it provides a much needed jolt to many hitherto unquestioned assumptions about appropriateness and effectiveness of services across cultural/ethnic boundaries. It brings to the fore a previously unheard group of voices, those of both black professionals and clients. One interesting question left unanswered at this stage, analogous to the question posed by Harding about feminist standpoint theory, is whether there is, or should be, one ethnic minority/black standpoint, or several different and cross-cutting standpoints which need to be viewed together.

iv. Feminist postmodernism.

Feminist postmodernism in Harding's discussion demands an acknowledgement of the validity and richness of women's 'fractured' identities; that is, a recognition of the many voices within the general identity 'women', and the need for these voices to interact and challenge one another, rather than trying to produce 'the' one feminist standpoint. It is trying "to eliminate the defensive androcentric urge to imagine a 'transcendental ego' with a single voice that judges how close our knowledge claims approach the 'one true story' of the way the world is" (p55). If not proposing a situation where epistemologically 'anything goes', Harding is at least envisaging an attempt to treat sceptically the most basic assumptions of science.

Science is engaged in seeking certain kinds of knowledge - and both the nature of that knowledge and the processes by which it is sought can be subject to critical assessment of the kinds suggested by Harding. Feminist science - or better, feminist sciences - do not yet exist, but a struggle has been joined to bring such new knowledge bases and procedures into being. Harding's own description of the present situation is worth quoting at some length:

" 'Something out there' is changing social relations between races, classes, and cultures as well as between genders - probably quite a few 'somethings' - at a pace that outstrips our theorizing. ... It would be historically premature and delusionary for feminism to arrive at a 'master theory', at a 'normal science' paradigm with conceptual and methodological assumptions that we all think we can accept. Feminist analytical categories should be unstable at this moment in history. ... The problem is that we do not know and should not know just what we want to say about a number of conceptual choices with which we are presented" (p244).

Harding points to the need for critical dialogue between the participants involved in science and for an interrogation of the discourses of science, the traditions that condition the practices, attitudes, knowledge bases - ways of knowing - of both participants and critics. A similar approach could usefully be applied to social work, an enterprise that has an irreducible dependence on and involvement with language, with both spoken and written text (interviews, case files, conferences, court reports, etc.).

Postmodernism, in the form presented by Harding, has something new to offer social work theory and practice. Within this frame of reference, the project now for social work is not to try and define the necessary conceptual and methodological assumptions for the enterprise to be known as 'anti-racist practice'. Such a project would be no more possible or desirable than the search for 'the feminist science'. A more realistic and urgent task would be the promoting of a process of critical dialogue and debate among the many different voices within and affected by the statutory welfare services.

In the next chapter, I analyse the concept of racism and will be suggesting that it transcends the purely personal (the prejudice/cognitive component), and similarly, that it cannot be reduced to the impersonal consequences of particular political/historical/bureaucratic configurations. In a certain sense, racism blends the personal and the political; it is embedded in the social fabric of this country and assumes the character of a 'linguistic resource'. A convincing definition of anti-racist practice needs to acknowledge the way in which racism structures and infiltrates different forms of discourse - including social work discourses. This view of racism reaches to the heart of our ways of knowing about the world; it raises basic questions of epistemology to do with how we understand and relate to what we encounter 'out there'. My reading of the social work literature suggests that neither MRP nor anti-racist practice have been approached from this angle, and in fact that it will

be necessary to look outside social work altogether to find an appropriate framework for analysis.

CHAPTER TWO - NOTES

1. I will expand this point about the significance of a change in terminology in section 4 of this chapter.
2. Though my later discussion of Dominelli (1988) in chapter seven suggests that such a move may not itself be without problems.
3. All references in this section are to Dominelli (1988) unless otherwise indicated.
4. This is an odd formulation for a structuralist: 'we' oppress 'them' because we think they are inferior. It suggests that ideology determines structure - so what then is the "core" of racism referred to by Dominelli on p2?
5. The problems associated with establishing egalitarian relationships are similar to those that arise when Dominelli falls back on intuition, calling on "our intuitive responses" (p13) to guide white social workers' communications with black clients and fellow workers. How should we know which of our own intuitive responses to listen to? Do we treat all comments or responses which suggest that we have been racist in the same way and with the same importance? Which white or black people, for example, do we consider are entitled to pass such comments? Dominelli offers few clues.
6. Other slogans in the same vein appear throughout the book, a point I will explore in more detail in chapter seven.
7. Examples include Bailey and Brake (eds.) (1975), Corrigan and Leonard (1978), Pritchard and Taylor (1978), Simpkin (1979), Brake and Bailey (eds.) (1980), and Langan and Lee (eds.) (1989).
8. This perhaps overlooks the point that decisions will always have to be made about access to resources. The problem is not about whether to ration, but to what degree and how.
9. I cannot help being sceptical of this description which fails to chime with my own experience of inner-city fieldwork practitioners. Dominelli apparently here bases her understanding on an account of social work that was at least ten years old and which could not have predicted the effects of an extended period of aggressive cuts in welfare provision under Thatcherism.
10. Is there necessarily anything intrinsically wrong with

contradiction? I pursue this point in later chapters.

11. This is more modest, but what about the other demands on social work? "Complex and contradictory" means just that. What happens when challenging racism means that someone else (equally 'deserving' or entitled to help) gets a poor deal?

12. See Ahmed, Cheetham and Small (eds.)(1986), for discussion of the colour-blind approach.

13. As the later discussion - particularly in chapter six - suggests, the notion of "exemplary classic texts" is perhaps not as transparent as Dominelli supposes.

14. All subsequent references in this section are to Ahmad (1990), unless otherwise stated.

15. It is interesting to note, in the light of the particular concerns of this thesis that Ahmad's terminology slides between "anti-racism" and "non-racism" with apparent unconcern.

16. It also raises interesting questions about the nature of subjectivity that the social work literature has not yet begun to address.

17. Several writers have started to look at this question; see, for example, Ahmed (1978), Manning (1979), Rooney (1980), Rooney (1982), and Liverpool (1982).

18. There are many discussions in the literature about the 'value core' of social work; see, for example, Walton (1982), Timms (1983), and Horne (1987).

19. A number of articles and longer works have already been cited in the notes accompanying chapter one; in particular, see under numbers 4, 5 and 11.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM 'RACE' TO 'RACISM'

3.1 Introduction.

What is 'race'? We all have a sense of what the term means, and most people could probably supply an 'off-the-cuff' definition, if asked. Put all the definitions together, however, and the sharp edges of the term immediately become blurred, and it takes on the character of an "essentially contested concept".¹ Nonetheless, 'race' - or perhaps more correctly, the belief in race (Cashmore and Troyna, 1983:17) - has been a powerful force in history and remains still an influential factor in present-day social and political arrangements. In chapters one and two, I referred at various points to 'racism' - mainly in relation to its presence or absence as an idea in the social work literature. I offered no definition, treating the term as a given. In this chapter, I put the concepts of race and racism under scrutiny. I will trace the history and the range of ideas about race and their incorporation into political and social ideologies, and will then examine different theoretical views of the components of racism, concluding with suggestions for an understanding of racism which will inform the rest of this study.

3.2 The idea of race.

The ultimate historical roots of this concept are obscure, but the idea of separate races is found in both the writings of the Ancient Greek philosophers and in the Old Testament.² The idea of race embraces ideas of inherent biological differences between groups of people, but has also been applied to language groups, national groups, religious and/or cultural groups and even to the whole of humankind mankind (the 'human race'). Linking these different usages is the assumption that line of descent is relevant to a group's current situation. The different conceptions of race also share the belief that human beings are "separable into types that are permanent and enduring", defined in relation to certain "immanent physical features" (Cashmore and Troyna, 1983:18). A definition combining emphasis on physical difference and lineage can be formulated: "A classificatory term broadly equivalent to subspecies. Applied most frequently to human beings, it indicates a group characterized by closeness of common descent and usually also by some shared physical distinctiveness such as colour of skin" (Bullock and

Stallybrass (eds.), 1977:520). Yet even this appealingly straightforward statement is misleading as it gives no suggestion that 'race' has proved "notoriously fragile" when subjected to biological analysis (Cashmore and Troyna, 1983:17).

Bloom (1971) and Tobias (1961) both make a case for the limited usefulness of the term 'race', restricting its application to a form of biological or anatomical typing, but strongly reject attempts to extrapolate from the biological to the social or political.³ Their cases for even a strictly limited, biological usage are challenged by other evidence cited in brief by Ely and Denney (1987:1-3) and Davey (1983:18-20) which points to the conclusion that the present state of scientific knowledge cannot support the division of the world's human population into discrete and immutable racial types. On the contrary, the available evidence strongly indicates a level of genetic homogeneity within the species: "the genetic differences between the so-called races of man are only slightly greater than those which occur between nations within a racial group, and the genetic differences between individuals within a local population are far greater than either of these" (Davey, 1983:19). The gradual emergence of this view as the reputable scientific consensus between the two world wars, and the linked demise of eugenic ideas in biology, is exhaustively documented in Barkan (1992).

It can be argued, then, that what are termed 'races' are not genetically or biologically that dissimilar from one another, and that the variation in the human species can be perceived as a genetic continuum. Yet despite its apparent limitations, the notion of race has an extremely tenacious grip in everyday thought, out of all proportion to its biological or genetic significance. Why should this be so? The answer lies, in part, in the observation made by Ely and Denney that: "attempts to dismiss biological race as a figment of the imagination founder on the common sense ability to distinguish a Chinese person from an African" (1987:3). Leaving aside for the moment the notion of 'common sense', which is perhaps more problematic than Ely and Denney imply here, they have pointed to two very obvious 'facts of life', namely, that people are observably different from one another, and that human beings have an apparently inherent need to classify and order the world and all its phenomena into discrete compartments.⁴

Classification, at the most basic level, is an essential part of negotiating - literally and metaphorically - with the world and its inhabitants. Perception is always 'perception of ...', and it is these objects of perception that have to be sorted into recognizable classes and

groups. Without the ability to place discriminably different objects, individuals or events together and treat them as if, for particular purposes, they were equivalent, the individual would simply be overwhelmed by the mass of what are, strictly speaking, unique perceptions. Perception, then, is creative. "By its most profound nature, perception cannot be only an obedient reflection of reality, an adaptation to the data at hand; it is also an active transfiguration giving meaning to being." (Berdyayev, quoted in Macquarrie, 1973:28) More or less sophisticated criteria may be used, but the business of dividing up the environment into manageable units and constructing equivalence categories continues throughout, and underlies, our intellectual development. So what we can take from the discussion thus far is that, at root, classification is a form of social agreement and, as will become clearer below, the terms of that agreement are not arbitrary, but depend on the particular purposes or objectives of the classifier.⁵

While individuals can call on a range of categorising systems to make sense of the world, it is clear that some phenomena are easier to classify than others. Classifying objects in the natural world, for instance, is simpler in some senses than placing oneself or other people in social categories; and it is the processes whereby the latter occurs that are most relevant here. There are difficulties attendant on any attempt to assign individuals and their behaviours to social categories as the individuals under consideration have their own understanding of the events they participate in, and their own reasons, motives and purposes for performing particular actions which may not be transparent to an outside observer.⁶ However, we try to make sense of those with whom we deal, and in order to do this we simplify the constantly shifting picture by creating constancies: "We attribute consistent and repeatable characteristics to others, either as individuals or as exemplars of social groups and respond to them according to their role, function, status, or group membership" (Davey, 1983:42).

We all have to learn which characteristics to attend to when making social judgements about each other; children are aware of differences in skin colour, hair, dress, style of speech, and so on, from perhaps the age of four or five, and will use these cues as the bases for 'person categories' to simplify and order their environments (Troyna and Hatcher, 1992). It is interaction with other people within a particular society though, that indicates how much attention should be paid to such differences, and that teaches the child how they should be evaluated. Ely and Denney suggest that the child has a fundamental need to establish his own identity, and can only do that by learning the rules of inclusion and exclusion operating

within his particular society: "He must be able to perceive the differences between the majority groups in his community and identify the one to which he belongs ... and he must learn the appropriate behavioural and attitudinal response towards people classified in a particular way. Self identification can only be acquired within the context of the system of preferences and biases which exist in a society" (Ely and Denney, 1987:6).

The desire to classify in itself need not be problematic - that is, a classification of physical differences along a horizontal axis could provide interesting information in terms of helping our understanding of how differences between individuals and groups occur. A potentially more sinister effect is achieved when the axis is shifted to the vertical, and the simple, serial ordering of groups on the basis of ascribed racial characteristics is replaced by a moral hierarchy in which some groups or races are placed higher than others. The former come to be seen as better/superior, the latter as worse/inferior, and this new ordering readily engenders ideas about dominant and dominated races which become part of our commonsense understanding of the world.⁷

In deploying the term 'race', then, we are latching on to what are in fact superficial differences, employing selective perception to attach special significance to a small number of physically obvious features - notably skin colour - and reaching conclusions about the nature or other essential characteristics of the individual bearing these outward distinguishing signs. It is worth noting that the outcome is an emphasis on the *negative* associations of difference; this is not a situation where difference is noted but nonetheless still implies equality. There is an idea of inherent superiority/inferiority contained in this particular way of dividing up the world.

So at this stage, it is being suggested that there are no races in the sense of immutable and discrete groups organised on the basis of certain phenotypical or genotypical characteristics. Physical and genetic differences do exist both within and between human populations, but there is no scientific justification for using these differences to rank the groups (races) hierarchically, and for then promoting unequal treatment on the grounds that one population is inherently superior to another. As Davey says, any justification for such treatment "must be sought in social and political relationships within and between societies rather than in the state of knowledge concerning biological differences" (Davey, 1983:19). So the political and social usages of ideas about race bear closer scrutiny, in order to understand the continuing importance of this otherwise

'empty' concept.

Up to the beginning of the 19th century, race was considered in terms of lineage or common ancestry, and signified "a line of descent, a group defined by historical continuity" (Husband, 1982:13). However, around the turn of the century, with the ascendancy of science, a change occurred.⁸ Particularly under the influence of the work of Cuvier, race came to signify "an inherent physical quality. Other peoples are seen as biologically different" (Banton, 1977:18). Although the definition was still uncertain, people began to assume that mankind was divided into races according to criteria of permanent physical difference. And theories about fixed differences between peoples quickly led to theories about inequalities between them. Racial (or racist) ideologies were constructed, based on the notion that these races might not all be of equal standing.⁹

The impact of Darwin's speculations about human evolution on perceptions of 'race' was enormous, at a time of colonial expansion when Europeans were coming into contact with and having to make sense of a vast range of peoples and customs. "If man had originated not by special creation but by evolution, it was perhaps natural to suppose that human races might represent stages in the process, or the branches of an evolutionary tree" (Baker, quoted in Cashmore and Troyna, 1983:22). Darwinism, which could have supported the view that 'all men are brothers', was instead diverted into a wholly opposite social theory where the races were seen as struggling for survival and only the 'fittest', most superior would win through - at the cost of the weakest. By definition, therefore, conquerors were obviously superior and were thus entitled to exploit the natural and human resources of the vanquished.¹⁰

Other theories emerged which aimed directly at finding 'scientific' foundations for the already widely-held assumptions about the inherent superiority of whites; these included the neotenic theory and theory of recapitulation. That successive theories were mutually contradictory seemed little impediment to their advance.¹¹ These approaches are mentioned here not simply as interesting relics from the nineteenth century's fascination with science, but as examples of the power of racist ideologies to maintain a hold through time regardless of their lack of foundation. As late as 1971, the neotenic argument was invoked by Eysenck in the course of the race and IQ debate, to support his assertion of the naturally advanced cognitive and intellectual abilities of whites over blacks (Gould, 1980:220).

The power exercised by ideas of race in the twentieth century cannot be overlooked: the large-scale development of extreme forms of nationalism and fascism such as Nazism may have passed, but the concept of racial superiority persists. As events in Eastern Europe and in the states of the former USSR show, ethnic and/or national identity remains a highly significant and emotionally charged factor in the lives of large groups of people, and provides a focus around which to organise social and political demands. In Britain, the fear - or worse, the experience - of racially-motivated violence remains a factor in the lives of numbers of black people. Neo-Nazi and extreme right-wing groups maintain a presence on the fringes of mainstream political life and, perhaps more insidiously, ideas of race have been reconfigured to allow for their inclusion in everyday, 'respectable' political debate - a point I shall explore further in section 3.4 of this chapter.

3.3 Learning to be prejudiced: the cognitive structures and strategies of racism.

"Race is not a problem: it's something that people create as a problem" (Cashmore and Troyna, 1983:30).

The previous section put forward the view that race and hence racism, belong more to the social world than the 'natural': race was presented as a largely social construct which has exercised a lasting influence on the minds and actions of the members of many different societies. This section concentrates on the cognitive processes by which individuals and groups learn and perpetuate racist ideas and practices. The focus here is on racial and ethnic prejudice. 'Prejudice' is an aspect of, but is not synonymous with, 'racism' (CCCS, 1982:47), but as it constitutes the essential attitudinal component of racism, it bears examination.

While it would be oversimple to say that prejudice is wholly personal, it is nonetheless a 'mental attitude' - one, in common usage, that is "inflexible" and "based on unreliable, possibly distorted, stereotyped images" of specific groups (Cashmore and Troyna, 1983:36) - and, as such, forms part of the psychological baggage of the individual. Still clarifying terms, 'stereotypes' are taken to be generalisations about particular groups of people made on the basis of incomplete, inaccurate, or simplified information; identical characteristics or properties are then attributed to individuals, purely on the basis of membership of that group. In Davey's formulation, "Stereotypes are judgements concerning a class or category of people we 'know' about, as distinct from people we know individually" (Davey, 1983:46).

Various theories have been advanced to account for the emergence of prejudice and these can be grouped under three headings: phenomenological, psychodynamic, and structural. Phenomenological theories start with the assumption that "a person's perceptions of his environment are of crucial importance in understanding his behavior" as they influence the nature of his responses to different situations (Wrightsmann, 1972:287). So the individual's perceptions, rather than the external world, become the objects of study. For example, Wrightsmann presents this situation: an individual will respond aggressively to minority group members if they are perceived as hostile or threatening. Thus, "Genuine conciliatory behavior on the part of the Black Panthers ... is irrelevant if white policemen have been brainwashed to believe that the Panthers are out to get them" (Wrightsmann, 1972:277).

This is uncontentious as far as it goes. If an individual believes 'A' to be true, she will act as if it were true. But this hardly advances matters to any great extent. In the example above, does the 'genuineness' derive from the Panthers' perceptions of their behaviour or from an external observer's? (Presumably, if the police were able to perceive it as genuinely conciliatory, it would no longer be appropriate to talk of them having been "brainwashed" into the opposing point of view.) Are the police literally unable to admit the idea of "genuine conciliatory behavior" into their assessment of the activities before them?

Further, Wrightsmann's comments do not indicate what consideration should be given to the reasons why the individual perceives the world one way (e.g. negatively) rather than another (e.g. positively). The policemen in the example have not decided on a whim that the Panthers are "out to get them" - they have been "brainwashed". I have suggested earlier (section 3.2) that category sets are constructed rather than given to consciousness - and the choices are not arbitrary. One final problem with phenomenological accounts of prejudice has to do with procedure; one might ask how the perceptions of another individual could be accurately studied. So, although the underlying assumptions of this approach can be clearly enough stated, example does little to illuminate their application .

Psychodynamic theories deal with the "prejudiced personality" and locate the origins and patterns of prejudice in personal conflicts and/or maladjustments within the individual. Such theories point to the functional aspect of prejudice, suggesting that it fulfils a need in that individual.¹² But individualist or psychological theories alone cannot account for the prevalence of prejudice in whole groups which include

individuals of widely differing personality types and life experience (Bethlehem, 1985:100), and have been criticised for underestimating the "crucial institutional pressures" that cause or promote discrimination and prejudiced behaviour in individuals regardless of personality structure and personal beliefs (Stone, 1985:28-29).

Structural theories trace the emergence of prejudice not to individual pathology or perception, but to the shared experience of group membership. "For the most part," argues Davey, "individuals do not interact with each other in *ad hoc* ways but as members of social collectivities, national, ethnic, religious or socioeconomic entities, in circumstances which are not of their own creation" (Davey, 1983:11). Thus, the relationships within and between groups are shaped by broad political, socioeconomic or cultural factors which exist beyond the will or complete control of individuals, and which regulate the conduct of members of the respective groups. Individuals behave in ways which they consider appropriate for the particular groups to which they belong; so prejudice may be an 'acceptable' response in terms of conformity to certain group expectations, where these are forged in a context of basically hostile intergroup relations.

The theoretical approaches presented above all contribute to an understanding of the genesis of prejudiced attitudes and behaviour, but each offers at best only a partial view. Prejudice is rooted both in the psychological processes of the individual and in the sociocultural milieu within which she operates, and a broader account is needed to incorporate both these interdependent aspects.

Van Dijk (1987) takes the analysis one stage further in a wide-ranging study whose object is to examine the processes whereby racism is communicated in a multi-racial society. His analysis of the cognitive dimensions of prejudice is framed within a broader information-processing paradigm, and takes account both of the psychological processes involved in the acquisition and maintenance of prejudiced attitudes, and the social context within which these attitudes are expressed through action. "Prejudice is not just a 'mental state'; it not only involves the (trans)formation of ethnic attitudes, but actually operates through flexible strategies for the processing of group-based ethnic or racial information. ...[P]rejudice is not just 'what' people think about ethnic out-groups, but also 'how' they do so." (van Dijk, 1987:181)

He proposes that prejudice has five distinct properties: first, it is a 'group attitude', that is, a shared attitude among members of an in-group and not just a personal opinion. Second, the recipients of the prejudiced

attitude are "one or more other groups ('out-groups') that are assumed to be different on any social dimension". Ethnic¹³ attitudes concentrate on differences attributed to the supposed ethnic or racial characteristics of the out-group. Third, the overall attitude towards the out-group is negative, and the differences associated with the out-group are negatively evaluated in relation to some of the values, interests or objectives of the in-group. Fourth, the negative opinions within the ethnic attitude are based on stereotypes or biased models of the out-group. Van Dijk suggests that effectively a double standard operates in the processing of information about ethnic minorities or other out-groups, which favours the construction of these biased models. It is perhaps useful to add here that prejudice characteristically also features over-classification; that is, individuals learn to habitually maximise or exaggerate the differences between groups, while minimising the differences within groups or categories. And last, prejudice is socially learned and used. It shapes inter-group perception and influences interaction within and between groups to the benefit of the in-group.

The properties of prejudice discussed above are predicated on one obvious assumption - that individuals believe that they can successfully distinguish out-group members from those of their own group. As the discussion in section 3.2 indicated, learning to classify and group objects and people is a necessary step in the development of the thinking of a social being; but the classification process is neither neutral nor necessarily benign.

Van Dijk suggests that the beliefs and opinions that go to make up ethnic attitudes are organised around a number of basic categories: appearance, origin, socioeconomic, sociocultural, and personality characteristics (van Dijk, 1987:203-213). These categories provide an effective structure for social information processing. He proposes further that prejudice is structured hierarchically, such that the respective categories follow an order of importance, and hence of acquisition. So in-group members will take note first of appearance and origin, then socioeconomic factors, and so on through the list, in classifying members of a 'new' - that is, unfamiliar - ethnic or other social group.

Thorough analysis of these categories reveals a basic structure which is composed of three main features; these, van Dijk suggests, characterise all dominant group relations with minorities, and the cognitive representation of those relationships among dominant group members. They are difference and inferiority, competition, and threat. To repeat an earlier point, difference is again evaluated negatively; ethnic minorities have

different cultures, behaviours, norms or aims, and these are treated as inferior to the dominant groups'.¹⁴

Having adopted a classification scheme for ordering people into social groups,¹⁵ individuals will work hard to maintain that system, even in the face of potentially disconfirming evidence. Davey suggests that individuals learn flexible strategies for processing social information, selecting and highlighting those items which are consonant with their preconceptions, and reshaping - or screening out altogether - those data or encounters that could challenge them (Davey, 1983:48). Two types of error or manipulation are possible in assigning objects or people to particular categories: over-inclusion - that is, including items in a group which do not exhibit the specified criteria for group membership - and under-inclusion - that is, excluding an item which does possess the required characteristics. Where the difference in value between social categories is large, it is more likely that errors of over-inclusion into a negatively valued category will take place, while errors of assignment into the positively valued class will tend towards under-inclusion. In this way, membership of the dominant group remains tightly regulated.

In the course of the above discussion, I have put forward the view that prejudice performs a socially useful function for certain groups in society, protecting and reinforcing a positive evaluation of the norms, goals, and other socioeconomic and cultural interests of the majority social group at the expense of ethnic minority groups: "The basic organizational setup of negative ethnic attitudes is geared toward the development of prejudiced opinions that can be used as ideological protection against infringements by the out-group on the interests of the in-group" (van Dijk, 1987:221).

3.4 The politics of race: the reproduction of racism inside and outside social institutions.

The preceding discussion has examined two key concepts - race and prejudice. Race was found to be a concept with little biological or genetic explanatory value which has, nonetheless, been given purchase in a wide range of historical circumstances. Prejudice concerns an attitude set constructed from socially acquired and maintained beliefs about the significance of race, constructions which, by and large, favour one group (the in-group) at the expense of others (out-groups). The validity or otherwise of the assumed racial differences on which such attitudes are predicated is less relevant than the social uses to which they have been put.

This next section examines further the linking of ideas of race and prejudice into the complex phenomenon of racism. My intention is to look at racism from two angles, offering first a political/structural account of its development and consolidation in British culture (section 3.4), followed by an analysis of the discourses of racism, that is, the ways in which racist ideas and attitudes are communicated within a society (section 3.5). Although for purposes of discussion these two aspects of racism will be presented as separate, the practical effect is that they intertwine, supporting and reinforcing one another. It is the task of the final section to suggest a framework for understanding racism that encompasses the dimensions discussed previously, and allows it to be seen as, at present, an integral part of a white (dominant group's) Weltanschauung.

i) Race, colonialism and imperialism.

The grounding of ideas about race in particular historical and political configurations extends the notion of race as a socially constructed, non-neutral basis for classification. Gilroy proposes that 'race' should be viewed as "an open political category, for it is struggle that determines which definition of 'race' will prevail and the conditions under which it will endure or wither away" (Gilroy, 1987:39). This suggests that ideas of race will become important where issues of power are at stake and, particularly, that acknowledgement of differences based on ascribed racial characteristics may assume a special significance where they provide a rationale for social and economic divisions which protect the interests of certain dominant groups.

There is evidence that the idea of race in Britain has a history that obviously predates the colonial era,¹⁶ but as I suggested earlier in this chapter, it seems that a change of conceptualisation occurred around the beginning of the nineteenth century which supported and justified the colonial domination of people of different racial types. Slavery became an integral part of the political and economic exploitation of the peoples of Asia and Africa that characterised the British Empire. It is suggested that the position at the unassailable top of the imperial pile promoted a particular mentality among British people, one which has remained - in the shape of a lasting consciousness of white superiority - despite the dissolution of the empire which originally engendered it. And the extended period of colonial and imperial dominance has had implications for political structures at home: "in view of the fact that, for four centuries, white colonialists have dominated the non-white populations they colonized and incorporated onto their empire, it is to be expected that the basic trends in the U.K.'s state institutions and operations will express the interests of

whites; in particular, those of the white ruling class" (Cashmore and Troyna, 1983:119).

The function of race ideas under capitalism has been explored from a Marxian perspective, which defines race relations as a product of material relations. Cox, in the 1940's, argued that capitalism benefits from a divided working class; therefore, any means that splits the working class into fragments and fosters antagonisms between different groupings could be pursued by 'capital' as it would help prevent workers from recognising their common exploitation and uniting in opposition. Race provides an effective focus around which to organise such splits. Workers are encouraged to see each other as different and therefore unequal, and to ally with their own race at the expense of their 'real' class interest.¹⁷

CCCS (1982) have traced the relations between race and power, superiority and inferiority in colonial societies, and the way these have developed into the networks of inequality that structure capitalist social formations. They do not suggest that Britain's imperial and colonial past has completely determined present day racist ideologies and practices, nor do they assume that 'race' can simply be reduced to 'class'; what these authors do clearly state is that racism, "as it exists and functions today ... has to be located historically and in terms of the wider structures and relations of British society" (Solomos et al, 1982:11).

ii) The 'new racism'.

While ideological remnants from the colonial past still remain embedded in British social attitudes, these are given a new twist in the racist accounts given of the present political and economic situation. The CCCS authors have charted the historic development of ideas about race, leading up to the elaboration of what they describe as a 'new racism' in Britain in the 1970's and early 1980's, the key feature of this contemporary brand of racism being its redefinition of 'race' in terms of culture and identity, or what van Dijk calls "ethnicism" (van Dijk, 1987:28).¹⁸ Lawrence (1982) and Barker (1983) link this 'culturalising' of racism to other ideological redefinitions of the time which arose with the articulation of a new conservative philosophy, allied to the economic decline and diminution of global influence experienced by Britain in the post-war period,¹⁹ and the "organic crisis" this has produced in British society: "The fear that society is falling apart at the seams has prompted the elaboration of theories about race which turn on particular notions of culture. The 'alien' cultures of the blacks are seen as either the cause, or else the most visible symptom of the destruction of the 'British way of life'" (Solomos, et al., 1982:47).

Essed (1991), too, charts the development of a new form of racism which moves away from the earlier biological/pseudo-scientific theories which supported the colonial brand of exploitation, and turns instead to theories of cultural difference. "At the same time", she notes, "'ethnic' forms of oppression have emerged that are fed by strong (nationalistic) identification with the cultural heritage of the group. These 'ethnic'-directed forms of oppression are an inherent part of the cultural pluralism model" (Essed, 1991:13). The possibility that cultural pluralism can become an oppressive social form is echoed by Ahmed who sees 'multiculturalism' being subverted by the 'new right' in ways that are clearly not to the benefit of ethnic minority groups in this country (Ahmed, 1991).

The thrust of the 'new racism' is the essential, the necessary, difference between British culture and 'the rest'. The debate is no longer about assimilation or even integration, but focusses on the almost mystical relationship between Britain, British culture and the British - who are, within this analysis, authentically white. Birthplace, even rights of citizenship, take second place to "membership of the nation" (Lawrence, 1982:85), which is the exclusive preserve of the indigenous white population. Culture and a shared tradition become the determinants of group membership, and they are defined so as to exclude black minorities, however this contradicts the historical connections between 'the British' and the populations of the ex-colonies and dependencies.

One of the appeals of this form of racism is that, as Barker observes, it purports to provide a theory of human nature. "Human nature is such that it is natural to form a bounded community, a nation, aware of its differences from other nations. They are not better or worse. But feelings of antagonism will be aroused if outsiders are admitted." (Barker, 1983:21) The 'it's only natural' argument gave a (spurious) universality to the claims of those like Enoch Powell who were calling for stricter controls on black immigration on the grounds that each community needed and deserved its own homeland (Barker, 1983:20ff). Settling in an 'alien' environment was thus wrong for both blacks and whites. Blacks could never achieve a true sense of 'Britishness', because of their different cultures and traditions, and Britain could not pursue its own destiny while suffering the diluting presence of non-British minorities within the fabric of white society; the unity of the nation, its very 'way of life' was threatened.

This discourse, or way of conceptualising race in terms of culture, explicitly distances itself from the language of superiority and inferiority. Cultures are different, and

it is presented as only right and proper for each group to seek to defend its own way of life. The siting of race in the new terrain of culture allows it to remain an integral part of the political framework at a time when cruder theories of biological determinism have been largely - though not yet absolutely - overthrown.

3.5 The discourse of racism.

Having looked at the macro-level of political and economic structures and the organisation of racist ideologies, the following discussion turns to the micro-level of interpersonal communication, and the forms of linguistic exchange that allow racism to be reproduced and transmitted within and between social groups. In terms of the reproduction of racism within social work, this micro-level is of particular relevance to a consideration of practice, where the 'encounter' or relationship between practitioner and client is under scrutiny. The framework I have adopted here takes a linguistic turn which prefigures the direction of the remainder of the study; it is a form of discourse analysis, taking discourse in its widest sense, which looks both at the immediate conversational structures and strategies that permit the transmission of racism, and the wider discursive frameworks, the 'everyday' background, within which such exchanges are embedded. This approach is derived from insights drawn from three wide-ranging studies of racism by, van Dijk (1987), Hewitt (1986), and Essed (1991).

The first analyses racism from a white point of view. It is van Dijk's contention that white people 'learn' about ethnic minorities less through observation and interaction with the other group than through talk and text; therefore in his study, attention is focussed on how people in the white (dominant) group talk about ethnic minorities in their society and how they "express, convey, or form ethnic beliefs or attitudes in such everyday conversations" (van Dijk, 1987:21). The task for van Dijk is to throw some light on these processes.

Hewitt looks at friendship patterns between black and white adolescents, focussing on language - in particular the use of creole or patois - and its relationship to ethnicity and intergroup relations. While he concentrates on friendship, his purpose is not to celebrate these examples of inter-racial acceptance and support, but rather to use these relationships to better understand the perpetuation and transmission of racism: "In paradoxically seeking where racism appears not to be, one could learn more about its mechanisms of reproduction" (Hewitt, 1986:6). In the most recent study of the three, Essed (1991) takes the experiences of a narrowly-selected group

of black women as her base for a discussion of what she terms "everyday" racism. As my concern is principally with white responses to and responsibility for racism, I give the greatest space to discussion of van Dijk's work here, though reference will be made to the other studies to illustrate particular points.

"Dominant group members regularly engage in conversation about ethnic minority groups in society, and thus express and persuasively communicate their attitudes to other in-group members. In this way, ethnic prejudices become shared and may form the cognitive basis of ethnic or racial discrimination in inter-group interaction" (van Dijk, 1987:11). Van Dijk structures his analysis of the processes of communication of racism around five lines of enquiry. The first aims to clarify the cognitive dimensions of racism. A discussion of the cognitive bases of racism, in particular the formation of 'ethnic attitudes', was presented in section 3.3 above, so van Dijk's analysis of attitude is simply summarised here: "Prejudice was analysed as a specific form of negative ethnic attitude, which was described as a hierarchically and categorically organised cluster of negative general opinions in semantic (social) memory. Such prejudiced schemata organize socially shared ethnic opinions according to categories such as origin, appearance, socioeconomic status, sociocultural properties, or personal characteristics of ethnic groups and their members" (van Dijk, 1987:391).

The second strand of the enquiry is designed to analyse how ethnic prejudice is expressed or signalled in conversation. The structures of prejudiced discourse are presented in some detail, starting with an exposition of the general principles and practices of modern discourse analysis - which covers the topics of conversation, story-telling, argumentation, style and rhetorical operations - and moving on to attempts to relate these to the specifics of prejudiced talk.

However while talk, informal social interaction, is crucial for the expression, reproduction and diffusion of racism in society (a point reinforced in both the other studies), it is not the only channel available. A wider 'discourse environment' exists, providing the public or social framework within which such talk is embedded.²⁰ Van Dijk lists possible components of this discourse environment - the news media, magazines, educational materials, novels, comics, films, advertising, political speeches, laws, regulations and institutional documentation (1987:40).

His comments on the negative representation of race in the news media are extended and developed in relation to the

discussion of sources of prejudiced talk, and of the social and ideological context of prejudice reproduction but, briefly, he observes that people look to the media to provide topics for everyday conversation and information about areas of life that cannot be drawn from their personal experience or routine contact with others - for example, national statistics on crime or unemployment, demographic trends among minority groups, housing conditions and educational circumstances of ethnic minorities. So the kind of information the media purvey is of crucial importance in setting the parameters for some types of conversation. If the media deal largely in stereotyped and negative representations of ethnic minorities, then these biased images will be the ones carried forward into casual conversation. The conclusion that van Dijk draws, then, is that prejudiced talk is structured and takes place within a 'non-neutral' discourse environment.

Van Dijk's third approach is to examine the interaction strategies that regulate discourse about ethnic minorities. Different interaction strategies may be followed in a conversation about ethnic minorities (for example, positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, face-saving, or persuasion), but prejudiced talk itself takes place within a communicative context that is bound by interpersonal and social constraints. So the individual has to operate a flexible strategy for processing and reproducing social information, responding to cues and signs within the conversational context: "These constraints may well be conflicting and demand that negative opinions about ethnic minority groups be formulated in terms of ethnic or racial tolerance, or dissimulated in other, strategically effective ways" (van Dijk, 1987:12.)²¹

The next line of enquiry involves an analysis of majority group participants' understanding, evaluation and representation of prejudiced discourse, and the location of the sources of the beliefs and opinions from which negative ethnic attitudes are formed. Van Dijk considers here the interpersonal communication of negative ethnic attitudes in prejudiced talk among in-group members, and the development and communication of a dominant ethnic consensus within that group.

One of the points that recurs in van Dijk's study is that ethnic prejudice is a social phenomenon and not just the expression of personal attitudes and beliefs. People acquire attitudes as members of specific social groups and define themselves in opposition to other groups - majority/minority, white/black, law-abiding/criminal, etc. Prejudiced discourse promotes the development and communication of a dominant ethnic consensus among the

in-group, a consensus which, van Dijk suggests, is largely negative in relation to ethnic minorities.

This negative consensus is carefully constructed and maintained, even without there being any explicit commitment among the majority group to perpetuate racism.²² As Essed notes, "It is important to see that intentionality is not a necessary component of racism ... It is not the nature of specific acts or beliefs that determines whether these are mechanisms of racism but the context in which these beliefs and acts operate" (Essed, 1991:45). In-group members draw information from a wide discourse environment, both public and interpersonal, and this interacts with personal beliefs and experiences as well as with broader social attitudes about ethnic minorities, in a complex process of communicative reproduction. The interactional relevance of talk in this process is fundamental. In talking about other people as members of specific out-groups, in-group members re-affirm their own position and social identity and, at the same time, "enact various forms of inter-group conflict, dominance and power, and other macro social dimensions of racism" (van Dijk, 1987:22).²³

Van Dijk found that within their overall discourse environments, individuals relied on certain sources for information about ethnic minorities, and the most significant of these sources were the mass media and personal communication in the form of stories about ethnic minorities who, in the context of his survey (Amsterdam in the Netherlands and San Diego, California) were usually characterised as 'foreigners'. He found, further, that negative information about ethnic minorities predominated over positive. People tended to remember, and pass on, this negative information, reproducing from their sources "precisely those topics that confirm the dominant prejudices of a racist society" (van Dijk, 1987:178). Even where individuals claimed not to share the negative opinions they were reporting, they were nonetheless familiar with, and able to talk about, these opinions.

Van Dijk suggests a number of reasons why individuals tend to retain, and subsequently reproduce, negative information in preference to positive (p335), but the result is that the negative material becomes the stuff of new stories about ethnic minorities that are passed on down the communicative chain, to become the new received wisdom, the 'facts', in talk about ethnic minorities. The lack of positive information about ethnic minorities in the commonly available sources prevents the formation of anything approaching an anti-racist consensus.²⁴ New data are processed, and 'tailored' to fit the existing picture of what we 'know' about ethnic groups: "People tell or hear hardly any positive things about foreigners, and if

they do, they ignore, forget, or disagree with that information. Disagreement with, or rejection of negative information is much less frequent" (Van Dijk, 1987:336). Thus, a consensus emerges based on, and reinforced by, a powerful network of socially shared prejudices.

Van Dijk's last major line of enquiry is an examination of the social and ideological context within which prejudiced discourse is situated. "Talk is embedded in more complex, higher-level systems of social information processing within groups, which also involve institutional discourses such as that of the media, politics or education" (Van Dijk, 1987:12).²⁵ The main points that he makes are that prejudiced talk fulfils a range of social functions (several are listed on p.394) which contribute to the creation and maintenance of a particular climate or attitude within the dominant group, about the relevant out-groups. This climate is favourable toward the in-group, and largely unfavourable to the out-groups - in this case, ethnic minorities, who are presented in consistently negative and stereotyped ways. Prejudice, in brief, serves to maintain the dominance or power of the in-group and its members in a racist society.

The in-group is not completely homogeneous, and not all members play the same part in the production and reproduction of negative ethnic attitudes. Van Dijk ascribes a special role to certain dominant sub-groups within the white majority community whom he sees as making a significant contribution to the formulation of racist attitudes and practices and their communication to society at large, principally through the mass media. These groups include, "politicians, civil servants, journalists, academics, professionals, members of the various state institutions (judiciary, police, social welfare agencies, and so forth), and all others in control of public and dominant discourse types"; in other words, those 'elite' groups distinguished by political or social power or by cultural dominance. These groups provide the dominant definitions of the ethnic situation and, as the basic providers of information, "preformulate the categories, the relevancies, the topics, the agenda, and the evaluation" with respect to ethnic minorities (van Dijk, 1987:348).²⁶

Everyday talk about ethnic minorities often reproduces media stories which are, in turn, (re)formulations of various other types of discourse - for example, parliamentary debate, institutional decisions or regulations, police or court reports, academic research reports (van Dijk, 1987:361) - provided by the elite groups listed above. Indeed, van Dijk suggests that discourse is the main type of social action and interaction for the elite groups, so if their ethnic

attitudes are made manifest it will be through discourse, in text or talk. So he concludes that "elite groups provide the initial (pre)formulations of ethnic prejudice in society, and that the media are the major channels and the communicative context for such discourse"(p361).

In *Communicating Racism*, van Dijk starts from the position that racism is a problem of white, dominant groups and is neither the problem of, nor is it caused by, ethnic minorities in white society. The object of his study is to examine how ethnic prejudices are expressed, communicated, and shared within white society through the mass media and also the 'low level' medium of interpersonal, everyday talk, with a view to understanding the mechanisms through which racism is reproduced.

After setting out the theoretical instruments needed for an analysis of the interpersonal communication of ethnic attitudes in conversation, van Dijk looks at the structural and strategic properties of two major components of the communication process - (ethnic) attitudes and discourse. He suggests that ethnic attitudes and opinions are "preformulated" by a range of elite sub-groups within the dominant white community and that these attitudes become part of the social fabric through their representation and reinforcement in the mass media. People rely on the media, and to some extent on 'stories' based on personal experiences, for data about ethnic minorities.²⁷ These data, which are largely negative in relation to ethnic groups, are reproduced through informal (prejudiced) talk.

The general norms and values of a society need not be overtly racist - indeed, explicit expressions of white superiority may well be negatively sanctioned - for a negative ethnic consensus to prevail: "Simply by living out the cultures in which racist codes (ideas, stereotypes, narrative motifs and language) are embedded, participants often 'do racism' through even the simplest and most mundane acts of communication, and sometimes with only the dimmest recognition of what is occurring" (Hewitt, 1986:225). This consensus is difficult to challenge because counter-arguments and alternative information, which could contribute to a positive assessment of ethnic minorities, are largely absent from public discourses.²⁸ People lack the socially sanctioned data with which to rebut racist stories and the opinions based on them, and do not learn to challenge or contradict racist thought and talk. Discourse in general, and talk in particular, thus continue to be crucial sites for the reproduction of racism in society.

3.6 Towards an understanding of racism.

"Racism is an abstract property of social structures at all levels of society that manifests itself in ethnic prejudices as shared group cognitions, in discriminatory actions of persons as dominant group members, as well as in the actions, discourses, organization, or relationships within and among groups, institutions, classes, or other social formations" (van Dijk, 1987:28).

The preceding discussion has tried to locate the ways in which ideas of race operate at various levels in society. An examination of biological or genetic definitions of race found such definitions to be of limited usefulness, and to be unable to account, by themselves, for the considerable influence exercised by the concept of race in everyday thought. It is clear, though, that judgements have historically been made about others on the basis of what we now know to be largely superficial physical differences - for example, in skin colour - and particular characteristics assigned to individuals who display the chosen features. So the emphasis in this discussion has been on racism, the social and ideological constructs that have been built around the concept of race. Three broad focuses were chosen: the cognitive dimensions of racism, political or structural accounts, and a linguistic or discourse-based approach to racism.

Racism, crudely, involves prejudice - that is, a negative ethnic attitude - plus the power to make a particular view of the world stick. But this is not the whole story of racism. Ideas of race are politically and historically specific, and can play a crucial role in the development of the individual's social identity, defining relations between in-group and out-groups, dominant and dominated, majority and minority. Both van Dijk and the CCCS authors present analyses of society that give particular significance to the role of elite groups in the construction and maintenance of prejudiced attitudes and racist practices. There is an assumption in both works that some groups have political and/or sociocultural power which they exercise largely to the benefit of their own members.²⁹ Further, it is axiomatic that racial categorisation is functional in maintaining the power of the dominant group(s) at the expense of others. The power dimension is examined in the structural analyses of CCCS via the notion of hegemony and in the discourse-based approach of van Dijk, in terms of the "elite preformulation" of ideas about ethnic minorities and ethnic attitudes.

This is not to suggest a form of conspiracy theory, where ideas of race are completely controlled and manipulated from the top, by dominant or elite groups, who allow such ideas to trickle down to the wider population according to

a particular political logic. For while I have made a case for the role of certain groups in perpetuating and promoting a restricted range of ideas about minority groups, that is not to say that racism is simply a tool for one group to use to the detriment of another. Van Dijk's approach appears to imply that elite groups have a level of detachment that it could be argued does not exist. Racism is not something that belongs to, but does not touch, an in-group and can be applied to an out-group like a coat of paint.

Van Dijk locates his analysis within a curiously ahistorical context. That is to say that he presents an account which starts with the (racist) status quo and investigates the reproduction of racism through a detailed examination of the range of discursive frameworks and strategies available in the societies concerned. What he perhaps downplays is the involvement of the elite groups in the very 'tradition' that they can admittedly also manipulate with a degree of efficiency. Racism has not been invented by any of the elite groups he mentions; it is already 'present to hand', intricately woven into the discursive structures he examines. Elite groups are no doubt culpable to the extent that they perpetuate rather than challenge discriminatory structures, but they cannot necessarily be held responsible for their creation.

Ideas of 'race' are deeply embedded in the structure and fabric of society and shape the categories available for social information processing. The analyses presented suggest that a dominant (negative) ethnic consensus is achieved, and that this both reflects and confirms the common-sense view of white superiority as 'how the world really is'. Alternative views of the world, counter-information or arguments, may exist but do not have the same status in public or interpersonal communications between whites, so there is little with which to challenge the prevailing consensus. "[Ideologies] work most effectively when we are not aware that how we formulate and construct a statement about the world is underpinned by ideological premises; when our formulations seem to be simply descriptive statements about how things are (i.e. must be), or of what we can 'take for granted'" (Hall, quoted in Lawrence, 1982:47).

It is the ubiquity of ideas of 'race' that I wish to underline here. Van Dijk's discourse-based analysis presents racism as a 'resource' for talking about ethnic minorities, rather than as a frame for a much wider range of discourses. The extent to which racism infiltrates and 'colours' social relations and discourse environments is perhaps best expressed through the notion of 'everyday racism' coined by Essed. The idea of the 'taken for granted', of 'commonsense', has been explored by a number

of writers concerned with understanding the ideological constructions encountered in a structurally unequal society, and the role these play in maintenance of the status quo.³⁰ But Essed incorporates the idea of the 'everyday' into her analysis of racism, in such a way that racism becomes an integral component of all social relations: "Everyday racism is the integration of racism into everyday situations through practices (cognitive and behavioral ...) that activate underlying power relations. This process must be seen as a continuum through which the integration of racism into everyday practice becomes part of the expected, of the unquestionable, and of what is seen as normal by the dominant group. When racist notions and actions infiltrate everyday life and become a part of the reproduction of the system, the system reproduces everyday racism" (Essed, 1991:50).

Not all racism is 'everyday' racism, in Essed's usage; the concept refers specifically to the reproduction of racism through routine, repeated practices which are familiar to the point of being unquestioned. "Everyday racism does not exist in the singular but only as a complex - as interrelated instantiations of racism. Each instantiation of everyday racism has meaning only in relation to the whole complex of relations and practices." (Essed, 1991:52) It is in this context that racism is presented as a 'linguistic resource', embedded in both public and interpersonal communications - written and spoken - and in social structures and institutions, shaping our categories of understanding.³¹ This usage of 'racism' accords it a significance in all forms of interpersonal contact in the sense that it becomes a 'given' part of the communicative framework within which we all function. It operates at the level of 'common sense' - largely implicit, unthought, and untheorised - relying on its 'everydayness' to maintain a purchase on a range of discourses, including those which inform or structure the organisation and practice of social work itself.

So the force of what can be called the cultural or linguistic resource position is that it locates racism (similarly sexism, classism, and so on,) in a very particular way in the texts and more broadly discursive structures of society. From this perspective, racism is not something 'bolted on' to an otherwise fair and open society, which carries the implication that with sufficient good will, ingenuity, and energy we could somehow 'unbolt' it and consign it to the scrapheap. If racism inheres in a wide range of discourses, including those of social work itself, then a different approach will be necessary which rethinks the task of removing racism from those discourses in such a mechanistic way.

How then, given the linguistic resource position, to

conceptualise the 'social work task' in relation to MRP? What ought social work and social workers to do about racism? How can we become 'anti-racist' or 'non-racist'? How do we even decide which of these two possibilities to pursue - are they sequential, in that having somehow having become 'anti-racist', one can then transcend this state to become entirely 'non-racist'? Can we opt to become one but not the other? Does the idea of being either 'anti-racist' or 'non-racist' start us off on the wrong journey anyway, looking for a new, fixed, albeit ideologically more correct, subjectivity?³² In terms more directly to do with social work, we can ask what form would/could a critique of 'traditional' social work take? How can we think about the move towards 'anti-racist' or 'non-racist' social work, and what is the nature (conceptual, moral and intellectual) of this process? What implications does the linguistic resource position have for the 'interim' relationships between white social workers, black social workers, white clients and black clients?

The kinds of issues raised by the linguistic resource position create problems for the empirically-minded social worker or researcher because, as the formulations above indicate, such matters are not readily amenable to empirical study. We cannot find out what anti-racist social work is by watching what people who claim to be anti-racist social workers do. This would beg the whole question of the nature, definition or existence of something called 'anti-racism'. The difficulty (impossibility?) of trying to move from 'what is' to 'what ought to be', the so-called naturalistic fallacy, is not unique to social work, and in articulating the kinds of questions and concerns outlined above, we have, I suggest, moved from the realm of the empirical into a different territory, the normative and philosophical.

My concern in what follows is to look at the implications of the linguistic resource position for the racism vs anti-racism or non-racism debate in social work through an approach drawn from the philosophy of language. My particular focus will be the branch of philosophy known as hermeneutics, which I will consider from two perspectives - one associated with the work of Gadamer, the other with the writings of Derrida, and it is to a fuller discussion of these two perspectives that I now turn.

CHAPTER THREE

NOTES

1. Lukes (1974:16) uses this expression in relation to "concepts whose application is inherently a matter of dispute".

2. Cashmore and Troyna suggest that both Aristotle and Hippocrates took an interest in the physical appearances of various groups (Cashmore and Troyna, 1983:19). In *The Politics*, Aristotle apparently builds on the work of Hippocrates concerning the effects of climate on the health and disposition of individuals; in chapter seven of Book Seven, Aristotle poses the question of what kind of natural qualities the citizen of a *polis* should possess. His answer is based on what amounts to a form of geographical determinism, derived from his assessment of Greek states and "the racial divisions of the world" (Aristotle, 1962:269).

He suggests that the European races and those of the "cold regions" are "full of courage and passion but somewhat lacking in skill and brain power", with the implication that "while remaining generally independent, the lack political cohesion and the ability to rule over others". Asiatic races remain subject and enslaved because, while they have an abundance of both brains and skill, they lack courage and will-power. It will perhaps not be surprising to learn that Aristotle found that 'the Hellenic race', "occupying a mid-position geographically, has a measure of both. Hence it continues to be free, to have the best political institutions, and to be capable of ruling all others, given a single constitution." (Aristotle, 1962:269) This exercise in geographic one-upmanship is not pursued further, but it is clear which 'race' Aristotle considered superior.

The story of Noah, in Genesis, contains an early expression of the idea that humankind is divided into separate groups on a biological basis. The three sons of Noah were said to have founded three distinct lines of descent; that is, a monogenist theory was proposed, for the various lines of descent would have had a unity in their one common ancestor, Noah. A more detailed account of both monogenesis and its alternative, polygenesis, can be found in Gould, 1983:141ff.

3. Bloom's point is that racial categorisation has some

use, but only at the level of defining gross physical types. There are discernible biological differences between groups of people, but these have no moral or social qualities in themselves:

"The major biological variations of mankind are as natural as deposits of minerals, and like these deposits, they are ignored or exploited as men think profitable. ... The meaning of race has become subordinated to the *myth* of race: it is politically and socially profitable to emphasize the biological differences of mankind, and to minimize (or to deny) the biologically more important universality" (Bloom, 1971:15).

See also Nash (1962) on the development of racial ideologies and the "logical confusions" supporting such ideologies.

4. See Savory (1970) for detailed discussion of classification. In relation to this drive to order the environment, he says: "Classifying is an innate mode of thinking ... [C]lassification demands comparison with other, similar entities, and is founded on a detection of the differences between them." This perhaps suggests that the differences between the entities being considered do exist, are significant, and are available for all to find if they look sufficiently carefully. It gives no hint that the decision to highlight certain differences rather than others may be a matter of choice, rather than a simple 'reading off' of available 'facts' about the entities under observation.

5. See Dean (1980), especially p.8.

6. This problem is discussed at length in Winch (1958).

7. The belief that certain groups should occupy superior or inferior positions in this assumed hierarchy is discussed by Cashmore and Troyna (1983) and CCCS (1982) in terms of the "it's only natural" argument.

8. See Banton (1988), especially chapter two.

9. Gobineau, for example, wrote about the assumed inherent inequality between the races, and his contribution is considered both by Kedourie (1974:72-73) and by Banton (1977:40ff). See also Bernal (1987) for an argument suggesting that ancient Greek history was reworked or reconstructed during the nineteenth century, in line with then current racial theories.

10. Bethlehem (1985:57ff) draws a link between contemporary racial theories and the history of the slave trade and the plantation economy. He suggests that a kind of racial theory was necessary that would justify the

clearly exploitative treatment of other human beings required by that economy. See also Banton (1977) on the "racializing of the West" and Gould (1980:243).

11. Neoteny and recapitulation theory are both discussed by Gould (1980:214-221). For further discussion of recapitulation theory, see also Banton (1977).

12. An example here would be Adorno's theory of the authoritarian personality, which is discussed in Bethlehem (1985:101ff). More generally, the particular need envisaged varies considerably and may include "the maintenance of self-esteem... the working out of inner conflicts by displacement, as in the various versions of frustration-aggression theory... or performing other utilitarian and social adjustment functions for the individual's personality" (Davey, 1983:9).

13. For a general discussion of the concept of 'ethnicity' and the nature and role of ethnic groups, see Glazer and Moynihan (1975).

14. A dominated group need not necessarily be an ethnic minority; that is, numerical inferiority may not be the significant factor in the relationship. South Africa provides a current example of an ethnic minority dominating a numerically vastly superior population.

15. See Davey (1983) on racial awareness and social identity.

16. See Miles (1989:chapter one).

17. For further discussion of race and class, see Cashmore and Troyna (1983), Stone (1985) and Gilroy (1987).

18. Miles (1989:62ff) offers a critical analysis of the idea of a 'new racism'.

19. For an interesting perspective on the then current political scene, see also Held's discussion of power and legitimacy in contemporary Britain. Held looks at the way Mrs. Thatcher re-activated and, in a sense, again made respectable, British pride in and commitment to "the traditional symbols of the British nation-state[,] ... precisely those symbols associated with Great Britain, the 'glorious past', the empire and international prestige" (Held, 1984:348).

20. This wider 'discourse environment' is the setting for the "everyday racism" analysed by Essed (1991). Her point is the pervasive nature of racism and its infiltration into every level of discourse.

21. The negative dimension of tolerance, and its contribution to the maintenance of a racist culture is explored by Essed (1991: particularly 202-212).

22. The following quotation from Hewitt reinforces this point: "In many cases, however, racist forms remain undetected as such partly because the assumed consistency of communication is white, and the impulse to monitor expression for offensiveness is not interactively established. Such instances, where racism is embedded in the very means of communication, provide the clearest examples both of 'unintentional racism' and of the more overt examples of 'intentional racism'." (Hewitt, 1986:225-226)

23. See Hewitt's (1986) study for further exploration of the interactional relevance of talk.

24. In addition, Essed notes the way in which those who try to oppose racism are themselves in turn problematised by the majority society (Essed, 1991:270-278). This point is also made by Dominelli (1988).

25. See also Fairclough (1989).

26. See also van Dijk (1993).

27. For a fuller discussion of the role of the press in perpetuating particular images of ethnic minority groups, see van Dijk (1991).

28. This is certainly not to say that such data do not exist. Numerous texts by black authors present the 'other side' of the story of the experiences of minority communities within a racist society, testifying to the strengths and resilience of these groups and individuals, and their active responses to racism. See, for example, Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe (1985), Gilroy (1987), and also Essed (1991).

29. The view of power being used here broadly follows Lukes' (1974) analysis.

30. For example, 'common sense' is discussed by Garfinkel (1967), Barker (1981:22-25), Lawrence (1982:47ff), and Fairclough (1989:passim).

31. Hewitt makes a similar point, as the following passage illustrates:

"the inventory of formulaic 'opinions', the accompanying sets of unstated cultural assumptions and the stereotypes which function like motifs in social narratives of race, together constitute the cultural materials (the 'code' in the sense in which I have been using it here) generated

from social and economic relations (and from other cultural materials autonomously) which return as a resource language through which 'race relations' are perceived. This code is dependent for its meaning and capacity for transmission on a specific social context (or on a confluence of several such contexts). Furthermore, the code may be augmented and expanded by items which, generated from local and specific conditions, have themselves become formulaic" (Hewitt, 1986:223).

32. Post-structuralism has challenged the idea of a fixed subjectivity, an essential 'centre' around which the individual's identity is structured; see, for example, Weedon (1987:74-106) and Belsey (1980:passim) for discussions of subjectivity.

CHAPTER FOUR

HERMENEUTICS AND SOCIAL WORK

4.1 Introduction.

At the end of the previous chapter, I proposed an understanding of racism that acknowledged its role as a 'linguistic resource'. The linguistic resource position emphasises the integration of the individual, black or white, professional or client, racist or anti-racist, into a complex and always evolving language-practice network. This network is neither completely determined nor completely under the control of any individual or group in the sense that no-one creates society anew, or is wholly and unavoidably governed by the strictures and norms of the society in which he happens to be born.¹ We can act in different ways in relation to what already exists (socially, culturally, politically), but we cannot simply 'step outside' that language-practice network into a space that has not yet been named.

Social work is made up of a series of cultural and intercultural encounters, each of which involves, depends on, language; at issue are attempts at communication, ways of 'seeing' and knowing, different practices that need to be understood. And how can this process of understanding itself be understood? There are different ideas about the place and nature of understanding in social interaction and, specifically, the social work 'encounter',² though it has commonly been discussed in terms of empathy, a concept on which a whole school of social work practice has been built - the so-called client-centred approach.³ But looked at from the perspective of the linguistic resource position, the main social work issues *vis a vis* anti-racism become a special case of questions at the heart of the debate about hermeneutics.

In this and the following chapters, I will present a consideration of hermeneutics in two of its manifestations and discuss the possible application of each to the problems previously outlined in relation to race and social work. The two dimensions of hermeneutics discussed in this study are the hermeneutics of tradition associated with the writings of Gadamer, and the more radical, deconstructive approach of Derrida. After some preliminary comments on the general features of hermeneutic philosophy, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to a more detailed examination of Gadamer's hermeneutics and an assessment of its potential contribution to an understanding of social work with ethnic minorities.

Chapter five continues the philosophical theme, but moves the discussion onto the perhaps more uncertain and problematic terrain of deconstruction.

Thompson (1981:36-41), Howard (1982:1-34), and Olson (1986) each look at the history of hermeneutics, locating its origins in the theory and practice of interpretation of theological texts, and charting the development - through the work of Schleiermacher and Dilthey - of a 'philosophical' hermeneutics. Philosophical hermeneutics takes as its focus the problem of understanding the 'other' given the embeddedness of each party to the encounter in her own 'tradition' or cultural and historical matrix. The basis of any and all understanding in language is emphasised: "Language does not produce a formulation of something we might have already understood pre-linguistically, but it is the mode of Being *qua* meaningful understanding as such" (Bleicher, 1980:116); and the key to any such act of understanding is textual study and analysis.

Hermeneutics emphasises the "context-bound character of interpretive understanding" (Hoy, 1991:155) and takes it as axiomatic that "with interpretation the contextuality is formative; the specific situation is what determines the very form and direction interpretation will take" (Bohman et al., 1991:12). Context refers not just to the placement of a particular passage within a larger work, but to the historical and cultural tradition(s) within which the encounter with the text takes place. And the text is the bearer of a tradition no less than the individual who reads it.⁴

Gadamer's version of hermeneutics provides an approach to the problem of understanding and interpretation based on dialogue - communication aimed at reaching an understanding through agreement about the matter in hand (*die Sache*, in Gadamer's terms). For him, the hermeneutic problem "is concerned with achieving agreement with somebody else about our shared 'world'. This communication takes the form of a dialogue that results in the 'fusion of horizons'." (Bleicher, 1980:3) The notion of a 'fusion of horizons' will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

At this level, social work could almost be the paradigm case for hermeneutic understanding, providing an object for Gadamer's notion of *praxis* to refer to: social worker and client, each with her own personal and cultural/institutional 'history', sit across the table to talk about, and reach a form of understanding about, the 'problem' brought by the client. And in the case of multi-racial practice (MRP) - the meeting of two cultures or historically constituted frames of reference

(traditions) - the encounter with difference throws the question of understanding into the sharpest relief because, characteristically, hermeneutic understanding obtains when one seeks to understand the unfamiliar or alien, defined in terms of cultural or temporal distance.

While the above description is accurate as far as it goes, it obviously leaves out a good deal. The following section attempts to outline the treatment of ideas about understanding in social work and then to examine the positive contribution that a hermeneutic approach could bring to social work practice, as well as the criticisms and limitations of such an approach.

4.2 Understanding in social work.

The potential interest in hermeneutics for social work derives from the latter's concerns with understanding. Social work, conceptualised within whatever framework, has one recurrent feature, namely an attempt at understanding between the social worker and the client. Much has been written about the nature of that attempt and the relationship that can follow from it, about the kinds of activity both social worker and client are and should be engaged in while 'doing social work' or 'being social worked'. Yet if, at one level, social work is about the understanding possible between one person and another (whether face-to-face or in print), the nature of the process through which this understanding is reached has remained opaque.

That understanding is possible at all is commonly explained by recourse to concepts such as a common human nature or empathy. These linked ideas are found in the client-centred approaches to social work and in discussions of counselling,⁵ which prioritise a notion of 'the social work relationship' depending on the use of self, so-called 'active' listening, and the ability to 'enter the client's world'. In looking first at the suggestion that universality, or an appeal to our common human nature, provides the basis for interpersonal understanding, I turn to Hugh England's text, *Social Work as Art*, for an approach that seems to depend on a clear belief in a common human nature.⁶

England's text, I believe, highlights some of the major problems with an approach predicated on an ill-defined notion of universality which glosses over questions of power and inequality. The theoretical part of the discussion is framed around the activities and experiences of "the worker" who is portrayed as male throughout. And it is in this context that we learn about the importance of universality: "The worker knows about the client's

meaning because the worker's own 'human nature' tells him what it is to experience, for example, intellectual confusion or particular emotional intensity ... He himself knows, in general, what it is to experience such mental and emotional states and can sensitively extrapolate from them. ... It is a reference to our own 'common human nature'" (England, 1986:28). The part of the book dealing with accounts of actual casework carried out by three practitioners is by contrast exclusively female - both workers and clients described in the case studies are women. England makes no comment on this transition, but as Billington's (1990) analysis of this work shows, feminists would find it hard to see a place for themselves in England's apparently gender-free commonality, and would highlight the absence of consideration of gender issues in defining social and personal 'reality'.

As the discussion of 'common sense' in chapter three suggested, decisions about what should be considered 'common' between different individuals and communities are neither arbitrary nor neutral, but reflect particular distributions of power, helping to maintain the position of some groups or individuals in relation to others. The assumption of a 'common human nature' can obviate the need to address questions of inequality of power and resources. And as with gender, so also with race. We may indeed all be the same under the skin, but there is a real danger that reliance on the superficially sympathetic notion of a common humanity minimises the impact of racism on the world-view of both majority and minority ethnic groups. As I have previously indicated, colour blindness has not proved a satisfactory basis for the development of multi-racial or anti-racist practice in social work.

Wilkes uses the idea of a common human nature to account for the possibility of understanding between individuals and to support her plea for a more humane social work practice with what she calls "undervalued groups" (Wilkes, 1981). She argues that, "if we are to understand a person we need to know how he or she sees their world. We do this by the method of recreating what is alien and past... There is a common human nature that transcends cultural and personal differences and it is because people are partly alike that understanding another person is possible" (Wilkes, 1981:106). Gadamer would seem to be making a similar point in his emphasis on the structuring role of effective history in understanding and in the statement, "Every conversation automatically presupposes that the two speakers speak the same language" (Gadamer, 1979:347), but the activity he derives from this is very different from that envisaged by either Wilkes or England, and moves him away from the idea of understanding as a form of empathy or intuitive recreation of the other's world which informs both of the

latter's accounts.

So what exactly is the 'empathy' against which hermeneutic understanding is defined? For a concept that has figured prominently in social work literature, education and practice, as the key feature of the client-centred approaches,⁷ it proves quite difficult to explain its workings. The basic sense of the term seems to be that empathy implies the ability to understand the world-view and inner feelings of another person and to be able to convey that understanding back to the other; that is, it is essentially a psychologistic conception of understanding. It involves more than just acknowledging the validity or authenticity of another person's point of view - though that is seen as a necessary if not sufficient condition for the experience of empathy. Somehow, the empathic social worker is able to 'go beyond' this point and, while engaging with a client "responds from the frames of reference of his (sic) client, for he can see the world through the client's eyes" (Egan, 1983:23).⁸

Quite how this occurs, however, is not clear. Neither is it clear that the criteria that are cited as evidence that empathy has successfully been practised and experienced are satisfactory. To take the first point: empathy is portrayed as the practice of entering the other person's world, of being able to understand the other from his frame of reference, without the helper/worker actually adopting that frame of reference himself. But what then is the status of the worker's own framework of understanding while this encounter takes place? Is the worker attempting to 'bracket out' his own experience and disengage from his own system of referents and experiences whilst in the act of empathising?⁹

Accepting the difficulty - indeed, the impossibility - of shedding one's own framework of understanding is essential to a hermeneutic approach to an encounter with difference. Thus the futility of trying to 'get inside' another person is recognised, and an understanding based on the linguisticity (see section 4.4 below) of our shared existence is sought. Another person's position can never be absolutely understood from their perspective because, by definition it is their perspective, coloured and conditioned by their personal history and engagement with tradition. "Understanding is not about 'getting inside' another person, or the immediate fusing of one person in another. To understand what a person says is ... to agree about the object, not to get inside another person and relive his experiences" (Gadamer, 1979:345).

Thus, Gadamer turns from a psychologically-based account of understanding, to one rooted in the experience of

dialogue, and the paradigm for understanding becomes translation.¹⁰ Understanding someone alien is most akin to the process of translation from one language to another. The art of translation is not to seek a word-for-word equivalence, but rather to say in one language what has been said in another. As Habermas observes, "the act of translation highlights a productive achievement to which language always empowers those who have mastered its grammatical rules: to assimilate what is foreign and thereby to further develop one's own linguistic system" (Habermas, 1970:338).

Translation and, analogously, interpretation are therefore both creative and self-reflective: "as the translator must find a common language that preserves the rights of his mother tongue and at the same time respects the foreignness of his text, so too must the interpreter conceptualize his material in such a way that while its foreignness is preserved, it is nevertheless brought into intelligible relation with his own life-world" (McCarthy, 1984:173). This brings us to the idea of understanding as a fusion of horizons. For Gadamer, 'horizon' expresses the idea of our (historical/cultural) perspective which is necessarily always both finite and limited, but which can move and expand to adjust to interaction with an 'other'. "It should not be conceived in terms of a fixed or closed standpoint; it is 'something into which we move and which moves with us'" (Holub, 1991:58).

Moving on to the second problem identified above: how are we to know when empathy has been present in an exchange? According to Egan (1983:78), the criterion for recognising empathy at either of the levels he describes (primary or advanced) is that the remark or communication "hits the mark" as evidenced by the response it elicits from the other person. It could be assumed, by extension then, that a contribution by the helper that does not "strike home" or "ring a bell" for the client is not after all accurately empathic, that the worker has somehow misconstrued some aspect of the client's world and therefore drawn illegitimate conclusions. But Egan's model does not necessarily lead to that conclusion. Rather, it allows for the possibility of the client's view of the world being somehow faulty and the worker having a more accurate or objective understanding which the client had not yet arrived at, or might be otherwise resisting (Egan, 1983:131 and 135).

The task for the worker in that situation would be to try to present the client with alternative formulations of the problem in order that the client might reach a more objective understanding. But the question must remain, when differences of opinion or interpretation arise, which version of reality prevails. The idea that social work

operates as both a form of care and a form of social control has been well-aided,¹¹ and the ambiguity of the social work role is readily seen in cases where clients are presenting with - or are deemed by the welfare authorities to be exhibiting - problems caused by dysfunctional behaviour. The very description of certain behaviours or attitudes as 'dysfunctional' already carries with it a heavy ideological baggage, and social workers are not immune to the social influences at work in such situations.

This problem of power, of adjudicating between different world-views, is of course not unique to the kind of social work practice I have been describing. A similar point could be made about the process of understanding outlined in Gadamerian hermeneutics, namely that differences in the access to power of participants in a dialogue will affect the quality of the interchange, and run the risk of deteriorating into the imposition of the more powerful partner's view on to the weaker. Gadamer's defence would be that a genuine attempt at reaching understanding with the other requires the questioner (or, in social work terms, the worker) to accord a certain normative authority to the object of understanding, and to proceed on the assumption that it may have something to teach her; this is the case whether the object of understanding is a text or another person. In the latter case, Gadamer makes this comment: "In human relations the important thing is ... to experience the 'Thou' truly as a 'Thou', ie [sic] not to overlook his claim and to listen to what he has to say to us. To this end, openness is necessary" (Gadamer, 1979:324).¹²

How satisfactory this stance proves is considered in relation to criticisms of Gadamer's position, in section 4.5 below; but for now, I would suggest that the implication of this discussion for social work is to challenge the validity and usefulness of the concept of empathy as a guiding principle for practice and to recognise that the involvement of social workers in their own personal and institutional histories necessarily shapes their understanding of others, whether clients or colleagues. With this in mind, I turn now to a discussion of a hermeneutic approach to understanding.

Gadamer's main work, *Truth and Method*, takes the form of an extended reflection on the nature of interpretation or, as Gadamer himself notes more precisely, the "phenomenon of understanding and the correct interpretation of what has been understood" (Gadamer, 1979:xi). The following discussion is necessarily partial, concentrating on dimensions of Gadamer's hermeneutics that seem to me of particular relevance to the social work enterprise.¹³ In this context, I will organise my comments around an

examination of three aspects or characteristics of understanding: the role of prejudice in understanding; understanding as practical-moral engagement or *phronesis*; and the dialogic nature of understanding.

4.3 Understanding and prejudice: the role of tradition.

Gadamer's analysis of the link between understanding and prejudice starts from the contention that, put at its most basic, all understanding involves a prior orientation towards the object at hand (Gadamer, 1979:236). He describes the assumptions or working hypotheses that we all use to orientate ourselves in this way as prejudices (*die Vorurteile*), endorsing an archaic usage of the word that seeks to return it to its literal meaning of, simply, 'pre-judgement', without the pejorative connotations the word has now acquired.¹⁴ In this sense he is perhaps saying nothing more challenging than Fairclough, who would hold that "the way people interpret features of texts depends upon which social and more specifically, discursal, conventions they are assuming to hold" (Fairclough, 1989:19).¹⁵ But prejudice occupies a very particular role in Gadamer's conception of understanding, and a lot rests on the success, or otherwise, of his re-positioning of this awkward term.

The process of rehabilitation pursued by Gadamer is not without problems, as Warnke's (1987) discussion shows. I set out the main points of this discussion below as it is important for an overall assessment of the hermeneutic approach in view of the central role that Gadamer accords to prejudice in structuring our understanding; and it necessarily directs attention onto another key concept in the hermeneutic worldview, tradition.

Gadamer attempts to rehabilitate the notion of prejudice to counter what he sees as the continuation of the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice which deprives tradition of its power" (Gadamer, 1979:240) and its elevation, in turn, of a spuriously detached or transcendent rationality. Ricoeur comments, "For Gadamer, prejudice is not the opposite pole of a reason without presupposition; it is a component of understanding, linked to the finite historical character of the human being" (Ricoeur, 1981:71).

Warnke (1987) follows the process of rehabilitation through three stages. The first step calls to mind Gadamer's account of the hermeneutic circle in textual understanding; this involves the claim that "understanding a text always involves a projection of its meaning on the basis of a partial experience of it" (Warnke, 1987:76). Thus, when starting to read a book or viewing a picture,

we are already bringing a set of expectations and assumptions to that experience. Expectations may need to be revised - for example, if the text in hand turns out to be by Joe Shakespeare, rather than William - but the new assumptions prompted by this new information will in turn inform and help to shape the reader/viewer's understanding of the text as a whole. This dynamic interaction of part and whole makes up the hermeneutic circle.

Similarly, "any understanding of an object is an understanding of that object as something. In other words, all understanding involves projecting a meaning on one's perceptions that is not strictly contained in the perceptions themselves" (Warnke, 1987:75). And the structures we use, consciously or unconsciously, to perform this initial projection of meaning are 'prejudices' or 'pre-judgements'. What we consider to be rational judgements derive from and function within "pre-disclosed interpretive frameworks derived from cultural-historical existence" (Dicenso, 1990:97). Reason itself, therefore, is also constituted historically: "the idea of an absolute reason is impossible for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms, i.e. it is not its own master, but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates" (Gadamer, 1979:245).

The second step that Warnke identifies is the assertion that "interpretive projections of meaning are rooted in the situation of the interpreter" (Warnke, 1987:77). This reinforces the role of prejudice, in that there is no neutral, context-free standpoint from which to engage with the matter in hand, whether text, work of art, or other object of understanding: "To try and eliminate one's own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible, but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to use own's own preconceptions so that the meaning of the text can really be made to speak for us" (Gadamer, 1979:358). Even the scientific attitude is just that - an attitude that depends on placing the object within a particular context and adopting certain rules and procedures for observation and accumulation of knowledge.

So at this stage, Gadamer is saying both that an individual's understanding necessarily involves a projection of 'full' meaning on the basis of incomplete and partial information, and that this projection is rooted in the person's particular situation, vantage point, expectations, and the like. Does the inevitability of prejudice in Gadamer's sense then consign all understanding to pure subjectivity? Are all individual prejudices or orientations towards the text or other matter at hand, *die Sache*, equally valid? Is there any way of distinguishing between purely personal or subjective

interpretations and 'authentic' understanding?

The third stage in Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice and clarification of the role of tradition, according to Warnke (1987:78), places his analysis at some distance from this form of subjectivism. Gadamer's hermeneutics develops - and depends on - the idea of situatedness or "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), and its determining role in our ability to understand the meaning of any text (text analogue) or situation. He draws on Heidegger's analysis of understanding rooted in "the concerns of the interpreting subject or ... in a structure of practical involvements" (Warnke, 1987:78), but specifically locates this structure of involvements in history.¹⁶ We are indeed 'thrown' into a historical and cultural matrix which we have not chosen, but this does not mean that our understanding of a text or event must be arbitrary. Rather, "our understanding stems from the way in which the event or work has previously been understood and is thus rooted in the growth of a historical and interpretive tradition" (Warnke, *ibid*). The tradition already mediates the event or text in the sense that it provides the ground-rules for deciding what objects should be deemed significant, worthy of consideration, and what kinds of questions should be posed about them.

The relation between historical situation and tradition, on the one hand, and understanding on the other, is explored by Gadamer (1979:267ff) through the joint ideas of "effective history" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) and "effective historical consciousness" (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). Bleicher defines the term "effective history" as the "on-going mediation of past and present which encompasses subject and object and in which tradition asserts itself as a continuing impulse and influence" (Bleicher, 1980:266). To put the same point somewhat differently, "effective history" concerns "the process of cultivating an awareness of the ways in which understanding has been shaped by historical forces" (Dicenso, 1990:82), and it is this awareness that constitutes "effective historical consciousness".¹⁷

So understanding is achieved through a recognition of effective-historical processes, though the point of Gadamer's emphasis on the historicity of understanding is to emphasise that knowledge of those processes can never be complete. Our perspective on any given event or object of understanding is necessarily always partial and finite. But it is the particular situation in which we find ourselves that provides the 'horizon' from which our understanding can proceed. Gadamer maintains that involvement in a particular historical or linguistic context does not prevent us from understanding other languages, cultures or events from our own past. Indeed,

it is that very involvement that provides or suggests an orientation towards the object and places it within a context. "The interpreter does not approach his subject as a *tabula rasa* ... Rather, he brings with him a certain horizon of expectations - of beliefs and practices, concepts and norms - that belong to his own life-world. He sees the subject from the perspectives opened by this horizon" (McCarthy, 1984:172).

Gadamer presents understanding as a process of reaching agreement (with the Other) about *die Sache*, a process which is encapsulated in the notion of the fusion of horizons. But the nature of the consensus sought is left ambiguous, depending on the exact interpretation given to the idea of 'fusion'. Gadamer seems to waver between two interpretations, one strong and the other weaker, though perhaps more tenable overall. The first, strong, sense requires substantive agreement between the interpreter and the views expressed by the Other; that is, one party acquiesces in the view of the other in a "concrete unity of judgment" (Warnke, 1987:106).

I have characterised the second interpretation as 'weaker', but I suggest that it may in fact lead to a more illuminating practice. This version of the fusion of horizons is arrived at "by restoring the dialectic of points of view and the tension between the other and the self" (Ricoeur, 1981:75). Both the interpreter and the text or other aspect of the tradition that is being examined move within their own horizon. Understanding is achieved by allowing one's own horizon to be open to the other, by entering into a dialogue within which both one's own prejudices and those of the other are thoroughly tested. I discuss the dialogic nature of understanding more fully in section 5.3, but allude to its significance here to explain the nature of the process of understanding Gadamer envisages. Within this view of the fusion of horizons, understanding involves a transformation of the original positions of both interpreter and text or other object of understanding, a dialectical process whose end point¹⁸ represents a new stage of the tradition.

On this view, understanding can also include disagreement - we simply agree to disagree; but the process of trying to achieve a better understanding of the matter at hand will have involved searching examination of each party's prejudices and assumptions and obliged each to incorporate a serious consideration of the other's position into his/her own framework. Knowledge of the points on which one disagrees with or remains unconvinced by the other's arguments enriches one's own understanding as surely as does the experience of finding previously held convictions being validated by the other.

Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice seems to leave a number of issues unresolved. The question still remains whether, in the light of the inescapable influence of prejudice, truth can be distinguished from personal preference or whether any interpretation of the matter in hand can be seen as valid? To confront the spectre of arbitrary, inaccurate or just whimsical interpretations, Gadamer introduces the presumption of unity, which expands the idea that we approach a text already anticipating or projecting a meaning, in order to understand it (the hermeneutic circle of part and whole). Warnke summarises this development as follows, "... the presumption here is that the text forms a unity, an internally consistent whole, and that one can use the regulative ideal of unity to assess the adequacy of one's interpretations of its various parts" (Warnke, 1987:83). The presumption of unity commits the reader of a text to an understanding that in a certain sense is 'true to itself'. But it does not confront the broader problem of misunderstanding or of adjudication between two equally consistent readings. Consistency by itself cannot guarantee truth.

If the text itself cannot provide a standard apart from internal consistency against which to measure our understanding, where should we look for authorisation or justification for particular interpretations? We cannot move 'outside' the text, for instance to appeal to the author's supposed intentions, because extra-textual evidence in turn must also be considered from the point of view of the hermeneutic circle, and so on *ad infinitum*.

So Gadamer introduces a new assumption which can allegedly provide a criterion or standard for discriminating between alternative, but equally self-consistent, interpretations of a text's meaning. Gadamer calls this the "presupposition or 'fore-conception' of completion" (1979:261). To try and avoid arbitrary or idiosyncratic interpretations of a text, "we are fundamentally open to the possibility that the writer of a transmitted text is better informed than we are, with our previously formed meaning. (1979:262) In essence, therefore, our engagement with a text or other object for understanding commits us to according that object a certain normative authority; we allow, at least for the purpose of that encounter, that the work before us can tell us something authentic.

Thus begins a process of putting our own prejudices into play; in this way we sift and test them, to sort the legitimate from the illegitimate, the justified from the unjustified (Gadamer, 1979:246ff). "The filtering out of the 'legitimate' prejudices occurs in the dialectic between otherness and familiarity, between object and tradition, that is initiated by the temporal distance: 'It not only lets those prejudices that are of a particular

and limited nature die away, but causes those that bring about genuine understanding to emerge clearly as such' (pp.282, 263-4)" (Bleicher, 1980:111). We take the risk that we might be wrong, might know less about the matter before us than the subject or text we are engaged with, though Gadamer does not commit us to an irreversible acceptance of the other's authority. Having provisionally granted the object of understanding an authority over us, this nonetheless leaves open the possibility of withdrawing acceptance of that authority in the future.

But does the anticipation of completeness resolve the earlier problem of misunderstanding and misinterpretation by making the object of study itself the standard of truth? How can we tell whether the new understanding we have achieved through allowing the object to exercise an authority over us is actually any less arbitrary or misleading than the old prejudices we have now discarded? And is there any way to tell whether our new understanding is anything other than simple acquiescence in the views expressed in the text?

A dissimilarity of viewpoint or even apparent falsity of a text or other work of art is not, according to the anticipation of completeness, a reason to reject new material. Indeed, the effect of such an encounter should rather be to encourage us to make more strenuous efforts to be educated by it; it allows our prejudices to be more thoroughly tested than an encounter with the cosily familiar. "Hermeneutic analysis demands a respect for the *authenticity* of mediated frames of meaning: this is the necessary avenue for understanding other forms of life, i.e., generating descriptions of them that are potentially available to those who have not directly participated in them" (Giddens, 1976:145).¹⁹ So at what stage should we stop trying to learn from our object? We seem to run the risk that, "if we do not simply interpret works so that they comply with our own beliefs, we will end up learning from truth-claims we ought long ago to have dismissed" (Warnke, 1987:89-90). The answer Gadamer provides is not wholly satisfactory, involving a further elaboration of the role of tradition in shaping our understanding.

As Gadamer has made clear before, the object of hermeneutic understanding is not neutral, presented to the naive observer free from any pre-judgement. The object is itself "already a fusion of the interpretations of a tradition" (Warnke, 1987:90), so engaging with the object involves an encounter with the tradition itself. The anticipation of completeness commits us to accord a normative authority to the object of understanding; thus, in a certain sense, we have necessarily accorded authority to the tradition: "The tradition is not only the source of the old interpretations that we test in anticipating

completeness; our new interpretations are themselves readings of the tradition's authority" (Warnke, 1987:90). Essentially, we seem to have swapped a commitment to personal prejudices for an allegiance to the past, according to Warnke, approaching a conservative defence of tradition which has brought Gadamer into conflict with writers like Habermas, who find in 'tradition' a force much more obviously open to challenge.²⁰

The relation of the above to the concerns of anti-racist social work must now be drawn in. In broad social work terms, the role of prejudice and tradition can be articulated: while social work as currently practised is not a monolithic enterprise, the state bureaucracies which today organise mainstream social work have developed out of a particular welfare tradition that has its roots in the charitable organisations of the Victorians. Assumptions about the role and purpose of individual acts of charity and about the wisdom of state involvement in individuals' private lives, ideas about the rightful recipients of aid - the 'deserving poor' contrasted with the feckless and idle - and appropriate modes of service delivery, all have a history which bears on current understandings of the social work enterprise. But hermeneutics goes beyond the simple acknowledgement of situatedness and makes powerful claims for the authority of tradition.

The defence of prejudice and the authority of tradition by Gadamer "presupposes that we are carried by the meanings of the past before we find ourselves in a position to judge them. Or to put it in other terms, we are spoken to before we speak; we are posited in tradition before we posit tradition; we are situated before we are free to criticize this situation" (Kearney, 1991:60). We allow the tradition to assert authority over us. Gadamer makes a strong case for the rationality of the choice to accept the authority of tradition (Gadamer, 1979:245ff), arguing that it is not simply a matter of blind obedience. We can choose to preserve our tradition or allow it to be challenged, though as Gadamer notes, "Even where life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything than anyone knows" (1979:250).

So if the general bias is towards continuity, what can be done within a tradition that is in some sense deeply flawed - as is the case, arguably, in a society that draws on a racist tradition? I shall consider this point further in section 4.6, when I look at criticisms of Gadamer's position.

4.3 Understanding as *phronesis*.

Gadamer sees a crisis in contemporary praxis - even a deformation of the idea of praxis - in the exaggerated role accorded to science and scientific/technical expertise and the downgrading of practical-moral knowledge as the basis for social and political decision-making. He appropriates Aristotle's insights into the characteristics of practical reason or *phronesis*, and its differences from and relations to both theoretical knowledge and technical skill, and draws from them a relevance to present day questions and concerns.²¹

Understanding does not take place in a vacuum, but involves a moment of application. Understanding, interpretation, and application are not discrete, separable elements of hermeneutics, but are internally related; "every act of understanding involves interpretation, and all interpretation involves application" (Bernstein, 1983:38). Bohman et al. underline this point, with the following comment: "Gadamer claims that interpretive understanding is always already application, since the situation that prestructures interpretation always calls for an application, always demands some response from us in the pursuit of the purposes through which we encounter the situation" (1991:12). The way in which understanding is pursued is crucial; for Gadamer, it takes on particular importance as a form of moral-practical engagement. "It is Aristotle's analysis of *phronesis* that ... enables us to understand the distinctive way in which application is an essential moment of the hermeneutical experience" (Bernstein, 1983:38).

Ethical know-how can be distinguished from theoretical and, more particularly, technical knowledge on three counts (Gadamer, 1979:283-289) which can be summarised as follows: firstly, there is a difference between moral and technical knowledge in terms of the relation of knowledge to its application. We can learn a technical skill and can also forget it. "*Phronesis* (prudence) as practical knowledge is internalized knowledge and cannot be forgotten if it is not needed at the moment" (Bleicher, 1980:126). Technical knowledge, in Warnke's estimation, "is a matter of fulfilling a general norm or paradigm as best as one can given one's materials and tools" (Warnke, 1987:93). But with moral knowledge, one needs to be able to decide which general norm or paradigm is at issue, and then make a decision to act which applies the general norm to the particular situation. For example, what is 'right' or 'courageous' or 'selfless' cannot be decided in the abstract, but only in the context of a situation in which a right, courageous or selfless act is required. Ethical knowledge, thus is "a matter of understanding how a general norm is to be given concrete content - or what its

meaning is - with regard to a particular situation" (Warnke, 1987:93).

Secondly, technical and moral knowledge are distinguished by a fundamental difference in conception of the relation between means and ends. Technical knowledge is particular and is related to the achievement of particular ends. There is no obligation to consider anew each time the suitability of the means employed to achieve the particular technical objective. Moral knowledge, by contrast, has no "merely particular" end, but is concerned with "right living in general" (Gadamer, 1979:286). So there can be no knowledge in advance, as it were, of the right means to adopt to achieve the end in any particular case, "[f]or the end itself is only concretely specified in deliberating about the means appropriate to a particular situation" (Bernstein, 1983:147). Means and ends stand in a reciprocal relationship.

And the third point which differentiates moral from technical knowledge lies in the concern of the former with other human beings. Moral knowledge concerns "the knowledge of what others, as opposed to oneself, ought to do" (Warnke, 1987:94). It is manifested not in the imposition of one's own knowledge on another on the grounds that it might be good for them, but rather a fundamental openness to what might be good for that other person, with their different experiences and circumstances. In Gadamer's words, the person with this kind of moral understanding "does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected; but rather, as one united by a specific bond with the other, he thinks with the other and undergoes the situation with him" (Gadamer, 1979:288).

Each of these points demonstrates the role of application in understanding; ethical knowledge consistently involves an application of general principles in specific real-life circumstances. And Gadamer goes on to suggest that textual understanding, and indeed all authentic understanding, is motivated by the same process - the application of a general normative understanding to different concrete situations.

The idea that social work has a moral base is not new²² but has not led to any clear agreement on the exact nature of the values that should inform practice. Different texts offer competing 'shopping lists', each with its own implications for action.²³ But social workers daily find themselves in, and must make some sense of, situations of "uncertainty, uniqueness and value conflict" (Schon, 1983:49). The emphasis of the idea of *phronesis* is that understanding arrives only in conjunction with application; that is to say, that moral decisions depend

on an interpretation of the particular features of that individual case, and its identification as an example of a particular moral dilemma or situation; following such identification, an appropriate course of action must be adopted. This is not the world of technical means/ends rationality.

The three dimensions that distinguish moral-practical from theoretical and technical knowledge can be examined in relation to social work concerns to see how relevant the idea of *phronesis* is to understanding in social work. Whan (1986) approaches this issue from a viewpoint informed by readings of both Gadamer and Bernstein,²⁴ and identifies in social work a sense of practice as practical-moral engagement that differentiates it from technique, however skilled. Whan's account places social work firmly in the moral realm; he is critical of the depersonalising nature of technical rationality when it is applied to 'human' situations. This way of problem-solving concerns itself only with the most efficient means to achieve given ends, and does not allow any consideration of the quality or morality of the ends themselves. Social work is not just about technically efficient processes for the distribution of services and resources²⁵ but operates with a sense of personal involvement or engagement, and it is to this that hermeneutics speaks.²⁶

Whan's article briefly considers the possible application of *phronesis* in social work practice, and suggests the need for a particular moral approach to the business of social work. I would like to take the discussion a stage further and consider how the concept of *phronesis* might assist in the development of ideas specifically about multi-racial and anti-racist practice.

The first point that distinguishes moral knowledge is that it is internalized and cannot be forgotten, but there can be no advance prescription for its application. The general norm is only really understood through the attempt to apply it in a particular situation. I do not think it contentious to present the goal of eradicating racism as morally inspired. But the difficulty in achieving such a goal has, as I have argued, left social work in some disarray. I would suggest that this may in part be because there is no 'once and for all' solution to the problem of racism, such that if we all behaved in a particular way, or if our social institutions were to be organised differently, racism would quietly evaporate. What constitutes 'racism', and by extension, 'anti-racism', cannot always be specified in advance. It is only through finding ourselves in a situation where we feel obliged to act in an anti-racist way that the content of such an act can be specified.

This can perhaps be illustrated in relation to the second point concerning moral knowledge: means/ends rationality. Within social services departments, procedural steps have been taken, often in association with 'equal opportunity' policies, to increase the numbers of ethnic minority staff - this being held to somehow improve services to ethnic minority clients and show a commitment to anti-racism. But as the discussion in chapter two indicated, an increase in the number of members of a particular group need not in itself be proof of anything very much. Procedural change can remain at the technical level, without fundamentally affecting the claimed end - to decrease racism within social services departments. Unless there is a reciprocity between means and ends, such that "the consideration of the means is itself a moral consideration and makes specific the moral rightness of the dominant end" (Gadamer, 1979:287), attempts to change the moral focus of social work in this way will be of limited use.

Concern for others and commitment to another's good rather than to maximising personal benefit clearly fit with the aims of multi-racial and anti-racist practice. Indeed, it is hard to conceive of social work without at least some acknowledgement of the idea of concern for others, though of course the form in which this concern is expressed and the action deriving from it will vary considerably, depending on the prejudices, in Gadamer's sense, of the social worker.

4.5 The dialogic nature of understanding.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer attempts "to disclose 'linguisticity' (*Sprachlichkeit*) as the basic mode of human existence." (Dallmayr & McCarthy, 1977:287); he explores "the linguistic character of understanding to show that, despite our situatedness, understanding is nonetheless possible" (Warnke, 1987:81). That is to say, speaking one set of languages, having a given set of categories or prejudices does not cut us off from other language cultures or even from our own past. "Language is the middle ground in which understanding and agreement concerning the object takes place between two people" (Gadamer, 1979:345-6). All understanding is linguistic - meaning does not, indeed cannot, exist 'outside of' language: language is formative of "modes of Being" (Dicenso, 1990:54).

Understanding, achieved through the 'fusion of horizons', is conceptualised as a kind of discussion or dialogue between different points of view; and Gadamer consequently looks to the conditions of conversation to illuminate those of understanding in general. Each partner in a genuine conversation devotes herself entirely to the

matter at hand, and to achieving an understanding of the truth with regard to that matter.²⁷ This involves a recognition of the limitations of one's own knowledge and a willingness to learn from the contribution of the other party, points summed up in the presumption of the *docta ignorantia*: each individual's viewpoint and hence knowledge, is necessarily partial, limited and historically constrained; there is no position of absolute knowledge from which to judge the contributions to the dialogue, so each partner joins the conversation with the awareness that, in a certain sense, she does not know about the matter before her and therefore should allow for the possible truth of other views. Thus, each partner stands in a special relationship to the other: "Each partner must thus be taken seriously as an equal dialogue partner, as someone who, despite heritage, quirks of expression or the like is equally capable of illuminating the subject matter" (Gadamer, 1979:347).

A genuine conversation is a process of "integration and appropriation" (Warnke, 1987:101), whose outcome is a unity about the subject at issue, a shared understanding where the reciprocity of conversation leads to a new position that represents neither party's original view, but rather an advance over the positions maintained by each at the beginning. Dialogue of this kind involves a co-determination of the knower and the known, to use Dencenso's expression (1990:81). Again, it is worth repeating that the understanding achieved is not 'better' in the sense that it approximates ever closer to some ideal or transcendental form of absolute knowledge. Conversation has a dialectical nature, but Gadamer does not assume the necessity for any particular *telos*.

This conversational/dialogic pattern is repeated, for Gadamer, in any hermeneutic engagement with aspects of our own or another tradition: "The focus of understanding, like that of dialogue, is the 'truth' of the subject-matter at issue; this requires taking seriously the claims of one's text (in the broadest sense), defining and testing one's own prejudices against these claims and coming ... to a new understanding of the subject-matter at issue" (Warnke, 1987:101-102).

Gadamer's account of the dialogic nature of understanding has clear relevance for social work. Everyday practice in social work is after all characteristically seen - and often caricatured - in terms of 'the social work interview', or rejected with such comments as "social workers don't do anything; they just talk".²⁸ Within social work there is an approach to practice that suggests that the simple experience of being involved in a conversation in which one is treated with respect and acknowledged as "conversible with"²⁹ - that such an

experience is, in itself, therapeutic.

While it would be unrealistic to expect every duty social work interview in a busy inner-city office to conform to the conversational standards that mark a true hermeneutic experience of understanding, the dialogic model offers a useful regulative ideal, and puts the onus for successfully achieving understanding as much on the social worker as on the client. "If the quintessence of what we are is to be dialogical - and this is not just the privilege of the few - then whatever the limitations of the practical realization of this ideal, it nevertheless can and should give practical orientation to our lives. We must ask what it is that blocks and prevents such dialogue, and what is to be done ... to make such genuine dialogue a concrete reality" (Bernstein, 1983:163).

4.6 Criticisms of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

Hermeneutic understanding 'fits' comfortably with the humanist, client-centred approaches to social work, although it is worth emphasising again that Gadamer's notion of the "fusion of horizons" differs significantly from the concept of empathy found in (for example) Egan (1983), and discussed earlier in this chapter. And while a hermeneutic approach clearly offers an opportunity to achieve greater understanding of the Other, and thence of ourselves as culturally and historically situated individuals, there is nevertheless a very real possibility of such an approach lapsing into a conservative acquiescence in the status quo. This is a familiar criticism of the Gadamerian version of hermeneutics, strongly associated with Habermas in particular, and challenges Gadamer on two main counts: the question of the distribution of power in dialogic situations; and the authority of tradition.

The distribution of power comes into question because dialogue, it is argued, can become another means of control if it fails to take account of the possible power imbalance between the partners in the exchange. Eagleton encapsulates the problem in his reference to "the monologue by the powerful to the powerless" (Eagleton, 1983:73). Do the participants in a conversation or encounter with a text have equal power in the exchange?³⁰ Or is it rather the case that those with more power, whether as representatives of a dominant culture (white vs black) or institutional tradition (social worker vs client), can control a dialogue and ensure that it is constrained within 'acceptable' boundaries?

At this level, the criticism perhaps just amounts to the truism that those with power would generally like to hang

on to it and will control dialogic, as well as other, situations if given half a chance. But I think that two points can be made that deepen the criticism of Gadamer's hermeneutics and present a more serious challenge to its premises. The first relates to the association of hermeneutics with "an apolitical notion of interpretive communities" in which "sets of shared prejudices ... are held together by cultural consensus" (Bohman et al., 1991:9),³¹ a view which begs more questions than it answers. For Gadamer presents consensus as itself an uncontentious idea, assuming rather than proving its existence, and ignoring or avoiding a discussion of "the character, dynamics, and tactics of power and domination" (Bernstein, 1983:156). Yet as the preceding remark by Bernstein suggests, this concept may not be entirely transparent, and some account needs to be given of the exercise of power and domination in the manipulation of social consensus.³²

The second, related, point has to do with the nature of language and discourse, and concerns the possibility that genuine dialogue is undermined or prevented by the existence of "systematically distorted communication" (Habermas, 1970a). Habermas shares with Gadamer a concern at the rise of technical rationality which has, they would both argue, "reduced the vocation of reason to a utilitarian calculus of means and ends, to a purely instrumental function" (Kearney, 1986:220). But this common concern has different implications in each case. As we have seen, Gadamer takes us back to the tradition within which we are placed and urges a dialogue with it or aspects of it based on a mutual respect and willingness to learn from the exchange. Habermas takes a less benign view of the process of dialogue and the role of tradition and, while he follows Gadamer's 'linguistic turn', draws on an understanding of language as "a medium of domination and social power; it serves to legitimate relations of organized force. Insofar as the legitimations do not articulate the power relations whose institutionalization they make possible, insofar as these relations merely manifest themselves in the legitimations, language is also ideological" (Habermas, 1970:360).³³

Habermas's analysis of language use and communication depends, in part, on two connected ideas: the first is that everyday speech is subject to distortion through the workings of ideology, and the second is that there is - in principle at least - the "ideal speech situation" in which all participants to an exchange have equal access to and free choice of the full range of speech acts. Habermas himself refers to the ideal speech situation as "neither an empirical phenomenon nor merely a construct, but rather an unavoidable reciprocal presupposition of discourse" (quoted in McCarthy, 1984:310), and uses it as the

regulative ideal by which to appraise instances of "systematically distorted communication".

Habermas suggests three criteria for marking out systematically distorted communication from 'pure' communicative action: it involves "a deviation from the recognised system of linguistic conventions; it is manifested in the rigid repetition of behavioural patterns; and it betrays a discrepancy between the various levels of communication, so that actions and expressions belie what is said" (Thompson, 1983:134).³⁴ At this level, the notion of systematically distorted communication seems particularly apposite for the consideration of dialogue in a racist society. It clearly resonates with the experience of 'everyday' racism described by Essed (1991), and perhaps accounts for the ability of a majority ethnic group to portray itself as 'tolerant' towards minorities while maintaining a racist status quo.

Ideology operates to promote "a 'false consciousness' which distorts communication and conceals the exercise of domination" (Kearney, 1986:223). So Habermas calls for a critique of ideology, a critical social theory that will expose the traditional suppression of generalisable interests, and make way for the free and equal communicative exchange between all social agents that characterises authentic human discourse. To elucidate the process of unmasking the distortions and 'false consensus' that are the products of 'pseudo-communication', Habermas turns to psychoanalysis. Just as psychoanalysis identifies "the mechanism in which we repress socially unacceptable motives and channel them into acceptable forms of expression" (Bleicher, 1980:156), so, in turn, will the form of critical theory proposed by Habermas seek "to dissolve systems of power through the interpretation of ideologies which restrict the realm of public debate" (Thompson, 1983:135).

While Gadamer assumes the general accessibility of meaning within a tradition, Habermas's task is to bring to light repressed meanings which support the self-delusions of particular groups within a stratified society. "The dead weight of given socio-political interests and forces sedimented in social institutions and reflected in everyday language precludes the unrestricted self-clarification of these members subjected to its regime" (Bleicher, 1980:158). The critique of ideology, motivated by belief in the possibility of the ideal speech situation, provides the vantage point for critical reflection that Habermas would argue is lacking in Gadamerian hermeneutics.

Habermas's analysis of the impact of power and domination in dialogue, of which I have given only the briefest

outline, is itself open to challenge, notably by Gadamer who argues that the concept of critique can be more than adequately accommodated within the scope of hermeneutics.³⁵

However, Habermas's position cannot be dismissed at this stage, as it also incorporates the second criticism I have mentioned, leading to a serious attack on the particular role of tradition in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Understanding, for Gadamer, is necessarily linked to the involvement of the interpreter or dialogue participant in a particular socio-historical matrix, and is achieved through the engagement of the interpreter's 'horizon' of experience with that of the Other in that encounter. The process of understanding is appropriation, the assimilation of an alternative viewpoint in terms which make sense to the interlocutor. An encounter with the Other, and the attempt to seek meaning in that exchange, offer the opportunity to increase one's self-knowledge.³⁶ That is not to say that the Other is an object or tool for use by the questioner to gain further personal insight; but that, for Gadamer, the dialectic of the process of understanding commits both parties to accepting the possibility of change in their own assumptions and prejudices in relation to their own traditions.

So in social work, adopting a hermeneutic approach to understanding involves an openness and humility on the part of the social worker when confronted by the 'otherness' of the client. In Gadamerian terms, the involvement of a white social worker with a black client opens the possibility of the social worker gaining greater understanding of her own role and place in a largely white-serving bureaucracy and broader white-dominated culture - if she is prepared to take the risk of engaging in a genuine dialogue. Understanding, then, will have a reflexive dimension, but is there not a danger that any adjustments to the worldview of that person will merely be self-serving? An encounter with difference sharpens one's understanding of one's own tradition, in Gadamer's terms, but could it not also just confirm the essential 'rightness' of what one already knows?

And even allowing for the possibility that both parties are willing and able to take on the challenge of a genuine conversation and are prepared to change, how does one deal with the negative aspects of tradition? Gadamer presents 'tradition' as "a linguistic body of commonly shared assumptions" (Kearney, 1986:223) to which we accord a normative authority. But there is no guarantee that our tradition is intrinsically benign. As Habermas indicates, 'tradition' may shelter all manner of ideological distortions and repressions and still claim authority over us.

In relation to the specific concerns of this thesis, therefore, what is one to do if the tradition from within which one speaks is fundamentally flawed - for example, by racism, as the linguistic resource position suggests? The process of understanding involves putting one's prejudices into play, and attempting to sift the 'legitimate' from the 'illegitimate' ones. But what criteria inform the decision to keep or reject particular prejudices? I have already drawn attention to Warnke's criticisms of Gadamer's stance on this issue, and suggest that his position is, finally, unsatisfactory and may leave us hanging on to beliefs and assumptions we ought long ago to have discarded. Gadamer argues that hermeneutics need not be uncritical, simply that all critique takes place from within the horizon of the critic. But having accepted that there is no 'meta-narrative' outside tradition that could justify or invalidate our prejudices, and rejecting the Habermasian option, hermeneutics slides uneasily under the weight of the authority of tradition into an accommodation with the status quo.

The emphasis on the authority of tradition raises a further question: is hermeneutics ethnocentric? This question is addressed specifically by Hoy (1991), and is answered in the negative.³⁷ The question of ethnocentrism arises out of hermeneutics' insistence on context-boundedness in interpretation and understanding. Given that all understanding takes place from within the particular 'horizon' or historical-social context of the individual and, further, that understanding always involves application to the present situation of the interpreter, can one infer that hermeneutics condones ethnocentrism?

Gadamer's hermeneutics is reframed by Hoy as a form of "critical pluralism", in which "what counts as real is determined *internally* within an interpretation and is not something external to the interpretation that the interpretation is *about*" (Hoy, 1991:160). Hoy's position is that the claim that understanding and interpretation are necessarily context-bound is not, of itself, pernicious; neither is it ethnocentric in the pejorative sense in which the term is most commonly used, if the interpreter remains open to the differences between her understanding and that of others, while acknowledging her own historicity. Problems arise, however, when this awareness of difference is obscured by the misguided expectation "that every other understanding of the world converge on one's own" (Hoy, 1991:156). It is the impulse towards convergence that is oppressive, rather than the inevitable situatedness of one's understanding in a particular social and historical matrix.

Hoy suggests that the self-reflective moment of hermeneutic understanding occasioned by an encounter with others who have a different self-understanding should not be conceived as a move towards understanding ourselves 'better', but rather that it offers us the chance to see ourselves differently from before: "we could admit that our understanding both of ourselves and others changes, so that new problems emerge. ... The self-understanding would be 'better' only to the extent that we see through our earlier myths about what we were doing when we thought we were observing others" (Hoy, 1991:175), and would not rule out the possibility of self-critical reflection. In essence, then, Hoy reiterates Gadamer's counter-arguments to Habermas's challenge to the authority of tradition, and makes a case for hermeneutics involving a critical dimension that guards against the hegemonic drive towards convergence that he (Hoy) identifies with the pernicious aspect of ethnocentrism.

In an attempt to mediate between the hermeneutics of Gadamer and the critical social theory of Habermas, Ricoeur sets up a position which perhaps allows for a less rigid interpretation of the authority of tradition. Having first summarised the antinomies between the two approaches (1981:78ff), Ricoeur then argues that Gadamer's hermeneutics of tradition contains within itself the possibility of a critique of ideology. "For as soon as we acknowledge that tradition is not some monolith of pre-established dogma but an ongoing dialectic of continuity and discontinuity made up of different rival traditions, internal crises, interruptions, revisions and schisms - as soon as we acknowledge this, we discover that there exists an essential dimension of distance at the very heart of tradition. A distance which actually invites critical interpretation" (Kearney, 1992:61).

This throws a different light on the authority of tradition, and raises the interesting possibility that there may not be one tradition but rather a multiplicity of interacting and cross-cutting traditions. This is reminiscent of the stand Harding takes on feminist postmodernism (Harding, 1986), and suggests a direction for the move beyond both Gadamer's and Habermas's conceptions of hermeneutics, and away from the position Ricoeur stakes out in his bid to reconcile these two approaches. Thus, while acknowledging Habermas's critique of Gadamerian hermeneutics, I have looked elsewhere for a corrective to it partly because I incline to the view that Habermas's own theory of "ideal speech situations" is unrealistic. I have been drawn to consider, therefore, some ideas based on what I have characterised as the other 'wing' of hermeneutics, the more radical 'deconstructive' approach associated with Derrida.³⁸

CHAPTER FOUR

NOTES

1. For example, an individual can choose to act in ways that are odds with the cultural norms of his community; the idea of "rule-governed" behaviour (cf Winch, 1958) implies the possibility, in some circumstances at least, of breaking, changing, or plain ignoring the rules. In terms of the use of language: within literature, challenges to the classis realist novel demonstrate the possibility of operating otherwise than in the culturally dominant forms. At the level of everyday language use, one could perhaps cite the use of non-standard forms of English by minority ethnic groups.

2. See, for example, Whan (1979), Gammack (1982), Imre (1984) and Whan (1986) on social work understanding.

3. Carl Rogers is probably the author most strongly associated with client-centred casework (see chapter one, note 7). For an approach based on the use of empathy, see Egan (1983).

4. See Thompson (1983:40-41) for expansion of this point.

5. For the purposes of this study, the article by Lago (1981) on cross-cultural counselling is particularly relevant, and contains further useful references related to conselling practice and theory.

6. I comment further on this book in chapter six where literary theory is discussed, for England has attempted to apply literary critical techniques and analyses to the production and reception of social work texts. Although not without problems, this work nonetheless represents an imaginative move towards a rethinking of social work's activities.

7. See Howe's discussion (1987:96-120) of what he calls the "seekers after meaning"; influenced by the theories of Carkhuff and Truax, this group is exemplified, in his view, by Rogers, England, Goldstein and Wilkes.

8. Egan's formulation does not suggest any limits to the exercise of empathy, and it would seem initially that there are no barriers to the range of situations or encounters in which the empathic worker can operate. It is therefore with some surprise that one comes across his

comments on the role of "indigenous helpers" (1983:86).

Acknowledgement that language itself might not be completely transparent is found in Lago (1980:60-61); the author suggests that in a cross-cultural meeting, differences can multiply when participants are working with different assumptions about language use.

9. cf Winch (1958) and understanding other 'forms of life'. Also, see Giddens (1976:149).

10. In this, Gadamer differs from other writers within the tradition of linguistic philosophy, like Habermas or Wittgenstein, who liken the process of understanding to that of socialisation in one's primary language.

11. See, for example, Corrigan and Leonard (1978) Pritchard and Taylor (1978), and Simpkin (1979).

12. This point, summarised by Gadamer as the "presupposition or fore-conception of completeness", is examined in more detail later in this chapter.

13. A work as dense as *Truth and Method* touches on more than I can appropriately indicate here, where my analysis of Gadamer's text is presented in a very specific context, namely its possible contribution to the race and social work debate. For an excellent, lucid account of Gadamer's hermeneutics which clarifies both the positive and negative aspects, see Warnke (1987); also Bernstein (1983, 1986).

14. Dicenso (1990) discusses Gadamer's idiosyncratic usage of "prejudice" and his conflation of this term with the more neutral "pre-judgment", finding such an elision unsatisfactory.

15. With the assumption, explicitly stated in Fairclough, that discursal strategies and conventions are centrally related to questions of power.

16. Ricoeur draws together the ideas of projection and "thrownness" that Gadamer takes from Heidegger in the following statement: understanding "must be described initially, not in terms of discourse, but in terms of the 'power-to-be'. The first function of understanding is to orientate us in a situation. So understanding is not concerned with grasping a fact but with apprehending a possibility of being. ... [T]o understand a text, we shall say, is not to find a lifeless sense which is contained therein, but to unfold the possibility of being indicated by the text. Thus we shall remain faithful to the Heideggerian notion of understanding which is essentially a *projection* or, to speak more dialectically and

paradoxically, a *projection* within a prior *being-thrown*" (Ricoeur, 1981:56).

17. See also the discussion in Ricoeur (1981:73ff).

18. The designation 'end' is meant only for the purposes of that enquiry or dialogue. Gadamer is not proposing that understanding moves inexorably towards a position of absolute knowledge. One's horizon can shift, but it remains essentially open to the possibility of encountering new texts or other objects of tradition.

19. This is perhaps the position the social worker is in, when trying to understand and subsequently re-tell (either verbally or in written form) the client's story.

20. I take up the question of Gadamer's alleged conservatism and his statements on the authority of tradition in section 4.6 below.

21. See Bernstein (1983) for a consideration of the use of the concept of *phronesis* in *Truth and Method*. In the course of this discussion, Bernstein makes the point that Gadamer's appropriation of Aristotle is "an exemplification of what he [Gadamer] means by opening ourselves to the truth that speaks to us through tradition" (Bernstein, 1983:39; and see also 148-150).

22. See, for example, Butrym (1976) and Wilkes (1981).

23. See, for example, Bailey (1980), Timms (1983), and Howe (1987).

24. Bernstein in fact challenges the assumption on which Gadamer raises his approach to understanding, namely that a sufficiently broad consensus exists to provide the framework for the expansion of understanding through dialogue informed by the exercise of *phronesis* (1983:156-160). He is in turn challenged by Dicenso (1990:106-108).

25. Though even this would presumably be carried out on the assumption that such a distribution was in some sense a 'good thing'.

26. cf. Schon (1983) on the failure of the predominant model applied to professional activity - technical rationality - and his acknowledgement of a creative, dynamic element in practise which cannot be codified according to the norms of technical rationality, but which can apparently be learned. Also, see England (1986), though I would suggest that there are problems with his conclusions.

27. This is not an esoteric exercise, but an intensely practical activity as Giddens observes (1976:150-151).

28. See, for example, Mayer and Timms (1970) and Sainsbury et al (182:172).

29. I owe this expression to Michael Whan, who used it in an (unpublished) seminar presentation at Cranfield Institute of Technology in 1989.

30. The idea of equality in relation to a text may sound a little eccentric, but I have in mind here Manlove's advice to treat all works with equivalent scepticism. He says firmly, "never take things for granted" (Manlove, 1989:14), and goes on to urge a critical attitude towards all literature, even "a text in which some authority ... appears to tell us what to think" (Manlove, 1989:16). Anyone who has felt critical towards an acknowledged example of 'great literature' will perhaps recognise the difficulty of asserting the right to an alternative judgement.

31. cf Fish's (1980) discussion of "interpretive communities".

32. The earlier discussion of van Dijk's and Essed's work particularly, underlines the relevance of this point to a consideration of racism.

33. Habermas developed his views on language into a theory of communication, which appeared in 1981 as *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, (translated into English as Theory of Communicative Action, the first volume was published in 1984, the second in 1987).

Without attempting a full exposition of Habermas's theory of communicative action, which would place it in the context of the wide-ranging and often eclectic writing about critical social theory that have appeared over a period of about thirty years, I concentrate on his work to the extent that his criticisms highlight possible problems within hermeneutics. So here, I will look at Habermas's analysis of the impact of ideology on communicative practice, and his consequent challenge to the dialogic approach to understanding endorsed by Gadamer. This is not to say that Habermas abandons the commitment to dialogue in toto, but rather that he presents the unconstrained dialogue of Gadamer's hermeneutics as an ideal not as an existing practice.

There is an extensive secondary literature providing exposition and critical discussion of these ideas; see, for example, Bernstein (1983), Thompson (1983), McCarthy (1984), Rasmussen (1990), Holub (1991), and Honneth and

Joas (eds.) (1991).

34. The 'logic' of deconstruction, of course, is that a text always operates on this level, undermining its own proclaimed position; there is no ideology-free space.

35. See McCarthy (1984:187ff) for a succinct summary of Gadamer's counter-arguments. Thompson takes the view that 'systematically distorted communication' is "an ambiguous and questionable concept" and opposes its extension from the psychological to the social plane (Thompson, 1983:133-136).

36. cf Marcus and Fischer (1986).

37. Rorty's appropriation of Gadamer's hermeneutics takes a different angle on the issue of ethnocentrism and the guiding role of tradition. He asks not just whether hermeneutics is ethnocentric or not, but whether it matters if it is. Adopting a somewhat provocative attitude, Rorty claims both a positive answer to the primary question and a cheerful negative to the second. For an account of the pragmatic position he advocates, see Rorty (1980) and the discussion of his work in Bernstein (1983).

38. This is clearly not the only possible response to traditional hermeneutics; I have mentioned Ricoeur (1981), who develops an alternative position based around the ideas of narrativity and action as text. See also Thompson (1983) for a discussion of what he designates "critical hermeneutics".

CHAPTER FIVE

RADICAL HERMENEUTICS AND SOCIAL WORK: A DECONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH

5.1 Introduction.

To introduce the philosophical concerns of this thesis, I identified two approaches to hermeneutics, characterised as 'traditional' and 'radical', and related them to the work of Gadamer and Derrida respectively. Having examined the possible application of the hermeneutics of tradition to social work, and in particular to social work with ethnic minorities, I concluded that while the premises of such an approach are congenial, there is nonetheless a real danger that according authority to tradition restricts the scope - and maybe even the possibility - of criticism of that tradition. In other words, Gadamerian hermeneutics has a latent conservatism that is perhaps misplaced if the tradition is flawed - by racism, for example, as the cultural/linguistic resource position suggests.

The possible danger of complacency or cosiness vanishes swiftly in the face of the often mischievous irreverence of deconstructive criticism as applied by Derrida. The essentially benign practice of pursuing understanding through an ethically-informed dialogue with 'the other' in all its cultural and historical manifestations collapses into the endless unpicking of a chain of meaning.¹ Each link in the chain is exposed to a thorough-going and sceptical examination to try and tease out the forces which hold a given meaning or reading together and, perhaps more importantly, keep alternative readings at bay. This practice, known variously as strong or deconstructive reading, opens the door to a very different kind of understanding from that of the hermeneutics of tradition explored in the last chapter. In what follows, I look at the ways in which Derrida's position complements Gadamer's,² but goes beyond it by adopting a critical practice that interrogates and challenges the dialogic assumptions on which the latter's hermeneutics is based. My intention will be to draw out the implications and resonances of both Gadamer's and Derrida's position for the race and social work debate that provides the focus of this thesis.

5.2 Radical hermeneutics and language.

One obvious place to start investigating the relations

between Gadamer's and Derrida's hermeneutics is perhaps their respective attitudes towards language and 'text'. While hermeneutic understanding depends, in broad terms, on textual analysis, the process of analysis as well as the idea of 'text' itself is open to a range of interpretations. The procedure for achieving understanding is envisaged by Gadamer as a dialogue with the object of tradition, whatever form that object may take. Thus, the interpreter or interlocutor may literally start a conversation with another speaker, or initiate a dialogue with a written work, a piece of visual art or other cultural product in the manner described above in chapter four.

By taking dialogue as the model for understanding, it could be argued, Gadamer privileges speech in relation to writing. Derrida himself challenges this priority of speech over writing and accordingly adopts a different approach to the problems of understanding and meaning which he derives from a particular (poststructuralist) conception of language itself. To understand the force and significance of this challenge, which I have stated in the baldest terms, we can first turn to a consideration of the nature of language to see what is at stake. This will involve a brief exposition of Saussure's linguistics, to set the context for the moves taken by Derrida and others beyond the structuralism derived from Saussure. The next step will be to follow Derrida's analysis of the history of Western philosophy and its dependence on what has been characterised as a 'metaphysics of presence'.³ This will be followed by an outline of the specific approach to language and understanding associated with the work of Derrida; and lastly, in this section, I will present an account of the reading practice associated with this approach.

i) Structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction.
 'Structuralism' is the general term for a movement with adherents from across a range of disciplines and fields of study who share a characteristic way of thinking about structures derived from an understanding of Saussurean linguistics. They are concerned with the way different elements of a signifying system (whether of ideas or knowledge, or of cultural practices and social institutions) are held in place and given meaning by structures which underlie and generate the various phenomena that come under observation. The practice of structuralism involves uncovering and explicating these structures and producing models of the signifying systems. As Young puts it: "The structuralist procedure of seeking out recurrent elements and their patterns assumes that the final model will consist of an autonomous entity of interdependent parts which condition each other reciprocally. It also assumes that meaning and

signification are both transparent and already in place, as well as the possibility of objective scientific verification of its findings" (1981:3).

It would seem useful, at this stage, to briefly sketch in the key points of Saussure's linguistic theories - to draw out the novelty and significance of his view of language, before looking at the use Derrida makes of Saussure's work, and his critique of it. As I noted above, Saussure's theories of language, his attempt to found a 'science of language', provided the basis for the development of systematic structuralism in other disciplines; any sign system or signifying practice could be approached with the structural methodology borrowed from linguistics. Levi-Strauss, for example, applied this method to the anthropological study of myth and of kinship systems. I mention Levi-Strauss here as he, along with Saussure himself, is used by Derrida⁴ to illustrate the limitations, indeed the impossibility, of the structuralist project, implicated as it is within the metaphysics of presence.

"It is Saussure's insistence on a pre-given fixed structuring of language, prior to its realization in speech or writing, which earns his linguistics the title 'structural' " (Weedon, 1987:23). This quotation from Weedon alludes to the distinction made by Saussure between *langue* and *parole*: *langue* is the abstract system of norms, rules and conventions which underlies and governs the formation and meaning of any linguistic act; and *parole* refers to individual utterances, the everyday productive uses of both spoken and written language. "Linguistics is not concerned with the positive realisation of language but with the differential structure which allows those particular productions. It is that distinction that Saussure captures in his terms *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* refers to the specific set of systematic differences which allow the production of particular utterances of *parole*" (MacCabe, 1979:439).

One further distinction made by Saussure is relevant here: that between the 'synchronic' and the 'diachronic': to study a system 'synchronically' is to isolate it historically and analyse it as a functioning totality at a given point in time; 'diachronic' analysis attends to patterns of change across time. Thus, Saussure proposed that the proper object of a science of language would be the synchronic study of *langue*.⁵

With the parameters for his new science in place, Saussure could then analyse the chains of signs that comprised the abstract system of *langue*. Signs, he suggested, consist of a 'signifier' (a sound or graphic image) and a 'signified' (the concept or meaning). The relationship between the two

components of the sign is an arbitrary one; there is no natural or inherent connection between the sound image and the concept it serves to evoke. In Eagleton's example, "the three black marks c-a-t are a signifier which evoke the signified 'cat' in an English mind. ... [But] there is no inherent reason why these three marks should mean 'cat', other than cultural and historical convention. Contrast *chat* in French" (1983:97). 'C-A-T' signifies by virtue of its difference from other possible formations, for example 'bat' or 'cot'. Nonetheless, Saussure does allow that, while signifier and signified are only bound together by convention, they do take on the nature of a completed sign and are "united in the brain by an associative bond", forming a "two-sided psychological entity" (Saussure, quoted by Young, 1981:2).

Having taken the step of dissolving any necessary relation between signifier and signified, Saussure formulated the further insight that the relation between the whole sign and its referent (i.e. what the sign refers to) is also arbitrary. Meaning is no longer referential but simply relational: "language is not a nomenclature, a way of naming things which already exist, but a system of differences with no positive terms" (Belsey, 1980:38). So the notion of difference or differentiation applies here too. The sign is in a sense empty; it has no positive content, no essential or intrinsic meaning; rather, meaning is negatively defined as an effect of the sign's difference from others in the language system. Harland (1988:15) likens this to the holes in a net: "specified by their boundaries but empty in themselves".

While a working definition of structuralism may be more or less adequately composed, drawing on the attachment of different disciplinary approaches to the work of Saussure, 'post-structuralism' presents different problems of definition. On one level, the term applies to the movement within linguistics and other disciplines away from or beyond structuralism. But the position is at once both more and less complicated than this, and the nature of the 'away from' and 'beyond' in the above formulation is not at all clear-cut. Harland finds valid distinctions between 'structuralism' and 'post-structuralism', but examines both within a framework he characterises as "superstructuralism" (1988).

Culler (1983:22ff) acknowledges that in some cases there are problems deciding whether a certain author is a structuralist or post-structuralist, and even in differentiating structuralism as an approach or practice from post-structuralism; but again he seems to write with the understanding that the latter is a tenable position, offering the following assessment of its task: "... structuralists and semioticians optimistically elaborate

theoretical metalanguages to account for textual phenomena; post-structuralists skeptically explore the paradoxes that arise in the pursuit of such projects and stress that their own work is not science but more text" (Culler, 1983:24-25). Thus, language continues to provide a crucial focus for attention within poststructuralism: "For poststructuralist theory the common factor in the analysis of social organization, social meanings, power and individual consciousness is *language*. Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed" (Weedon, 1987:21).

Different forms of post-structuralism can be identified, but all share a common assumption, namely that "meaning is constituted within language and is not guaranteed by the subject which speaks it" (Weedon, 1987:22). One strand of post-structuralism draws on insights from psychoanalysis, particularly the work of Lacan;⁶ a second strand focusses on the history of discourses, on the relationships between language and power, discursive framework and social and political institutions;⁷ the third strand, deconstruction, concentrates on analysis of text, the relationships between and within texts and is associated most strongly with the work of Jacques Derrida. And, as I have indicated already, it is this third approach that informs my understanding of the race and social work debate.

ii) Logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence.

Derrida's approach to problems of meaning and understanding draws on a particular interpretation of the Western metaphysical tradition that runs from Plato to Hegel and beyond. He sees this tradition as being governed by 'logocentrism', using the term "to characterise the recurring propensity of Western thinking to centralise or ground its understanding on notions of 'presence' (*logos*)" (Kearney, 1986:115). Derrida's challenge is to do away with any attempt to provide foundations or grounds 'below' or 'beyond' the language categories and social meanings that make up the "ordinary socially created intelligibility of the world" (Harland, 1987:68) and, on this view, provide the only reality we can know. In this section, I will look at the 'history' of this philosophical position,⁸ the workings of logocentrism, the conceptual ordering it promotes and the significance accorded to voice or speech within this tradition.

Logocentrism is the term applied by Derrida to ways of thinking that depend on a metaphysics of presence, that is, a belief in a transcendental presence that fixes and guarantees linguistic meaning but which itself remains beyond question. Western philosophy, he argues, has been

governed by the attempt to describe the 'fundamental', the really 'real'; and this urge to designate a centre, origin or grounding principle invites a way of thinking that defines by exclusion. Logocentrism, then, entails the establishment of a conceptual hierarchy based on a series of philosophical dualisms: presence/absence, literal/metaphorical, mind/body, speech/writing, to give some examples of binary distinctions that have exercised considerable power within the Western tradition. In each case, the first term assumes superiority; it is the term associated with presence, with self-authenticating meaning, while the second represents a fall away from full presence: it is defined as inferior, and is characterised by a lack, "a complication, a negation, a manifestation, or a disruption of the first" (Culler, 1983:93).

Derrida draws on Saussure's theories of language to furnish material for his challenge to logocentrism. Logocentrism's elevation of the literal is treated with suspicion; indeed, "Derrida denies the very possibility of literal meaning. This is because the literal assumes the absolute self-presence of meaning, whereas in fact, according to Saussure's own formulation, language is constituted by difference - it is 'form and not a [sic] substance'" (Young, 1981:15). For Saussure, sign systems are constituted through difference - and, to use Derrida's own coinage, through *differance* as well,⁹ the sign is an arbitrary construct, depending for its explanatory force on its relations of difference from other signs within the overall system of signification. The signifier never 'catches up' with the signified, and the sign always remains different from itself, and cannot achieve the moment of pure self-presence posited by logocentrism. This rather opaque formulation can be expressed more simply, by saying that the word for an object, experience, mental state and so on is not the same as the thing itself, a point to which I will return.

But having taken this stance, apparently in opposition to the claims of the metaphysics of presence, Saussure appears to retreat from the full implications of his own insights and, as Derrida shows, to fall prey to the dictates of logocentrism himself. Saussure's work is unavoidably involved in the very tradition it undermines; it challenges logocentrism while remaining bound by the terms it disputes. Derrida does not present this as a fault in Saussure's thinking, a mistake that could have been avoided. On the contrary, it demonstrates that one cannot 'leap outside' of the governing tradition or way of thinking, but must adopt an alternative strategy to question the conceptual hierarchies of everyday thinking. Such a strategy would engage with the ruling conceptual apparatus, but from a position of unavoidable involvement: "The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures

from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, ..." (Derrida, 1976:24); in this way, deconstruction works to unsettle established systems of thought.

The practical implications of the involvement in logocentrism can be seen in the phenomenon of 'political correctness' and associated attempts to somehow purge language of all racist, sexist, classist, ageist or otherwise offensive connotations. The motivation to do this may be worthy,¹⁰ but the attempt - from a Derridean perspective - cannot but fail. In chapter four, I used the changing terminology of the discourse of race/racism and anti-racism to illustrate this point: changing particular words which have acquired derogatory meaning does not remove racism from its niche as a linguistic resource. The urge to expunge racism in this way belongs firmly to the metaphysics of presence, to a belief in a strict one to one relation between word and meaning, signifier and signified - in short, to a commitment to the unified sign that Derrida shows to be an illusion.

Logocentrism works to persuade us that if we could only hit on the 'right' term or formulation, we could achieve the ideal of a racism-free language. But as I indicate above, this could only be possible if the identity between signifier and signified were fixed and complete. Derrida's approach to language sees it instead in a perpetual state of *dissemination*. Meaning is neither fixed nor complete; on the contrary, it flits across endless chains of signifiers, always pointing away from itself, and cannot finally be 'pinned down' in a way that would allow certain meanings to be removed from our common vocabulary by the simple act of changing one word for another. Why then bother about language at all? If the logic of deconstruction leads to the abandonment of the search for a 'pure', non-racist language, is there any point in the process of substitution alluded to above where race terminology is modified, and certain new terms adopted, only to be replaced in turn themselves some time later?

Within deconstruction, the idea of a once for all switch in meaning, in the manner of a gestalt shift, is a fantasy, but this is not to say that the process of change is without significance. To prefigure a later discussion of ethics (section 5.3ii, below), it could be argued that the decision to engage in the kind of linguistic analysis that questions the assumptions behind particular preferred conceptual hierarchies is itself a form of moral-practical

engagement. Otherwise, we could just accept the impossibility of arriving at an 'untainted' form of words, and relax!

The fact that Saussure is not able to 'escape' from the conceptual ordering of logocentrism is both demonstrable and unsurprising, in Derrida's terms. The evidence of his inscription in the prevailing metaphysics is seen in the relation between *parole* and *langue* found in Saussure's work, which follows the logocentric privileging of voice or speech over writing.¹¹ Logocentrism, in this sense, is also phonocentrism.

The down-grading of writing at the expense of speech or the voice has a long history. Though the use of the word 'history' is not intended to suggest an originating moment when phonocentrism was 'born', Derrida traces this phenomenon back as far as Plato, whose work he examines in considerable detail. In *Of Grammatology* and elsewhere, Derrida considers the relation between speech and writing; in particular, he questions the systematic denigration of writing in philosophical works which are themselves, of course, written texts. Rorty sums up the situation as follows: "'Given that philosophy is a kind of writing, why does this suggestion meet with such resistance?' This becomes in his [Derrida's] work, the slightly more particular question, 'What must philosophers who object to this characterization think *writing* is, that they should find the notion that this is what they are doing so offensive?'" (Rorty, quoted by Culler, 1983:89).

One of the objects of philosophy has been to designate and understand the fundamental categories of meaning. Derrida suggests that the matrix for this historical process has been "the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of the word" (Derrida, 1978:110). The logocentric ideal would be the direct contemplation of thought itself but if that cannot be, if, that is, thought is always mediated - by innate ideas, *a priori* categories, or by language - then logocentrism demands that language be as transparent as possible. And the form in which this transparency can be achieved is held to be speech, for speech traditionally belongs to presence.

For Plato, truth inheres in the 'silent dialogue of the soul with itself'. The internal monologue offers an instant where the self is truly present to itself, where "truth is still pure self-immediacy; it has not yet been contaminated by the risk of alienation or confusion" (Kearney, 1986:117). Dialogue is the model that next most closely approximates to the ideal of full and immediate self-presence. The example of the conversation, where two parties are able to hear and discuss each others' utterances, provides the speaker with the opportunity to

clarify the meaning of what has been said and to correct any misinterpretations or ambiguities as they arise. In dialogue, words carry a particular meaning and express what the speaker 'had in mind'; these words convey meaning to the listener who can, in principle at least, come to understand the speaker's full and exact intention.

The ability to simultaneously hear and understand oneself speak¹² puts speech in a special relationship with meaning: "The inward Voice puts the utterance and its reception right up against each other, absolutely adjacent within a single consciousness; no medium, not even an interval of air divides them" (Harland, 1987:126). Writing introduces a level of mediation that allows, indeed forces, this intimate bond to be dissolved. Writing, conceived as the physical or graphic representation of speech, falls into all the traps that voice, in the logocentric world, avoids. Typically, it takes the form of "physical marks that are divorced from the thought that may have produced them. It characteristically functions in the absence of a speaker, gives uncertain access to a thought, and can even appear as wholly anonymous, cut off from any speaker or author" (Culler, 1983:100).

Writing challenges the spoken word's claim to full, self-identical meaning, and raises the unwelcome possibility of meaning cut loose from the speaker's or author's intention. A written text continues to signify whatever the author subsequently thinks about the matter; it can be read at any temporal or geographical distance from the authorial 'source'; even the death of the author cannot end the process. In her Introduction to Derrida's *Dissemination*, Johnson writes, "This inclusion of death, distance and difference is thought to be a corruption of the self-presence of meaning, to open meaning up to all forms of adulteration which immediacy would have prevented" (Derrida, 1981). Meaning can, in this sense, become alienated from itself with the result that, thus divorced from the controlling presence of the original intention, it becomes, in principle at least, plural.

So far from being the inert, technical representation of speech, writing has the power to undermine speech; it poses a threat to the unity of meaning that logocentrism would maintain. In this view, writing is considered a parasitic form of language use, a derivative or secondary form dependent on the 'meaning-fulness' of speech. Writing, then, belongs to absence. Derrida however challenges this equation and argues that presence is already always inhabited by difference. Writing assumes the absence of both the author and the object of the text - but speech, too, involves the possibility of absence: "it requires an asymmetry, a difference, between intention and intuition, just as writing does" (Hoy, 1978:81).

This asymmetry arise from the fact that to have meaning a spoken sentence must in principle be understandable in the absence of the particular intention or perception that prompted it; otherwise it could not be understood by someone who does not share that original experience. The sentence 'I see Jane' continues to signify whether or not anyone else hearing it has seen or knows the person concerned. It "has to be understandable by someone who does not have that particular perceptual presence. The intention of speaking is only accountable in terms of the possibility of this absence, not in terms of the intuition alone, for this presence would never give rise to the need to speak" (Hoy, 1978:81). Derrida turns the assumed priority of speech over writing on its head and claims that writing, far from being dependent on speech, is the necessary or enabling condition of speech. Speech and writing, in this unusual sense, both fall within a kind of general writing or 'arche-writing'.¹³

iii) Language, logocentrism and meaning.

Derrida uses Saussure's theory of difference to launch his critique of logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence, although he then goes on to show how Saussure himself remains within that very tradition - demonstrated in part through the way in which he privileges speech over writing (Norris, 1991:26-32); in Derrida's analysis, as discussed above, phonocentrism is closely allied to logocentrism. His extension of the ideas of Saussure and his challenge to established metaphysics is captured in an observation by Moi which is worth quoting in full: for Derrida, "language is structured as an endless deferral of meaning, and any search for an essential, absolutely stable meaning must therefore be considered metaphysical. There is no final element, no fundamental unit, no *transcendental signified* that is meaningful *in itself* and thus escapes the ceaseless interplay of linguistic deferral and difference. The free play of signifiers will never yield a final, unified meaning that in turn might ground and explain all the others" (Moi, 1985:9). In the rest of this section, I will try to unpack some of the ideas contained in Moi's comment quoted above by looking at Derrida's use of a number of 'key' terms.¹⁴

The characteristic use made by Derrida of the terms 'centre' and 'presence' derive from his analysis of the logocentrism that he sees supporting the Western metaphysical tradition. Logocentrism, as the earlier discussion indicated, demands fixed meanings held in place by some extra-systemic guarantor - a centre around which meaning turns, a guiding principle that points either back to an origin or forward to an absolute end; Derrida does not specify that it must be one rather than the other, and lists a number of terms as candidates for this position

(1978, in Lodge, 1988:110). The factor uniting them is, he suggests, that each has been used to designate an "invariable presence" (ibid:110); all, that is to say, represent "extra-systemic entities, points of reference or centres of authority which escape from that play of difference which, following Saussure, Derrida believes to be the sole source of meaning" (Hawthorn, 1992:140).

Hawthorn's comment underlines the importance of 'difference' and, indeed, *differance*, to Derrida's theory of language and meaning. Saussure moved linguistics in a new direction in breaking with the traditional view of language as reflecting either external reality or internal mental processes and theorising language instead as a system of differences with no fixed terms. Eagleton (1983:127-132) succinctly summarises Saussure's position, and then outlines Derrida's challenge to it, his attempt to crack open the unity of the sign - the link between signifier and signified - exposing meaning as an effect of the continuous movement of the signifier.

Briefly, the argument runs as follows: a signifier has meaning only in relation to other signifiers within a language system; its identity is a matter of what it is not, that is, its difference from other possible and actual signifiers. So far, we are following Saussure. But whereas the concept of synchrony committed Saussure to a view of language as a closed system of unified signs, Derrida argues that language is an altogether messier affair where the status of the signified itself is called into question. Far from there being a neatly symmetrical relationship between a given signifier and its signified, rather, the signified "is really the product of a complex interaction of signifiers, which has no obvious end-point" (Eagleton, 1983:127).

Meaning, then, does not inhere in the signified. The signified does not exist as an 'in-itself'; it is merely a form of short-hand, a way of giving meaning to a potentially limitless chain of signifiers, each one referring endlessly away from itself. To illustrate this point, one could use the example of looking up a word in a dictionary. The dictionary offers a 'definition' - but only in the form of more words, any one of which could in turn be looked up in the same or other dictionaries, and so on. The concept or signified itself is not made manifest in any other way than through language, which is where it remains. In this way, Derrida rethinks the traditional concept of signification itself, such that "signification does not present or represent some original presence; the very notion of presence is *itself* an effect produced by signification" (Kearney, 1986:116).

Accepting Derrida's view of language involves trying to

let go of some of the more deep-rooted principles of logocentrism concerned with fixed, full and absolute meaning, though this is not to say that the idea of establishing any meaning in a given situation is lost. Derrida argues that meaning is context bound, but as context itself is in principle infinite it cannot provide a limit to the possibilities of meaning. His position on this is clear: "This is my starting point: no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation" (Derrida, quoted by Culler, 1983:81).

On this understanding, meaning is never stable or settled for all time, as "signifying is nothing more or less than signifiers *in motion*" (Harland, 1987:135). Language operates in the mode of *dissemination*, a term Derrida uses to suggest the way language (necessarily) always 'spills over' any attempt to curtail the play of signification. It is "an endless shifting from sign to sign which can never be terminated or fixed by reducing the signifying process to some transcendental starting-point or end-point" (Kearney, 1986:116).

The impossibility of meeting the logocentric ideal of complete self-identical or self-present meaning is explored further by Derrida through the notion of *differance*, a neologism which draws on two French verbs - 'to differ' and 'to defer' - for its sense, while remaining poised between both of them. The dependence of language on 'difference' was amply demonstrated by Saussure; but there is another dimension to the process of signification, an element of 'deferring' or postponement that is unavoidable. The sign, as one element in a system of differences, silently draws attention to the absence of everything from which it has been differentiated, a phenomenon Derrida refers to as 'spacing' (1976:68ff).

At the same time, it is a feature of the sign that it must remain different from itself, in the sense that it cannot literally bring to presence that which it signifies; as Young observes, "a sign for something must imply that thing's absence (just as a copy must be different from an original in order to be a copy, or a repetition can never be an exact repetition, otherwise it would be the thing itself). Representation never re-presents, but always defers the presence of the signified" (Young, 1981:15). The inability of the sign ever to 'catch up' with the thing it signifies, the necessary lag or slippage in language that prevents the sign from coinciding with itself in "a moment of perfect, remainderless grasp" (Norris, 1987:15) - it is these ideas that the element of 'deferral' in *differance* suggests.

iv) Deconstructive reading.

Derrida's analysis of language gives rise to a view of the

nature of meaning that is at odds with our 'common sense' understanding of the world. Meaning no longer belongs to our words and concepts in the way we, influenced as we are by the prevailing logocentrism of Western thinking, have been led to believe. Following Derrida, meaning is pursued through engagement with text, which in turn draws attention to modes of reading. This points us, in part, to the domain of literary criticism which will be explored in chapter six, where I examine various approaches to reading and textual criticism. My purpose here is to explain the kind of approach to reading that is promoted when Derrida's understanding of language is applied to texts.

Logocentrism, in Derrida's analysis, is characterised by a search for origins, foundations or "first principles" which, as Eagleton observes, are "commonly defined by what they exclude" (1983:132). Thus, as we have observed, logocentrism tends to structure discourse around a "loaded system of binary distinctions" (Norris, 1987:34); Norris identifies three such distinctions - or oppositions, as they more properly appear - namely, presence/absence, speech/writing, origin/supplement, and we might add others to this basic list: nature/culture, male/female, and white/black. I described these as 'oppositions' because in each case a hierarchy is maintained, with one term in the pairing occupying a privileged position in relation to the other;¹⁵ one term is defined as the key concept against which the other is negatively defined.

Derrida proposes to disrupt the fixed order governing logocentric theories of language, consciousness and subjectivity in which "signs have an already fixed meaning recognized by the self-consciousness of the rational speaking subject" (Weedon, 1987:25), through a process of close or deconstructive reading which aims initially to reverse, and ultimately to 're-inscribe' these hierarchical oppositions. This, in Derrida's analysis, opens the way to a new 'science' of language - grammatology - and a new practice for reading which focusses minutely on 'the text'.¹⁶ Indeed in a certain sense, for Derrida, the text is all we have; as he asserts, in a much-quoted remark, "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*".¹⁷

How then to characterise a deconstructive reading? It is perhaps easier to state with a degree of certainty what deconstruction or a deconstructive reading is not, than what it actually is - though even a move of this kind risks merely reinscribing us in the very system of oppositions that Derrida posits running through and shaping our 'everyday' thinking.¹⁸ At the least, however, it could be said that "deconstruction does not elucidate texts in the traditional sense of attempting to grasp a unifying content or theme" (Culler, 1983:109). The object

of a deconstructive reading is not to come up with 'the meaning' of a given text; the possibility of univocal meaning is rejected by an analysis of language that denies an end to the movement of signifiers in the signification process. The inherent instability of signs points away from any final closure of meaning in favour of dissemination, or an endless 'overspilling' of meaning.

This is not to say that deconstruction endorses an approach to the text where 'anything goes' - as some critics have assumed, and some adherents apparently hoped.¹⁹ Deconstruction suggests that the 'free play' of meaning differs significantly from complete arbitrariness or wilful nihilism, and is inextricably linked to the text. Close reading, if the term is to have any currency at all, must imply an attention to the words on the page, the form and content of the text. We do not have to follow the path of the New Critics²⁰ and elevate the text to transcendental status to allow for the possibility of meaning. This reference to the New Critics points us again towards the general sphere of literary criticism, which is where the impact of deconstruction has perhaps been most keenly felt,²¹ and which may, in consequence, furnish us with a clearer picture of the role, strategy and effect of deconstructive reading.

To return to the idea of deconstructive reading, Con Davis and Schliefer offer the following formulation: "A deconstructive critique examines and tests the assumptions supporting intellectual insight in order to interrogate the 'self-evident' truths on which they are based. It tests the legitimacy of the contextual 'bounds' that understanding both presents and requires. Rather than seeking a way of understanding, a way of incorporating new phenomena into coherent existing or modified models, deconstructive critique seeks to uncover the unexamined axioms that give rise to those models and their boundaries" (1991:152).

5.3 Beyond the hermeneutics of tradition.

In this section, I wish to continue the process outlined at the end of the Introduction to this chapter, and examine aspects common to the hermeneutics of both Gadamer and Derrida, highlighting the ways in which the latter's understanding complements but then - more particularly - goes beyond the former's. To this end, the discussion will focus on the three features of hermeneutic understanding identified in the earlier exploration of Gadamer's ideas, namely i) the role of tradition; ii) the place of ethics or moral knowledge in understanding; and iii) " 'linguisticity' (*Sprachlichkeit*) as the basic mode of human existence" (Dallmayr and McCarthy, 1977:287).

i) The inevitable involvement in tradition.

The role and importance of tradition in Gadamer's thinking has been discussed at some length in the preceding chapter, so I will only make brief reference here in order to emphasise the centrality of the concept of tradition to his account of understanding. For Gadamer, understanding is always partial and finite, an act of interpretation that takes place from within, and is governed by, the particular perspective of the interpreter. The interpreter is never able to approach the object of understanding in an attitude entirely free from preconception, because the ability to appreciate the object as an object already presupposes some prior orientation towards that object, some context in which to situate it. And the conceptual framework, the orienting perspective, is derived from the individual's involvement in a particular cultural or social/historical matrix or tradition.

Understanding is dialogic and is achieved, in Gadamer's phrase, through a 'fusion of horizons' in which the interpreter's own point of view, informed by a particular set of prejudices (in the special sense in which Gadamer uses this word), meets and engages with that of the dialogue partner. Involvement in tradition is then the necessary precondition for any act of understanding, but at the same time the limiting condition on that understanding; our viewpoint must always remain restricted, circumscribed by the very tradition that generated it.

One of the problems associated with Gadamer's hermeneutics, as the earlier discussion suggested, was the apparent absence of considerations of power and dominance in the process of achieving understanding. Power relations include the possibility of exploiting language's capacity to suppress as well as illuminate. Gadamer draws on the concept of *aletheia* to discuss the relationship of disclosure and concealment that characterises the search for understanding. Derrida's position is that language itself has this double nature. And further, he suggests that any text carries within it the potential for its own deconstruction: "One can say *a priori* that in every proposition or in every system of semiotic research ... metaphysical presuppositions coexist with critical motifs. And this by the simple fact that up to a certain point they inhabit the same language" (Derrida, 1987:36).

Derrida shares with Gadamer the idea of inevitable involvement in a tradition, but draws different conclusions about the nature of that involvement; he is also led to promote different strategies for action. Like Gadamer, he argues that there is no position outside language, and that language itself is never neutral; it

has always been thoroughly 'worked over' by the structure or network of existing concepts which appear, to use Derrida's term (1976), as 'traces' within it.

The deconstructive critic is obliged to use the language that is available to her and to use the practice of deconstruction to "transform concepts, to displace them, to turn them against their presuppositions, to reinscribe them in other chains, and little by little to modify the terrain of our work and thereby produce new configurations" (Derrida, 1987:24). But in the meantime - and of course, for Derrida, this process of producing "new configurations" is potentially endless, as each new formation will in turn be open to the same treatment that produced it - the language we use is 'tainted', and can never be otherwise. Deconstruction offers no metalanguage or metacritique, but remains heavily implicated in the very system it challenges. And it is perhaps this element of challenge or permanent questioning that marks deconstruction from the more conservative hermeneutics of Gadamer.

For Derrida, tradition (as in 'the Western metaphysical tradition') is conceived as a set or sequence of conceptual hierarchies, held in place by a kind of violence.²² This suggests one possible site for intervention in the race and social work debate - at least to the extent that this debate is framed in terms of the engagement with otherness. It points towards a different relationship with otherness from that presupposed by Gadamer's hermeneutics, where the recognition of otherness involves making an ethical commitment to the 'object of understanding'. The hermeneutics of tradition asks only that we engage open-mindedly and even-handedly with the Other in order to reach agreement about the matter at hand. Derrida's analysis shifts the terms on which this engagement takes place such that, within logocentrism, the hierarchical ordering of concepts dictates that otherness is construed as an absence, a loss or lack, as the repository for that which the Self is not. The Other is not a neutral term, but already carries with it a freight of meaning; it already occupies a position of inferiority, secondariness, supplementarity, in relation to the superior term, the Self.

Logocentrism encourages a way of thinking that sees the world in terms of 'either...or', and decides unequivocally which is the preferred side of the divide in any given case. Derrida is not suggesting that we can unilaterally break with this habit of thought, as the earlier discussion made clear; rather, his approach urges caution or scepticism when faced with any such 'obvious' or 'commonsense' pairing as 'self / other', and a willingness to investigate the assumptions which sustain that

division. Derrida takes up the idea of the supplement - a term applied by Rousseau to writing to explore the relationship between speech and writing - and uses the logic of supplementarity to explore the oppositional hierarchies of logocentrism.

Young (1981:17-18) offers the following account of supplementarity, drawing on Derrida's example from Rousseau: "The supplement is both a surplus, 'a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence', but also adds 'only to replace'. It adds to speech, but also displaces it as a substitute. Derrida's analysis explores the strange logic involved here. An inside/outside opposition (speech/writing) has to introduce a third term (the supplement) in order to produce a sense of the very thing that the supplement defers (presence). Yet the supplement is not in fact a third term at all, since it partakes of and transgresses both sides of the 'opposition'. ...Its effect is to undo the closure of the 'logocentric' oppositions of texts".²³

While the practice of deconstruction involves an attempt at "disorganizing the entire inherited order" (Derrida, 1987:42) of concepts, he never suggests that this can be done from anywhere other than a position firmly rooted in the very order it challenges. "This double procedure of systematically employing the concepts or premises one is undermining puts the critic in a position not of skeptical detachment but of unwarrantable involvement" (Culler, 1983:87-88).

The presumption in favour of the authority of tradition gives way, with Derrida, to a relentless questioning of the bases on which that authority is claimed. The tradition, and the conceptual apparatus that supports it, is viewed with suspicion, and interrogated to elicit not only the meanings it asserts but also those that it denies or suppresses. I have already remarked on the process of reversal and reinscription that Derrida employs to striking effect, unpacking or dismantling the cardinal oppositions of a given text "to the point where opposition itself - the very ground of dialectical reason - gives way to a process where opposites merge in a constant undecidable exchange of attributes" (Norris, 1987:35). What I wish to discuss here is perhaps best described as the 'strategy' that the use of such a process calls forth.

It is difficult to write about deconstructive practice in the abstract, as it were, without reducing it to mere formulas, mechanical processes that can be engaged to produce certain (and in some ways, rather predictable) textual effects.²⁴ However, I shall proceed in the hope that an awareness of this danger minimises the risk of

falling too far into it. Thus, in what follows, the focus will be on strategy, as I indicated, in particular the way Derrida approaches the task of close reading.

Such a reading involves the attempt to seek out "that obscure yet inescapable logic by which the text deconstructs its own most rooted assumptions" (Norris, 1987:37) and proceeds, in typically contrary or subversive style, by approaching the text 'from the margins'. Culler places his comments on marginality in the context of a broader discussion of "grafts and graft", describing an operation "which takes a minor, unknown text and grafts it onto the main body of the tradition, or else takes an apparently marginal element of a text, such a footnote, and transplants it to a vital spot" (1983:139-140). So two modes are distinguished: marginality can operate either at the level of choice of text or at the level of the construction of the chosen text itself - the details of metaphor and other rhetorical figures, footnotes, passing comments and so on.

The focus on the marginal produces the recurring double movement that has been identified in deconstructive practice. It not only reverses the previous order of centrality/marginality, but calls into question the very grounds of the opposition between centre and margin, essential and inessential, inside and outside that previous readings have maintained. The elevation of the marginal is in itself only a passing - though essential - stage and is not intended simply to establish the old periphery as a new centre. Rather, it is an attempt to subvert the hierarchy of centre/margin, by rethinking the terms of the opposition. What, after all, is a centre if it can be displaced to the margins in this way? The potential relevance of this emphasis on the marginal has not been lost on feminist critics, who have taken the opportunity to exploit their position on the edges of academia and the 'lit crit' establishment.²⁵ And it seems to me, in relation to the concerns of this thesis, that this approach offers something both to black critics and readers of 'black' texts, a point I will return to in the next chapter.

ii) The ethical moment in understanding.

The ethical nature of hermeneutic enquiry is captured by Gadamer in the idea of *phronesis*; it is through the exercise of *phronesis*, or moral-practical knowledge, that the critic is able to engage with the Other and achieve understanding. This, in brief, is the position explored in much greater detail in chapter four. So the suggestion that hermeneutics has an ethical moment is well-founded in relation to what I have called hermeneutics' 'traditional' mode. The question to pursue here, then, is whether or not deconstruction has an equivalent ethical moment.

A criticism frequently levelled against deconstruction is that its characteristic concern with text and textuality, with the intricacies of language and tricks of rhetoric, removes the critic/reader from any serious engagement with the 'real world' and all its problems. While Derrida's own work remains analytically extremely rigorous, he nonetheless happily exploits the ambiguities or 'play' of language²⁶ and pushes conventional ideas about the organisation of text to the limit.²⁷ And it is this playful, creative aspect of his work that has become associated with certain American literary critics - for example, Hartman and Hillis Miller - who exemplify what Norris has called the "dizzy, exuberant side" of deconstruction (Norris, 1991:91).

Consideration of the 'ludic' dimension of deconstruction may lead one to ask whether there is, after all, anything to this form of criticism. Once we have admired the interpretive pyrotechnics of its more skilled proponents, are we left with anything other than "a form of sterile showing-off that finally alienates people" (Salusinszky, 1987:166)? One answer might be that while the ludic version of deconstruction is undoubtedly flamboyant and most conscious of itself as performance, as an approach to the (literary) text, it challenges the traditional boundary between 'creative' and 'critical' writing and celebrates "an open-ended free play of style and speculative thought, untrammelled by 'rules' of any kind" (Norris, 1991:91). But it has also provided ammunition for those - like, for example, Edward Said²⁸ - who feel that textual analysis should not become divorced from wider social practices.

So the question remains: does deconstruction have any bearing on matters of ethical or political significance? In an interesting series of interviews, Salusinszky (1987) questioned a number of established literary critics about the possible social function of criticism. In relation specifically to deconstruction, one of the most illuminating contributions comes from Barbara Johnson. Johnson responds to a comment that suggests that deconstructive criticism does not imply any form of political engagement - unlike, for example, Marxist criticism.²⁹ And her reply, though it is not programmatic, clearly locates deconstruction 'in the world', in an attitude of political engagement: "There's no political program, but I think there's a political attitude, which is to examine authority in language, and the pronouncements of any self-constituted authority for what it is repressing or what it is not saying" (Salusinszky, 1987:167). From this point of view, the political scope of deconstruction is enormous and, indeed, potentially endless. In *Otobiographies*, Derrida shows how this

attitude of questioning has implications for our understanding of established political 'facts' (in this case, the American Declaration of Independence).³⁰

Hillis Miller takes up the charge of political and ethical detachment that has been levelled against deconstruction. In the sense that "there is a political facet to everything one does in the university" (Salusinszky, 1987:213), he clearly believes that involvement in such an institution renders his own activities political, but he questions the assumption that there is a direct political effect or intervention in the act of reading, teaching or criticising particular texts. He argues that any effect is likely, rather, to be indirect, and therefore harder to identify. So he turns instead to "what is more direct, and has more to do with one person face to face with another: namely, ethics" (Salusinszky, 1987:213).³¹

There is, I would argue, no necessary ethical correlate for the questioning attitude implied by deconstruction. It would not be too far-fetched to suggest that deconstructive criticism in its ludic variation could be seen as positively amoral in its restless play through endless chains of signifiers, where play seems to be an end in itself. But this is not to say that deconstruction must lack any ethical direction.³² Observation of social inequalities and repressions, with a consequent unwillingness to accept the status quo, may provide the jumping-off point for the type of enquiry that deconstruction promotes - one that offers a quizzical perspective on the everyday assumptions, including the moral/ethical principles, by which we order our lives. Johnson, again, offers an apposite comment: "one of the things that is essential ... is to put in question exactly where it is you're standing, to be doing the activity you're doing: what are the boundaries you are assuming for your activity, what are those boundaries safeguarding and what are they opening?" (Salusinszky, 1987:158)

Deconstructive criticism need not entail a retreat from the world or an avoidance of ethical issues, as Derrida's own work on racism confirms.³³ Racism, as a site where politics and ethics collide, offers an interesting test-bed for deconstruction, and it will be part of the task of the remaining three chapters of this thesis to show how this form of criticism can contribute to an understanding of the workings of racism and the challenges of anti-racism through a study of selected texts.

iii) Linguisticality.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer expresses in unequivocal terms his belief in the central role of language in organising human understanding: "Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world, but on it depends the

fact that man has a world at all" (1975:401). Understanding always takes place from within a tradition which provides the language, the whole conceptual apparatus within which individual experience is framed, and a set of guiding 'prejudices' or orientations towards 'the world'. Gadamer does not propose that tradition is a hermetically sealed entity, nor that it is monolithic. Hermeneutic understanding is the result of successful mediation between two different points of view about a matter at hand, mediation which takes the form of a conversation between the parties concerned to reach an agreement about the particular subject. Understanding, as Gadamer expresses it, is dialogic.

Given the centrality of metaphors of speech and voice in Gadamer's work, the emphasis on dialogue and conversation, the choice of translation as the preferred model for the process of understanding, the approving references to Plato and his dialogic style of argument - can it be concluded that Derrida's critique of phonocentrism applies equally to Gadamer's work as to the others he explicitly challenges? After all, Gadamer seems to have adopted the phonocentric bias that prioritises speech at the expense of writing, and to have done so in a work explicitly concerned with problems of textual meaning.

Hoy's approach is to maintain that the positions espoused by Gadamer and Derrida are more closely involved than this possible criticism of Gadamerian hermeneutics would imply; he suggests "that Gadamer's and Derrida's views supplement each other because both thinkers are engaged in the same critical attack on metaphysical assumptions about truth, method, and absolute self-certainty" (Hoy, 1978:79). I would accept Hoy's claim that Gadamer's and Derrida's views supplement each other but would adopt a different position from which to explore the relation between the hermeneutics of tradition and deconstruction.

For Hoy, Derrida's thinking is more radical than Gadamer's, but not necessarily incompatible with it. He takes Derrida's re-interpretation of the relationship between speech and writing to provide a way of saving the idea of dialogue with a written text: "Hearing and reading are no longer so disanalogous, for hearing is also a kind of reading - an *interpretation* of the universality of the proposition in terms of the concreteness of the situation" (ibid :82).

But rather than trying to 'fit' Derrida's insights into a Gadamerian framework, I would suggest that these two approaches be considered complementary, or "supplementary" to one another, in the sense that Derrida uses this term.³⁴ They occupy a particular relation to one another that is perhaps most closely analogous to that of content

and form in literary criticism: Gadamer's hermeneutics is concerned with what a text means, and deconstruction with explicating how a text means.³⁵ But, to put it crudely, form requires content just as much as content requires form. An attempt to deconstruct the pairing of form/content would show the indissoluble link between the two terms, and the essential undecidability into which they collapse. Neither approach is complete in itself, but hermeneutic understanding of the type sought by Gadamer can be illuminated by the critical approach to language adopted by Derrida, and vice versa.

CHAPTER FIVE

NOTES

1. Hillis Miller (1977) provides an example of deconstructive criticism which includes an analysis of the metaphor of links in a chain.

2. See Hoy (1978) on the relationship between Gadamer's and Derrida's thinking; though in this connection, also see Norris (1985:chapter one) for a discussion which links Derrida with Habermas in preference to Gadamer.

3. These two strands are presented as separate for the purpose of exposition but, as will become clearer, they are deeply intertwined. Where necessary, I have risked repetition for the sake of clarity.

4. Levi-Strauss's work is discussed in Derrida (1976:101ff); see also Leitch (1983:chapter two).

5. Though, according to Hawthorn (1992:175), this is not a wholly accurate representation of Saussure who, he claims, did not dismiss the historical.

6. Within this strand, the works of Cixous, Irigary and Kristeva figure prominently; these three authors are discussed by Moi (1985:95-173) who provides a clear introduction to their different approaches.

7. This approach is strongly associated with Foucault; for a sympathetic account of his work, see Sheridan (1980).

Foucault's understanding of the relations between discourse, knowledge and power has influenced contemporary literary criticism and theory. For example, see Belsey (1983:399-410) or Weedon (1987). Weedon adopts a Foucauldian approach on the grounds that a 'politically aware' poststructuralism "must pay full attention to the social and institutional context of textuality in order to address the power relations of everyday life" (1987:25). The assumption here, one that I do not share, is that poststructuralism can only be politically radical in Foucauldian vein. Derrida's deconstruction is sidelined, as lacking in political effectiveness. But other analyses, which I shall explore elsewhere in this chapter, suggest that a Derridean perspective need not be politically disengaged.

8. Mindful, as one must be, that the temptation to search for origins, foundations, transcendental moments, is all part of the logocentrism that Derrida identifies with this tradition.

9. I discuss the notion of *differance* in the next section, so at this stage use the term without further expansion.

10. Though it need not be. Political correctness can become oppressive in its own way, by attempting to stifle certain uses of language in favour of other more 'acceptable' ones - leaving open the question of who defines this acceptability.

11. See Derrida (1976:27-73).

12. In French, the construction *s'entendre parler* carries both meanings or connotations.

13. The idea of 'arche-writing' (*archi-écriture*) is discussed by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1976:60ff), and also in an essay on Freud's *Note on the mystic writing pad* (1978:196-231). Through an exploration of the metaphors of writing in Freud's work, Derrida presents a view of the unconscious mind as constituted, in a special sense, by writing. Norris summarises this position as follows: "As Derrida shows, the entire Freudian topology of unconscious meaning depends on such notions as 'trace', 'spacing', 'difference' and others whose place can be found only within a graphic system of representation" (1991:123). It is in this context that Derrida uses the idea of 'arche-writing', a writing 'in' the brain that, as the condition of all linguistic systems, precedes any and all speech as well as physical writing.

14. I am uncomfortably aware, of course, that the very designation of certain terms as 'key' is itself suspicious, smacking of the very logocentrism that Derrida sets out to challenge. The difficulty of examining words in this way is also discussed by Norris (1987:15-16).

Derrida's own habit is to use 'essential' terms, but at the same time to put them 'under erasure' (*sous rature*), to indicate their provisional and tentative status, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. The idea of using, while simultaneously suspending the meaning of, particular terms in this way is borrowed by Derrida from Heidegger; see Spivak's commentary on this in Derrida (1976:xiv-xviii).

15. See Derrida (1987:41).

16. It is interesting to note that, in some ways, Derrida's return to 'the text' is reminiscent of the New

Critics' commitment to the written 'work', the autotelic art object. Johnson comments on this point in Salusinszky (1987:157-8). Further reference will be made to the New Critics both below and in chapter six. Briefly, though, the New Criticism emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, and is exemplified in the work of Cleanth Brooks and W.K. Wimsatt; they, and others within the New Critical approach, were in part responding to the writings of T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards (see Belsey, 1980:15-20).

17. Though it is here that the difference between Derrida's textualism and that of the New Critics is perhaps most sharply demonstrated. Derrida's assertion that there is nothing outside text depends on a particular view of text which is very much at odds with the idea of the self-contained, autonomous work of art sustained by the New Critics. Derrida's 'text' is intensely political, so "*'il n'y a pas de hors-texte'*" can be asserted on the grounds that the realities with which politics is concerned, and forms in which they are manipulated, are inseparable from discursive structures and systems of signification, or what Derrida calls 'the general text'" (Culler, 1983:157).

18. Indeed, the unavoidable involvement in that metaphysical tradition is one of Derrida's strongest themes: there is no meta-language, no recourse to concepts that have not already been 'worked over' or 'tainted' with metaphysical presuppositions.

19. This is what Norris calls deconstruction "on the wild side" (1991:92), by which he means an approach where the emphasis on the ludic element of deconstruction is pursued at the expense of the rigour that characterised certainly the earlier of Derrida's own work which depended for its force on scrupulous attention to the detail of the text being studied.

20. See notes 16 and 17 above, and also section 6.2ii) in the following chapter.

21. The pairing of philosophy and literature is one that deconstruction has engaged with most thoroughly. Deconstruction challenges the self-assessment and self-authorized statues of both philosophy and literature proposing instead an understanding in terms of a general textuality.

22. Hierarchies seem to somehow be superimposed on one another, with the male/female hierarchy apparently the most fundamental as evidenced by the pervading phallocentrism of Western culture. The influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis on feminist poststructuralist criticism can be seen in the development of the idea of

phallogocentrism into "phallogocentrism"; this is discussed in Culler (1983:165-177), Kearney (1986:122) and Hawthorn (1992:129-30).

23. The idea of supplementarity, or the logic of the supplement, is discussed at length by Derrida (1976:Part II, chapters 2-4), particularly with reference to the work of Rousseau. For a commentary on Derrida's use of this particular 'theme' see, for example, Culler (1983:102-106) and Norris (1987:97ff).

24. 'Predictable' in the sense that deconstructive criticism, according to its detractors, always comes out the same. Texts can always be shown to possess the potential for their own deconstruction - if only the critic is sufficiently inventive; see, for example, Abrams (1977).

25. See Culler (1983:43-64) and Moi (1985).

26. Both Derrida and also Gadamer draw extensively on the idea of play. For Derrida, the play of language or meaning is unstoppable, and is associated in his writings with the 'concepts' of *differance* and *dissemination*. Play, if I can put it this way, is then a recurring 'motif' in Derrida's 'work', and is thus not readily isolated from the general fabric of his texts; but see, for example, Derrida (1978 and 1987:39-49).

Play is presented by Gadamer as "the clue to ontological explanation" (1979:91) and *Truth and Method* gives detailed consideration to this important concept (see, for example, pp91ff); also see Bernstein (1983:120ff).

27. See, for example, *Glas*, *Living On: Border Lines*, and *The Double Session*, which are all discussed by Norris (1987:46-64).

28. Said, himself, owing more to Foucault's analysis of power and discourse or discursive formations (see Salusinszky, 1987:123ff).

29. Though see Ryan (1984) for a discussion of the possible "articulation" between Marxism and deconstruction.

30. See Norris (1987:194ff).

31. The echo of Gadamerian hermeneutics in this expression seems, to me, striking.

32. See Buker (1991:236-244).

33. See Derrida (1986a and 1986b).

34. See note 23 above.

35 See Birch (1989:5ff).

CHAPTER SIX

METHOD AND APPROACH: LANGUAGE, PHILOSOPHY AND READING

6.1 Introduction.

In this thesis, I have been advancing a particular view of racism, one which treats it as a linguistic or cultural resource. At the end of chapter three, I suggested that adoption of this view had implications for an understanding of the race and social work debate, and in the course of that and the following two chapters started to tease out the philosophical implications of the linguistic resource position for anti-racist social work. I took hermeneutic philosophy as the framework for this discussion, examining both the hermeneutics of tradition associated with Gadamer and the deconstructive approach that has been pursued by Derrida, and suggested that together these two approaches could provide a basis for re-thinking the terms of the race and social work debate.

Hermeneutics identifies a linguistically based tradition into which we are 'thrown', and which provides the network of prejudices and assumptions that each of us uses to orientate ourselves in the world. This network operates almost at the level of 'background noise'; it is largely unthought and unreflective, structuring our perceptions of ourselves and others. Social work turns on the involvement of a Self (a social worker, for example) with an Other (the client). But if the Other is always already represented within the governing tradition, then to make sense of multi-racial or anti-racist social work practice - or indeed any relationship with 'difference', however conceived - we need a way of conceptualising the encounter with otherness. And this, I have suggested, can be drawn from hermeneutics.

Moving on from philosophical considerations, I would suggest that the cultural or linguistic resource position also has implications in terms of methodological strategy, which it will be the business of this chapter to explore. I start with the assumption that part of the process of engaging with racism involves being able to identify it and understand its function(s). The proposition that racism operates as a linguistic resource points towards a study of language-in-use (as opposed to linguistics) as a way in to this process of engagement. This in turn directs us towards the study of examples of language-in-use, or texts, which means that we will need a strategy for reading.

Both Gadamer's hermeneutics of tradition and Derrida's deconstructive method problematise the act of interpreting text. Historically, hermeneutics originated in the search for appropriate principles and methods for biblical interpretation, and a central concern with the study of text remains a characteristic feature of Gadamer's work. The interest in text is two-fold: each text 'speaks' to us from the tradition within which it was produced and thus, at one level, each engagement with the text is also an opportunity to engage with a tradition that may be a long distance from our own, temporally or culturally.

But at the same time, the act of interpretation or understanding is self-reflective, and the encounter with the text in turn throws light on the interpreter's own historically- and culturally-constituted frameworks of understanding. In relation to Gadamer's work, Dencso writes: "Hermeneutics refers both to acts of textual exegesis per se and to an inquiry into the interpretive nature of human self-understanding and modes of being. The former activity provides a means of revealing the latter. Because we are cultural and historical beings who exist within linguistically formed worlds, the interpretation of texts can disclose modes of being-in-the-world" (1990:80-81).

Deconstruction, as chapter five suggested, is inextricably involved with the study of text, though the focus of that study is somewhat different from Gadamer's. The textual analysis associated with Derridean deconstruction is concerned with the rhetorical strategies adopted by, or incorporated within, particular pieces of writing; to repeat a point made earlier, it deals with how a text means. So while hermeneutic understanding depends, in broad terms, on textual analysis, the process of analysis as well as the idea of text¹ itself is open to a range of understandings. Drawing on explicitly literary critical sources, the next two sections look at different ways of conceptualising reading itself, moving on, in the final section of this chapter, to consider the practical implications of applying a text-based strategy to answering the questions posed earlier in relation to social work and race.

6.2 Reading theories.

The question of a strategy or method for engaging with text - for reading - now arises. Literary criticism is, broadly, the discipline in which reading as an activity is discussed and practised, so this can offer a useful additional source to draw on in conjunction with the consideration of philosophical hermeneutics. So, below, I present a brief, and highly selective, account of the main

branches of reading theory within literary criticism. Approaches to reading vary in terms of the importance granted by each to the role of the author, the text itself, or the reader in defining or producing meaning. The following account looks at each of these approaches in turn and then goes on to consider a fourth approach that draws on a different, less determinate, view of meaning.

i) Author-oriented reading.

This involves a search for the (univocal) meaning of the text which accurately represents the author's intention when producing that text. The work of Hirsch provides an example of this type of reading, where meaning is held to be directly related to authorial intention. If Gadamer's work is, in part, a response to Schleiermacher's claim that "the hermeneutical task ... consists in working through the language of the text to the thoughts of the author, which are both the source of meaning and the goal of understanding" (Dicenso, 1990:84), then Hirsch's contribution can be seen as an attempt to take the debate about textual interpretation full-circle, with a return to authorial intention as the guarantor of meaning. Gadamer's position can be stated unequivocally: "Not occasionally only, but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author" (Gadamer, 1979:264), and it is this lack of fixity of meaning that Hirsch challenges.

Eagleton suggests that Hirsch followed Husserl in his approach to meaning: "It was a kind of 'ideal' object, in the sense that it could be expressed in a number of different ways but still remain the same" (Eagleton, 1983:67). Hirsch allows that a literary work may be understood differently by different people and at different times, but ascribes these differences to the changing 'significance' of the work, rather than its 'meaning' which remains both unchanging and objectively knowable. "Significances vary throughout history, whereas meanings remain constant: authors put in meanings whereas readers assign significances" (Eagleton, 1983:67).

Hirsch attacks what he calls the theory of "cultural perspectivism" (Hirsch, 1976:258) - that is, the belief that meaning varies with the standpoint of the reader or interpreter - as based on fallacious premises and therefore argues, against the implications of this view, that the meaning of a text can be objectively knowable. "Textual meaning is not like an elephant or a tree; it is not something out there to be approached from different points of view. It is not *there* for the critic in any sense until he has construed it" (Hirsch, 1976:259). He contends that, prior to adopting any critical approach at all, a critic must first come to some understanding of the marks on the paper before him. And that process of constructing meaning depends on a unified, precritical

approach without which the critic, of whatever persuasion, would be unable to understand the text at all .

Hirsch supports this position by analogy with visual perception. As an example, he considers the case of two people looking at a particular building from different vantage points and argues that although the perspectives are undoubtedly different, they are nonetheless just that - perspectives, partial views of the same building. No one view provides the 'whole picture', but each separate view refers to the same object. He compares the way visual perception 'works' to create a whole image, an object that we 'know', from incomplete, partial (perspectival) information with the way binocular vision "completes and corrects monocular perspective effects" (Hirsch, 1976:261). We 'know' a whole object, despite only physically seeing one view of it. Different perspectives indeed exist, but only in relation to the existing original object which remains 'the same' and which is knowable to all observers. He concludes, "Anyone who takes the perspectivist metaphor seriously is forced by the empirical facts of visual perception to reverse his original inference, and conclude that a diversity of perspectives does not necessarily compel a diversity of understood meanings" (Hirsch, 1976:262).

Hirsch suggests a way of 'saving' perspectival relativism by appeal to the individual meaning categories through which each of us 'creates' the object under consideration, but then shows how a "paradox of perspectivism" in fact points back to meaning residing in the intention or consciousness of the author: "As a construction from a mute text, meaning has existence only in consciousness. Apart from the categories through which it is construed, meaning can have no existence at all. ... [I]nterpretive perspectivism argues for the constitutive nature of cultural categories. In its deepest significance, therefore, perspectivism implies that verbal meaning exists only by virtue of the perspective which gives it existence. And this compels the conclusion that verbal meaning can exist from only one perspective" - namely, the author's (Hirsch, 1976:262).

Problems arise with this view of reading at every level: how is the reader to know whether she has discovered the 'true' meaning of a given text, or merely framed an understanding that has personal significance? What sign denotes an authoritative reading? The problem of trying to define what is or was going on inside somebody else's head (as distinct from what they say about what is going on) has plagued all branches of the humanities and social sciences.² Even assuming it were possible to establish 'the intention' guiding the author's creation (and is it necessarily the case that each work of literature had only

one guiding intention; multiple or conflicting intentions could govern a particular piece of behaviour?), how would this be made manifest in the text?

But perhaps the most fundamental problem with author-oriented criticism is that it depends on a particular and, at the very least, questionable view of language. Diconso sums this up: "In order for the text to possess a single determinable meaning that corresponds to the intentions of the author, language would have to be a pliant tool that is imprinted by the author's mental processes. It would have to fixedly retain that impression and unambiguously present it to the reader" (Diconso, 1990:89). It is this view of language as the direct embodiment of the speaker's or author's consciousness, fully controlled and determined by that person, and therefore, so to speak, 'closed' to further discussion, that hermeneutics challenges.

ii) Close reading: 'New Criticism' and the text.

The institution of literary criticism in Britain - what Easthope calls "Englit" (1991:134ff) - has been dominated for the last fifty years by a form of textual analysis known as 'New Criticism'. The key points of this criticism are summarised succinctly by Weedon: New Criticism is marked by "its appeal to fixed moral and political values, the critic as the arbiter of these values and literature as a privileged mode of access to truth through its evocation of 'life'" (Weedon, 1987:139). This view of literature as providing unique access to true knowledge about human life, the 'human condition', assumes that "literature is not 'just' different from other uses of language, it is ontologically different" (Birch, 1989:59). New Criticism, then, operated a clear categorisation of text into 'the literary', which it was valuable to study, and the 'non-literary', which could be disregarded. Inclusion in the canon of acceptable 'Literature' would entail meeting a particular set of aesthetic ideals based on specifically literary values and qualities.

The study of 'literature' - which within New Criticism was often even more finely tuned to the study of poetry as the perfect example of literary form - if conducted by suitably trained and sensitive critics, could shed light on "fixed universal meanings which enable us to understand the 'truth' of human nature, which is itself fixed" (Weedon, 1987:139). If only certain texts could qualify for consideration as 'literature', then the ability to recognise such texts, and to make the requisite value judgements, depended in turn on a particular sensibility on the part of the critic whose role would be to expound on the meaning of the text for the benefit of the 'ordinary' reader. So the critic was elevated above the common herd of ordinary readers: "Literature is perceived

as special, the language used in literature is considered special, and the people involved in producing literature (and literary criticism) are considered special ... Critics who think along these lines create a priesthood; they become guardians of 'poetic truth' and of the meanings they determine for the texts they study" (Birch, 1989:63).

Eagleton, in a very un-New Critical way, locates the emergence of this form of textual analysis in a particular historical and social context, where an appeal to timeless and universal values provided a much sought after moral certainty and set of 'anchorage points' for an intellectual community facing the aftermath of the first Great War.³ New Criticism offered access to objective truths about the human condition, access which could be derived from assiduous study of a concrete artefact, the work of 'literature'.

Attempts to search out an original, intended meaning for a text through historical, biographical or sociological studies of the author and his milieu (and with New Criticism, the authors of 'great literature' were, with a few honourable exceptions, male) were rejected by New Critics. Meaning was neither the property of the author nor the reader but the text, though the author's claim to inclusion in the canon rested on his or her ability to portray experience as at once uniquely individual and universally human: "'Good literature' represents the expression of individuals who are able to control their experiences, compared with the offerings of other people who wander aimlessly in a world of uncontrolled experiences, pulp novels, mass advertising, and celebrations of the mediocre" (Birch, 1989:61). New Criticism was nothing if not normative⁴

The text itself, the formal features from which it was constructed, provided the critic with all he⁶ needed. "The theory of organic unity - 'text-in-itself-relevance' - does not permit speculation or discussion of anything other than the meaning 'inherent' in the text" (Birch, 1989:66). This led to a form of criticism based on 'close reading' where strict attention was paid to the stylistic and rhetorical details of the text, and all matters 'external' to the text - the discursive frameworks within which it was created or produced and, at different times, read - could all be 'bracketed out'.

But while New Criticism championed the critical primacy of the text, against the challenges of author-oriented criticism and, later, reader-response theories of meaning, it nonetheless maintained that the proper job of the critic was the search for the work's single, true meaning. Thus, as Belsey notes, "the continued assumption that

meaning is single, and the continued quest for a guarantee of this single meaning results in a conviction that the meaning of any text is timeless, universal and transhistorical" (Belsey, 1980:18).

iii) Reader-response theories.

These theories move the responsibility for defining meaning away from the author or the text, and ascribe it to the reader. In some of its manifestations, however, reader theory does not break completely with the search for authorial intention, and the procedures it adopts, in the end, do not differentiate it very clearly from this latter type of reading.

Slatoff recognised that "texts cannot determine across history and for all readers how they are to be read" (Belsey, 1980:30), and that the formal properties of a work, *pace* the New Critics, did not hold the key to the work's true meaning. The reader (or critic) actually had a certain amount of flexibility to create his or her own meanings. But Slatoff did not pursue this line of reasoning into a full-blooded acceptance of textual indeterminacy. Rather, he argued that most readers will in fact draw a particular range of meanings from a text through following a practice of 'good reading'. Such a strategy generates "a 'sympathy' or 'empathy' with what finally turns out to have been the intention of the 'implied author', the 'human presence' in the work" (Belsey, 1980:30). Thus, the 'implied author' - who does not seem all that far removed from the actual, physical author from whom the text derives its meaning and value - is brought in to curtail the otherwise limitless possible readings of a given text.

Fish, too, takes up the question of authorial intention, complementing it with a discussion of the "optimal" or "intended" reader, "the reader whose education, opinion, concerns, linguistic competences, and so on make him capable of having the experiences the author wished to provide" (Fish, 1980:320). He understands the search for the author's purpose in terms of the experiences of the reader, and the effects the text has on him (sic): "as the succession of acts readers perform in the continuing assumption that they are dealing with intentional beings. In this view, discerning an intention is no more or less than understanding, and understanding includes (is constituted by) all the activities which make up what I call the structure of the reader's experience" (Fish, *ibid*:320).

So meaning, at least within Fish's framework, becomes a product of the experiences of the readers of a particular text. It is not a once and for all event, but a process of anticipation and retrospective ordering of the experiences

provided by the unfolding of the text in the act of reading. Meaning, therefore, is fluid and multiple. In proposing this view of reading and the creation of meaning, Fish is explicit about the assumptions he is challenging, namely "the assumption that there *is* a sense, that it is embedded or encoded in the text, and that it can be taken in at a single glance" (Fish, *ibid*:319). He argues against both author-oriented and formalist theories claiming that the search for intention and the ability to define as salient certain features of a text are dependent on a prior interpretive commitment. The critic or reader is not involved in trying to unearth something, 'meaning', which is immanently 'there' in the text; rather, "[e]verything in the text - its grammar, meaning formal units - is a product of interpretation, in no sense 'factually' given" (Eagleton, 1983:85).

At one level, Fish's view of "reader-power" (Belsey, 1980:31) seems to make a decisive break with both the author-oriented form of criticism and the formalism of New Criticism in offering the reader a role in the creation of meaning (in partnership, almost, with the author). But for Belsey, Fish's position fails to sustain its potential as "a possible basis for a genuinely radical and productive critical practice" (*ibid*:33). For, despite his acknowledgement of the centrality of the reader in the process of meaning production, Fish does not conclude from this that each reader's response may be different, giving rise to a range of readings of the same text. The search is on again for the work's 'real' meaning, and this is attained through the exercise of "literary competence" by the "informed reader" in the context of his (*sic*) membership of an "interpretive community".⁶

Eagleton makes the point (1983:87-89) that the choice of interpretive community is not an entirely free one, and that these communities do not necessarily co-exist in an environment of peaceful, pluralist debate. Interpretive strategies are neither neutral nor innocent. Certain ways of reading are sanctioned, for example within academic institutions, while others are not given the same social licence. There is a degree of flexibility in choosing interpretive strategies, but the ones that carry weight (academically, socially, within the circles of cultural criticism) "relate to dominant forms of valuation and interpretation in a society as a whole" (Eagleton, 1983:88).

6.3 Beyond determinate meaning.

Recent literary criticism has been much influenced by hermeneutics, particularly in its 'radical' version - though it is interesting to note that the one explicit

attempt to apply the techniques of literary criticism to social work 'reading', *Social Work as Art* (England, 1986), relies entirely on the critical strictures of Leavis and Eliot, at the expense of more contemporary approaches.⁷ And what these contemporary approaches share is a rejection of the empiricist preoccupation with fixed, determinate meaning and, in consequence, an interest in the text as discursively produced.

Gadamer's preferred model for the process of engaging with a text or other object of understanding is the conversation. Understanding, in his analysis, is dialogic. In a certain sense then, to fall back into the phonocentric idiom, the text 'speaks for itself'. But this does not mean that Gadamer grants the text complete autonomy in the determination of meaning; as the discussion in section 6.2 suggested, the source of meaning in a work has been variously located - with the author, interpreter/reader, or with the text itself; for Gadamer, the interpreter and the text are partners in the process of creating meaning, which is always culturally and historically specific, and thus never achieves closure.

This suggests that a text may not be entirely transparent, and that 'meaning' is not 'contained' within it, like a nut in a nut-shell, awaiting the critic's attempts to prise it loose in its entirety. Literary critical methods have a role to play in the process of close reading⁸, but attention is no longer directed towards finding a work's single and unchanging meaning. Post-New Critical readings share an acknowledgement of the irreducibly interpretive nature of understanding, denying any essential or foundational meaning to texts, literary or otherwise. Indeed, some forms of post-structuralist criticism would collapse or at least interrogate the distinction between literary and non-literary altogether, as an arbitrary (and non-neutral) categorisation. Derrida takes the problem of understanding into a new phase and adopts an approach to text that analyses how, rather than simply what, it means. The text is foregrounded again, but with an emphasis on the language, the signifying practices it adopts.

Deconstruction has affected literary theory and criticism at a number of levels starting, at the most basic, with literature's understanding of itself as an autonomous and privileged discourse; this, in turn, is part of the fundamental reappraisal of a number of critical concepts that, Culler suggests (1983:180ff), constitutes one of the four "modes of relevance" of deconstruction *vis a vis* literature and literary criticism. He identifies the other ways in which deconstruction engages with the general discipline of literature "as a source of themes, as an example of reading strategies, and as a repository of

suggestions about the nature and goals of critical inquiry" (1983:180-181) and explicates each point in some detail. In addition, of course, a number of texts exist (aside from Derrida's own) which provide either an exposition of his arguments and approach to texts,⁹ or examples of deconstruction 'in action' as it were, in the form of critical analyses of specific (literary) works.¹⁰ From these, and resisting the urge to formulate an all-purpose definition that would finally 'net down' deconstruction, certain tentative conclusions may be drawn:

Deconstruction proceeds by drawing attention to the detail of texts, the language used, the rhetoric deployed to achieve particular ends; it investigates the hierarchical oppositions which govern a (any) text, and through this investigation shows how logocentric meaning is maintained. And it is maintained at the expense of the suppression of the 'inferior' term of the governing hierarchy or hierarchies. Deconstructive practice, then, typically involves a double movement: in the first place the hierarchical opposition is reversed, allowing the previously suppressed term a priority or superiority. But this is not taken to be an end in itself, as the conceptual system that generated - and still contains - the opposition, remains.

Derrida therefore suggests "a kind of *general strategy of deconstruction* ... to avoid both simply *neutralizing* the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply *residing* within the closed field of those oppositions, thereby confirming it" (Derrida, 1987:41), so that the moment of reversal is followed by an attempt to 'reinscribe' the opposition in a different order of textual signification, to subvert the distinctions on which the opposition is grounded to show that the two terms, far from being mutually exclusive, are inextricably linked and mutually dependent.

Culler expresses this stage in the critic's or reader's activity as follows: "The question for the critic is whether the second term, treated as a negative, marginal, and supplementary version of the first, does not prove to be the condition of possibility of the first. Along with the logic that asserts the preeminence of the first term, is there a contrary logic, covertly at work but emerging at some crucial moment or figure in the text, which identifies the second term as the enabling condition of the first?" (1983:213). The implication of this "contrary logic" is to collapse the boundaries that have held the opposition in place, recognising instead the element of undecideability always present in language,¹¹ and allowing for the "irruptive emergence of a new 'concept', a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the

previous regime" (Derrida, 1987:42).¹²

This is not to say that the distinctions maintained in these hierarchies are not 'real' or that they can just be removed with a grand rhetorical flourish. On the contrary, they exert a very 'real' force and would provide an uncompromising linguistic/conceptual straightjacket - if it were not for language's unstoppable urge towards dissemination. What Derrida is proposing, is that some of the most powerful governing principles of Western thought can begin to be re-thought through this double process of reversal and reinscription. The force of deconstruction lies in its capacity to minutely scrutinise the concepts that we otherwise take for granted, the ones that structure our everyday thinking but remain at the unthought level of 'common sense'. "What is required", writes Norris (1987:16), "is a kind of internal distancing, an effort at defamiliarization which prevents those concepts from settling down into routine habits of thought".

A new kind of close reading is common to post-New Critical theories of reading, one which draws attention to how the text is articulated, and the ways in which how a text does something is related to what it does.¹³ In all cases, attention is focussed on how the text is articulated, with deconstructive reading taking particular interest in "aporias" or internal contradictions which inevitably inhabit the text. The emphasis, then, of post-New Critical reading is on the interplay between various elements in the production of meaning: the reader, as a culturally and historically specific individual, brings a framework of assumptions, values and interpretive strategies to bear on the text; but the text is no longer the ideal object of traditional 'lit.crit.' - it is "a product rather than a process - a product of the process of text production" (Fairclough, 1989:24), and both its production and its reception take place in an actual, 'real' world, "a world that is culturally, socially and institutionally determined; that is messy, noisy, and full of disturbances, surprises, and instabilities" (Birch, 1989:2). Understanding a text becomes a matter of interpretation, and this "interpretive turn" (Hiley et al, 1991) takes us back to the concerns of hermeneutics.

The relevance of the "interpretive turn" to an understanding of racism and anti-racism may perhaps be illustrated by analogy again with feminist approaches to textual criticism which have sought to highlight the discursive frameworks and practices within which different texts and different readings of those texts are situated. Feminists have challenged the idea of the literary canon for representing patriarchal (and commonly, also white, middle/upper class) values as universal, thereby excluding

from serious consideration the texts and reading strategies of those who 'fall short' of these 'ideals', and have endorsed instead a range of different approaches to textual analysis,¹⁴ the most relevant of which - for my purposes - make use of the "relationship between language, power and the political consequences of how 'we' constitute subjects and objects and allocate value and status to them through discourse" (Bohman et al., 1991:9).

Weedon (1987), Moi (1985) and Belsey (1980) all endorse a critical practice using close reading that depends on a post-Saussurean understanding of language as a socially structured system of differences.¹⁵ Language does not reflect reality but creates it, and creates it in historically and politically specific forms. "There is no concept which is not embroiled in an open-ended play of signification, shot through with the traces and fragments of other ideas. It is just that, out of this play of signifiers, certain meanings are elevated by social ideologies to a privileged position, or made the centres around which other meanings are forced to turn" (Eagleton, 1983:131). Thus feminist critics have defined a task for themselves: "speaking from their marginalized positions on the outskirts of the academic establishments, they strive to make *explicit* the politics of the so-called 'neutral' or 'objective' works of their colleagues, as well as to act as cultural *critics* in the widest sense of the word" (Moi, 1985:87).

The relationship between the literary and literary critical 'centre' and 'margins' is also reshaped or redefined by the emergence of black literary theory and practice. Two strands can be seen at work: at the practical level, the application of existing literary critical techniques (for example, Marxist, structuralist, feminist, psychoanalytic, post-structuralist) to works by black authors¹⁶ not hitherto considered part of the Western canon; and in broader theoretical terms, a rethinking by black authors and critics of the relationship between black literatures and European/American, white literatures.¹⁷

Black writing, whether specifically 'literary' or otherwise, is of course not a new phenomenon.¹⁸ What perhaps is new, however, is the challenge that such writing can offer to the hegemony of the 'englit' establishment with its closely defined canon of 'great works' and, beyond that, to broader social, political and cultural relations. Black writing is not uniform either in its choice of approach or theoretical technique or in its conclusions. But Gates suggests that there might be one point of agreement among these diverse productions: "one important benefit of the development of subtle and

searching modes of 'reading' is that these can indeed be brought to bear upon relationships that extend far beyond the confined boundaries of a text" (Gates, 1986a:17). Reading, then, is not a neutral activity to be carried out in social or political isolation. Both feminist and black readings and writings recognise and indeed highlight the embeddedness of any text or act of reading in a broader discursive framework.

6.4 Social work as text: towards a critical practice.

In this section, I will look at the proposition that social work provides a 'text' that can, in some sense, be 'read'. At the most literal level, it is the texts of social work that define what social work is about: a library of books exists to tell social workers about the law, psychology, social policy and intervention techniques that structure and guide their practice. Research is written up for publication in academic journals, and a more or less well-informed debate about the whole enterprise of social work is carried out in the 'trade press' and wider public news media. Social workers themselves spend a considerable amount of time producing text in the form of case files, reports, letters, assessments. We can read social work writing in all its forms - and there is certainly no shortage of written material on which to concentrate. In this thesis, I am concentrating on a limited sub-set of the potential spread of materials that could be analysed, having chosen to focus on published work - and more particularly still, on published work that explicitly addresses the issues of anti- or non-racist social work.

But there is also perhaps a more metaphorical sense in which social work operates as a 'text', as a range of signifying practices that are open to analysis and criticism. This is an understanding that post-structuralist approaches to language have fostered, and leads, in the case of Derrida's work, to a focus beyond the individual works of social work literature, and towards an appreciation of a general 'textuality'.¹⁹ So in this sense, the activity of social work can be textualized and thence, subsequently, 'read'. Leitch expresses this notion of textuality as follows, "Since language serves as ground of existence, the world emerges as infinite Text. Everything gets textualized. All contexts, whether political, economic, social, psychological, historical or theological, become intertexts; that is, outside influences and forces undergo textualization. Instead of literature we have textuality; in place of tradition, intertextuality. Authors die so that readers can come into prominence. In any case, all selves, whether of critics, poets, or readers, appear as language constructions -

texts. What are texts? Strings of differential traces. Sequences of floating signifiers. ... Sites for the freeplay of grammar, rhetoric, and (illusory) reference" (quoted in Kearney, 1986:123).

But the deconstructive turn is not the only possible response to the assertion that "language serves as ground of existence". The move away from a narrow definition of the text as a self-contained, self-validating artefact invites the consideration of any given work within a broader discursive framework, which is itself amenable to inquiry. Discourse thus becomes a proper focus of investigation, and discourse analysis - of one sort or another - an appropriate methodological tool.²⁰ So while Rojek, Peacock and Collins also propose a "linguistically grounded" model of social work (1988:137), they use this as the basis for a different methodological approach owing more, particularly, to Foucault than to the philosophical sources that I have explored.²¹

This thesis, however, remains within a broadly hermeneutic framework which puts interpretation of text at the centre of its view of philosophical activity. Gadamer takes the idea of dialogue with the text as a model for understanding. Derrida, and the form of deconstruction associated with his own analyses, depends explicitly on close reading of selected texts to elicit a meaning, a reading which is often at variance with, or subversive of, the ostensible meaning of the passage under discussion. And it is through reading that we can begin to articulate the implications of the linguistic resource position, by showing how social work writing either leaves key questions unanswered or 'self-deconstructs' by presupposing the very concepts of language-practice which it seeks to disown.

So to return, finally, to the implications of this analysis of reading theory for the race and social work debate. The cultural or linguistic resource position offers a basis for understanding how racism operates, and hence what moves to challenge racism - anti-racism - might involve. Adopting the linguistic resource position means taking language seriously, so coming to terms with racism will require a strategy for reading - whatever else may be involved. It also means understanding our cultural "thrownness" philosophically through an appreciation of hermeneutics.

A possible way forward now emerges: critical analysis of social work texts, highlighting their discursive structures and strategies, may clarify the assumptions and values that (perhaps unwittingly) support them. In addition, such an analysis will have the potential for hermeneutic reflexivity; that is to say that the analyst

or critic herself will, in the course of engaging with the otherness of the text, be obliged to reflect on her own interpretive framework, values and assumptions and those of the broader tradition within which she is situated. Hermeneutic analysis is not one-dimensional, remaining aloof while directing critical attention onto the Other. Rather, the analyst, reader or critic is heavily and unavoidably implicated in the process of establishing meaning and risks (or, in the case of deconstruction, invites) the disruption of existing prejudices and cultural hierarchies.

CHAPTER SIX

NOTES

1. See Birch (1989:13-14) and Fairclough (1989:24), for example.

2. See, for example, Winch (1958 and 1987), Ryan (1973), Handel (1982).

3. Eagleton's extended discussion of the "rise of English" (1983:17-53), places New Criticism firmly within a particular social and historical context.

4. See Moi (1985:46-47) and Birch (1989:60ff) on the normative or prescriptive qualities of New Criticism.

5. I use this pronoun deliberately; Weedon (1987) and Moi (1985) draw attention to the patriarchal nature of New Criticism.

6. Both "literary competence" and the idea of the "informed reader" are used by Fish (1980) and discussed by Belsey (1980:33-34). Fish develops the notion of interpretive communities in *Interpreting the Variorum* (reprinted in Lodge (ed.), 1988:311-329) to accommodate two "facts of reading" that he had observed, namely, "(1) The same reader will perform differently when reading two 'different' (the word is in quotation marks because its status is precisely what is at issue) texts; and (2) different readers will perform similarly when reading the 'same' (in quotes for the same reason) text" (Fish, 1980:325).

He suggests that people learn, and come to share, interpretive strategies for dealing with texts, "for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (ibid:327), and acquisition of these strategies precedes any act of reading. In order to 'read' at all, the reader must already have internalised a set of strategies, a framework within which to place the subsequent activities.

7. For an interesting discussion of England's contribution, see Billington (1990).

8. Manlove (1989) provides a useful structure or set of 'pointers' to guide a critical reading of a text.

9. I have referred to a number of critical commentaries in the course of this and the previous chapter, including

Culler (1983), Leitch (1983), Harland (1987), Norris (1987 and 1991); in addition, see Ellis (1989).

10. See, for example Johnson's analysis of works by Balzac and Barthes (Johnson, 1980:162-174) or Hillis Miller's discussion of Wordsworth (1981:244-265).

11. As Descombes puts it, "The metaphysical tongue is double; its words may always be shown to have two irreducible meanings (although not indeed 'opposed'). It is also deceptive, for it dissimulates its duplicity by retaining only one meaning, the 'right meaning', thereby claiming that the good is only good, that the true is all true, and that meaning is full of meaning, etc." (1980:140).

12. This again hints at the potential for political change occasioned by deconstructive analysis, a point that was raised in the main text of chapter five. See also Culler (1983:85-86).

13. One of the things meant by "discourse analysis" is akin to this type of reading.

14. There is no clear agreement among feminists as to what, if anything, should replace both the canon as traditionally conceived and the existing academically-sanctioned forms of literary criticism, and a range of feminist criticisms now exist; see Moi (1985) for a summary of the variety of approaches that have emerged.

15. Though there are differences between their positions; Weedon, for example, leans towards a Foucauldian analysis, while Moi works within a more overtly deconstructive framework.

16. See, for example, the articles that form the "Practice" section of Gates (ed.), 1990:175ff.

17. Theoretical dimensions are explored in Gates (ed), 1990:27-172).

18. See Gates (1985) for a discussion of the history of black writing and its role as "a complex 'certificate of humanity'" (1985:12).

19. See also Warnke's comment on Gadamer: "Understanding remains primarily a historically situated understanding of the possible *validity* of texts or such 'text-analogues' as actions, practices and social norms" (1987:ix).

20. See Birch (1989), Fairclough (1989); and, specifically in connection with racist discourse, van Dijk (1987, 1991, 1992 and 1993) and Cohen (1992).

21. A Foucauldian analysis could consider the idea that "social work discourse is a form of power which is both a resource for social work practice and a limitation upon it" (Rojek et al, 1988:118), an idea that could, no doubt, inform the social work and race debate and provide a different corrective to the problem of power associated with the Gadamerian hermeneutics.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A CLOSE READING OF *ANTI-RACIST SOCIAL WORK*

7.1 Introduction.

The philosophical and methodological implications of the linguistic resource position have been explored in some detail in the preceding chapters. Chapters four and five considered, in general terms, the possible contribution of hermeneutics to the race and social work debate while chapter six, again in general terms, considered how reading theory might be incorporated into an approach that could engage with and challenge racism. The purpose of the next two chapters is to move from the general to the specific, and to see what can be learned from an attempt to bring a hermeneutic analysis to bear on particular social work texts. My choice of texts arises from the literature review with which this thesis began. I suggested at that point that two themes, 'anti-racism' and 'black perspectives', currently dominated the discussion of race issues in social work. So it is to these themes that I now return, starting in this chapter with a critical analysis of Dominelli's *Anti-Racist Social Work: A Challenge for White Practitioners and Educators*. Chapter eight will take up the 'black perspectives' theme, through a discussion of Ahmad's *Black Perspectives in Social Work*. Although these two named texts are discussed and treated separately, it will become apparent that the themes are not conceptually so clearcut, and at many points in fact overlap.

In chapter two, I took a first look at Dominelli's text *Anti-Racist Social Work*; my commentary drew attention to the strategies and actions endorsed by the author in pursuit of something called "anti-racist social work", and I suggested that problems might be encountered if Dominelli's prescriptions were adopted. In what follows, I draw on another level of criticism - the textual - where inconsistencies in the argument or gaps in the logic of the author's position may be revealed. My intention is to rework and expand my earlier exposition of *Anti-Racist Social Work* by placing my comments about it into a dialogue with hermeneutics, to see whether any preliminary decision can be reached about an appropriate framework for discussion of anti-racist practice.

7.2 Language and racism.

Hermeneutics emphasises the 'situatedness' of any act of

understanding in a particular and historically specific linguistic tradition. This tradition, however flawed it may be (for example, by racism, as the linguistic resource position suggests), furnishes the concepts with which we 'think the world'. One corollary of this is that the attempt to somehow escape language, to take a verbal leap into a racism-free place cannot succeed; so a different approach to anti-racism must be sought - one which acknowledges our unavoidable embeddedness in a particular cultural, historical, political, and linguistic matrix and takes this as a given, something to be worked with. This is not to say that, as our language is intimately bound up with the structures and processes of racism, we are unable to critically appraise it or make serious attempts to change the ways in which we use it. The argument at this stage is, rather, that we cannot ever wholly escape language and invent, or somehow otherwise happen across, a 'pure' language that is for all times free of racist implication.

As an example of this point, one could look briefly at the changing vocabulary of race/racism and anti-racism, at the processes whereby certain expressions fall out of favour, and new, more 'acceptable' ones are drafted in to the public arena. Observable shifts in language have included: Negro -> coloured -> black; West Indian -> Afro-Caribbean -> African Caribbean; immigrant or alien -> ethnic minority -> minority ethnic. In each of these progressions, the last-named term is the one currently held to be the most 'correct'. These moves can be understood as attempts to find a language 'uncontaminated' by racism.

In an otherwise not altogether complimentary essay on the language of poststructuralism, Lurie (1991:289) succinctly sums up the curious way in which new terminology is endlessly subverted, such that the 'break' from old to new is never complete: "Innovations in language are always interesting metaphorically. When the words used for familiar things change, or new words are introduced, they are usually not composed of nonsense syllables, but borrowed or adapted from stock. Assuming new roles, they drag their old meanings along behind them like flickering shadows". As each new term gets drawn into everyday usage, its critical edge is blunted and it is 'sucked into' old practices. So the escape is never quite successful, though to say this is not to advocate an end to attempts to modify and refine our language - contexts and existing practices change too;¹ the mistake would be to think that we will ultimately reach an ideal or 'uncontaminated' end-state, when such a thing cannot be achieved in language.

I return to Dominelli's book for examples to illustrate

this point because it is axiomatic that she has made every effort to produce a text that, so to speak, practices what it preaches, that is, it strives self-consciously not to fall into racist modes of thought and linguistic expression. So, if the language of such a text can be found to have the same opacity or ambiguity that is found in other works that Dominelli herself defines as failing to meet anti-racist criteria, then perhaps this indicates that the difficulty in conceptualising - and hence practicing - 'anti-racism' cannot be resolved simply by opposing it to something called 'racism'.

On pages 85 to 87 of *Anti-Racist Social Work*, Dominelli offers some examples of statements from white social workers;² each one is then explained in terms of the racism she identifies in it. But two problems arise with this exercise: some of the statements look like ones Dominelli herself makes elsewhere in the book, suggesting that statements cannot usefully be abstracted from context; and further, some of the examples she cites as racist could be construed differently, again if we assume a different context. These two points together emphasise the importance of context in determining meaning and may make the charge of racism harder to justify.

Thus, on page 85, this statement appears: "Black clients come to the office with so many conflicting demands. What do they *really* want?" Dominelli defines this as racist because, "[w]hite people assume black people don't know what they want" (p87). But on page 100, she herself asserts: "White social workers should beware of promoting black people's right to self-determination in the absence of support from other black individuals and organisations in clarifying their objectives..." The argument here is that a black family may be requesting a particular service (e.g. reception into care) because they have "internalised racist values pathologising black families" (p100). So on the one hand, it can be racist to assume that the client does not know what he or she wants (with the implication that the white social worker is adopting a position of superiority and presuming to know herself what the client really wants), while on the other hand, it can equally be racist to assume that the client does know what she or he wants when certain kinds of services are being requested.

The idea that black clients' demands conflict is only surprising or problematic if one has assumed that essentially all black people are the same, an assumption that could reasonably be construed as racist. But recognising that the demands of an individual client may not be entirely consistent, and that a further level of conflict may be experienced by black people who are placed in contradictory positions by racism, seems to me to shift

the emphasis of the statement attributed to the anonymous white social worker, bringing it more into line with the views expressed by Dominelli elsewhere: "The wishes of the black client [must be] established openly, rather than interpreting whatever they say in terms that white social workers want to hear" (p117). So, while a racist interpretation of the original statement can easily be sustained, the words themselves can be understood differently, depending on the assumptions with which one starts.

The next statement I consider is number 4:

(i) "When black clients get angry, I feel so helpless." (p85)

And the racism Dominelli identifies in it:

(ii) "The statement blames the victims for their plight." (p87)

As things stand at present on the anti-racist front, I'm not sure I see the connection that Dominelli is making. Feeling helpless may be a legitimate initial reaction to anger which the social worker recognises is justified in view of the failures of the social services system to respond adequately to black client groups. The social worker here is not saying that black clients' anger is out of place, nor that black clients make her feel helpless, which could be seen as 'blaming the victim'; it would surely be more arrogant, and indeed racist, for the social worker to try and deal with the clients' anger by assuming that she had all the answers at her disposal.³ If the social work system is not meeting black people's rightful demands, then this situation can and will only change slowly. While adopting a position of helplessness may be overly pessimistic and become an excuse for inaction, recognition of one's individual limitations may be the necessary spur to a white person to engage in the kind of collective action advocated with some force by Dominelli.

No.6(i) "I'm not racist, I just think each ethnic group is different and should keep itself to itself. Black social workers should deal with black clients." (p85)

And the reply:

6(ii) "Black people are held responsible for racism and for doing something about it. It suggests there is no role for white people in deconstructing racism." (p87)

No. 20(i) "Black people who show an interest in their affairs don't want us to deal with their problems." (p86)

Dominelli's diagnosis:

20(ii) "The responsibility for eliminating racism is placed upon black people." (p88)

Taking these two pairs of statements together, a different light can be shed on the 'racist' remarks by drawing on

comments made elsewhere by Dominelli. In number 6(i), the worker is apparently trying to avoid identifying herself as racist, thus opting out of involvement in measures to develop anti-racist practice, a position that Dominelli rightly castigates. But she is found saying something very similar to the second part of that statement herself - though obviously from a very different perspective: "Ideally, until white social workers become anti-racist and anti-sexist, they should not intervene in the lives of black women" (p107). And her general position on the role of white social workers working with black clients is to advise the least possible direct involvement, kept at the level of referral to other more appropriate (black) agencies.

She also makes a strong case for the establishment and support of autonomous black groups which should have the right to define their own situations and needs, and would empower individuals to force change in a reluctant system. Again, this position could be seen to be at odds with the racist interpretation placed on statement 20(i).

My point here, to emphasise this once again, is not to suggest that the statements recorded by Dominelli are neutral or innocent of racism. But, as a hermeneutic approach suggests, language itself is open to a range of interpretations, where meaning is largely fixed by context. A deconstructive analysis would propose, further, that the ideologies and practices that Dominelli refers to shape and endlessly co-opt the language we use to describe them. So the oppositional metaphors and images of "eradication" and "transformation" that Dominelli repeatedly deploys throughout the text suffer from the fact that it may be much harder - indeed impossible - to 'escape' from racist language in the first place.

7.3 Structuralism or hermeneutics?

Dominelli's book is a powerful and crusading attack (and I choose the word carefully) on the whole edifice of white social work - the bureaucracy, the legal framework, the practice found at all levels, the education and training. No aspect of social work escapes Dominelli's critical gaze, and in the main, her attack is well targetted. The ADSS/CRE report of 1978 indicates that social work has long recognised its failure to respond adequately to the needs and demands of ethnic minority groups, but the question of how to act on this recognition has remained unsatisfactorily answered. Dominelli's book attempts to change this situation, by exhorting social workers to take action, to join with others in the struggle against racism, and to change the structures and organisations that permit racism to continue.

At the moral and emotional level, it would be hard to argue against Dominelli - and indeed, I would not wish to challenge her claim as to the urgency and necessity of moves to challenge racism. My difference with Dominelli is rather at the level of frameworks, philosophical or theoretical. Dominelli's emphasis is on structures, mine is on language, and how we use language to understand, to shape and change our world.

Dominelli's analysis commits the white would-be anti-racist to opposing and eradicating racism both within social work and thence, the wider society. But where do we stand while we involve ourselves in this fight? If, as a hermeneutic approach indicates, it is impossible to stand outside our own frames of reference, which include both language and practice, how then are we to proceed? I would suggest that the strengths and the limitations of Dominelli's position become more apparent when it is considered in relation to the two other view points associated with Gadamer and Derrida which have been examined in this thesis. In what follows, I will put my reading of Dominelli into a three-way 'conversation' with hermeneutics in both its traditional and more radical forms and explore three dimensions of her work in greater detail. These dimensions are i) rhetorical style, ii) power, iii) dialectics or process. In each case, I look at the way hermeneutics can contribute to an understanding of the development of anti-racist approaches in social work.

i) Rhetorical style.

In Dominelli's analysis, anti-racist practice demands a degree of self-awareness, and self-awareness cannot be easily won. What is at issue is our very way of thinking about ourselves and about others - and the language we have available to structure our thoughts and relationships is critical. Hermeneutics, in both its forms, emphasises and explores the language-dependent nature of our understanding - what has been called the "linguisticity" of human existence. Dominelli's structuralism, while robustly anti-metaphysical, commits her to an approach to, and use of, language that differs markedly from either Gadamer or Derrida.

Within the hermeneutics of tradition, problems of meaning and understanding are explored through the process of conversation or dialogue. This kind of approach is not didactic: neither party to a conversation has a monopoly on 'rightness', and both may learn from the exchange. Dominelli's style of argument by exhortation presents a sharp contrast to the more open, to-and-fro play of Gadamerian enquiry: she asserts, rather than discusses; she demands, rather than negotiates. Language is treated

as an essentially transparent medium for the expression of certain truths. Words have a direct, one to one relationship to 'things in the world', about which there can be no dispute. Thus Dominelli can maintain a position where racism is wrong, anti-racism is right, and we have a moral obligation to fight the one and support the other; there is no acceptable alternative.

This puts Dominelli in an apparently unassailable position, for challenging her call to join the anti-racist fight in whatever terms (for example by taking issue with her definition of and assumptions about 'anti-racism') looks suspiciously like closet racism. But as I have tried to indicate in the preceding chapters, the question of language use and rhetorical style is not trivial, and my engagement with her text at this level is intended to acknowledge the seriousness of her concerns. I do not disagree with the overall project, then, but take issue with how it has been conceived and described.

Odd comments that Dominelli makes suggest that she does attach some importance to the use of language, but she does not pursue this line of thinking, leaving it almost as a parenthetical aside. Language is not, by and large, interesting in itself - it is not, to borrow from her own arsenal of oppositional images, the main site where the battle against racism is to be fought. She indicates that there are problems associated with certain patterns of language use, but only hints at the difficulty that may be associated with changing these patterns.

Dominelli, then, offers an interesting, if problematic, view of language, acknowledging its importance as an "aspect of the oppression process" (p77). She announces that language is "riddled with racism" (p6), and gives an example of language thus infected/spread through with racism: "When white people ... speak of Britain, they usually mean white, 'English' Britain. Becoming aware of the implicit racism in the word makes white anti-racists hesitant in using it. But, as yet, we have neither reclaimed the word by divesting it of the racist ideologies and practices embedded within it, nor have we developed an alternative to it" (p6).

The question then arises, can a word, in and of itself, be 'racist', or must this judgement rather be made about the context in which the word (any word) is used? Are "racist ideologies and practices embedded within [the word]" like so many currants in a cake, with the assumption that, if we could only find the right device to 'riddle' our language with, the right sieve through which we could sift it, the racism could be shaken out in discrete units leaving nice 'clean' words behind? Dominelli's oppositional imagery seems to depend for its force on the

belief that racism can somehow be "eradicated" from language and, by implication, also from social relations. But I think that there are enough examples in her own text to show that such a belief cannot be sustained - or at least, that the process of eradication may be less of a once and for all shift than the text often seems to suggest. Language is inherently more ambiguous than this.

But ambiguity has no place in Dominelli's anti-racist scheme. On reading *Anti-Racist Social Work*, one cannot help noticing that she has adopted a very particular rhetorical style. She talks of "transformation", "eradication" and "elimination" in relation to racism and racist attitudes, and the recurrent imagery is of opposition. An idea that I will return to is that Dominelli's text operates within a logocentric economy of difference. Hers is a world of 'either/or', a world of clear alternatives: on the one hand there is 'racism' and on the other 'anti-racism', and one must overwhelm the other. When Dominelli entitles one chapter "Deconstructing racism ..." (p71), she has in mind a very different set of activities from those that a Derridean usage of the term "deconstruction" would imply.

A deconstructive or close reading, adopting the tactic Derrida refers to as reading "from the margins" (1982), would allow remarks of this kind a new significance; as Weedon has written in another context, "Once language is understood in terms of competing discourses, competing ways of giving meaning to the world, which imply differences in the organization of social power, then language becomes an important site of political struggle" (Weedon, 1987:24). In earlier chapters, I have drawn attention to the practice of deconstructive close reading which can be applied to any text or social situation or relationship as 'text-analogue'. The process of trying to give a close reading allows certain expressions, linguistic 'tics' or stylistic habits to assume a (perhaps only temporary) prominence the author did not necessarily intend. This emphasis on language can be used both to illuminate the text that Dominelli has written and, beyond that, the social work practice to which the text refers.

I have suggested above that Dominelli's text is tightly bound by the logic of logocentrism, and offer three examples here to illustrate this point in the context of this discussion of rhetorical style. In the first example, I consider the deployment of what I have elsewhere likened to 'thought reform' slogans; in the second, I turn again to her analysis of reported statements by white social workers which she uses to expose the alleged racism behind much social work thought (pp85ff). The final example deals with her treatment of contradiction.

The slogans I refer to appear as chapter headings or sub-headings throughout the book and include, in chapter one, the title "Racism permeates social work ideology and practice", and the sub-heading (p29) "Racism exacerbates and extends social control in social work"; chapter two proclaims in its title that "Social work training is imbued with racism", while chapter five maintains, in the form of a sub-heading, that "Endorsing an equal opportunities policy requires the commitment of additional resources". These slogans are not out of place in a text that is conspicuously declamatory, and reinforce the unequivocal nature of the task that Dominelli has assigned to social workers - to oppose, overthrow or otherwise extirpate racism from the institution of social work and from the wider social system.

Argument by slogan reduces the complexity of the problem under discussion at a stroke and suggests that solutions to what have hitherto been seen as intractable problems can be conjured up if the correct form of words is invoked. In fact, though, as soon as Dominelli's own slogans are put to the test, difficulties become apparent. Take, for instance, the statement "Autonomous black organisations must be respected by white anti-racist educators and practitioners" (p56) which heads a section of chapter five - what is this to mean in practice? Are all autonomous black organisations to be treated with the same respect, regardless of their aims and aspirations? Who decides whether sufficient respect has been shown to particular organisations? What should the white anti-racist educator or practitioner do in a situation where members of one group denigrate or denounce another. Factional infighting is not unknown in radical politics, but Dominelli's blanket prescription offers little guidance to white social workers when confronted with disagreement or even antipathy between black groups.⁴

In the same vein, one could consider the claim made by Dominelli in the final section of chapter six: "Anti-racist social work practice is good practice". At first glance, this seems an acceptable, even uncontentious, assertion. Racism is, after all, bad and anti-racism good, so therefore practice that is anti-racist must - almost by definition - also be good. But closer investigation suggests that statements of this kind are altogether less clear than they appear. "Anti-racist practice is good practice" assumes, first of all, that something called 'anti-racist' practice can be defined and identified - an assumption I have already called into question; further it appears to assume that 'good' practice is similarly easy to spot and agree on.⁵

In Derridean terms, statements of the form 'A is B' belong firmly to the logocentric order, where meaning is fixed,

and held in place by powerful hierarchical mechanisms which keep alternative understandings at bay. By contrast with Dominelli's approach, a deconstructive reading of the slogan "Anti-racist practice ..." would immediately want to put the main terms 'under erasure', to indicate their provisional status, and open up for discussion the understanding on which such definitional statements are made. Reading deconstructively, one could find in this slogan not an all-purpose statement of the truth about social work, but rather an indication or suggestion that a certain line of enquiry could usefully be pursued. It expresses the hope that both 'anti-racism' and 'social work' can be re-defined in accommodation with each other - though working out what that might actually mean in practice will be a lengthy task.

Attention to stylistic detail of this kind invites investigation of a second feature of Dominelli's text: her use of statements made by social workers in a "brainstorming" session as a tool for the exploration of racism. These statements (pp85-87) are treated as significant by Dominelli, as they "reveal both the subtlety and variety of ways in which racism expresses itself in the actions and attitudes of social workers" (p85). Drawing on ideas of logocentrism and phonocentrism, which I have discussed particularly in the context of Derrida's work⁶ a deconstructive reading might question the relation between the expressed words and the meaning Dominelli derives from each of her examples.

Phonocentrism, in elevating speech at the expense of writing, claims for speech a closer, less equivocal, relation to meaning. As Derrida suggests, speech is taken to be the closest we can get to the self-identical meaning that logocentrism dictates; it provides a moment of coincidence between articulation and intention, a moment where meaning is fully present. But, as Derrida also strongly suggests, this search for pure self-presence is a fantasy, and even the experience of speech lacks the full immediacy claimed for it.⁷ So reliance on the (reported) speech of a group of social workers to demonstrate the racist attitudes and actions of the speakers is, again, perhaps less straightforward than Dominelli's own account would suggest. Either she is claiming that racism somehow inheres in those particular combinations of words or that it lurks, in a way yet to be defined, 'behind' the words used, in the intentions of the speakers. Either interpretation poses problems for Dominelli and, from a deconstructive point of view, both look equally untenable.

To conclude this discussion of logocentrism in relation to *Anti-Racist Social Work*, I would like briefly to consider the treatment of contradiction. I have already suggested

that Dominelli's text is framed in 'either/or' terms which are characteristic of logocentric discourse - and contradiction has no real place within such a framework. This is reflected in, or has implications for, her understanding of social work as a social activity. There is no room for ambiguity or debate; we must "*cut the Gordian knot of social work as a complex and contradictory form of social control*" (p35). The search for a transcendental signified is re-joined: social work must be one thing or another; it cannot be both and it cannot contain these two contradictory impulses.⁸ From this position, Dominelli has no choice but to "oppose", "transform", "eliminate", in her attempt to move from one definition or state of social work (racist and controlling) to the preferred alternative (anti-racist and caring).

In not only acknowledging, but actively embracing contradiction, Derrida occupies a position at some remove from both Dominelli and Gadamer.⁹ "Deconstruction points to those blind-spots of argument where a text generates aberrant meanings or chains of disruptive implication that work to undermine its manifest 'logical' sense" (Norris, 1987:163). A deconstructive reading looks specifically for points of contradiction, for gaps in the 'logic' of the text, and finds in these the starting points for further enquiry. Having abandoned the search for univocal meaning, deconstruction exploits the multiple possibilities 'within' the text and explores the contradictory pairings around which that particular text is organised. From within this understanding of language and text, then, contradiction is unavoidable and Dominelli's desire to finally 'pin social work down' by attempting to remove or resolve its inherent contradictions is but one more manifestation of logocentric thinking.

ii) Power.

The dimension of power in Dominelli's work is explored here initially in the context of the "egalitarian relationships" that she urges white social workers to form with black clients. I have suggested earlier that social work, in the currently accepted usage, involves the social worker's 'use of self', and that this, in part, distinguishes it from other forms of social and political activity. Dominelli herself acknowledges the importance of this concept, but her main concerns are elsewhere, at the level of large-scale political or organisational change. Individuals have a role to play in the process of change, of course, but her interest in the individual himself is limited. Dominelli's understanding of 'use of self' is concentrated on the need for the individual to examine and understand his own racism, in order to minimise the racist effects or implications of social work intervention. This process of "conscientization" is to be achieved through

the medium of anti-racism awareness training, which she examines in some detail in her third chapter.

In advocating the use of anti-racism awareness training to provide the framework within which the individual can examine her own assumptions and beliefs relating to 'race' and her understanding of situations that involve attempts at communication across cultural, racial or ethnic boundaries, Dominelli strays away from orthodox structuralism and moves more towards a position that is recognisably hermeneutic. While it would be stretching a point to claim that this is what Dominelli intended (and anyway, such a claim about her intentions would be irrelevant as well as unprovable, from a hermeneutic perspective), interesting parallels with Gadamer's understanding of the role of prejudice and, in particular, the possibility of distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices, can be drawn.

Understanding, in Gadamer's analysis, is achieved through a process of dialogue motivated by a sense of moral-practical engagement or *phronesis*. As part of this process, the individual is invited to put her prejudices into play, and to test them thoroughly against those of the other participant in the conversation. If, within a hermeneutics of tradition, racist attitudes can be construed as an example of an illegitimate prejudice, using this term in the special sense of 'prejudgement' or general orientation favoured by Gadamer, then it is in principle possible that the act of engaging in an authentic dialogue will allow the individual to discard such damaging views, and 'move on'.

But having offered an understanding of anti-racism awareness training in terms of the exploration of unexamined prejudices, this account is subject to the same criticisms that applied to Gadamer's explanation of the role of prejudice in general and the possibility of identifying and then changing illegitimate prejudices in particular. These criticisms were rehearsed in some detail in Chapter Five, and concerned the difficulty of knowing when, in practice, one should be persuaded by the force or logic of the Other's position to incorporate it into one's own world-view and when one should give up trying to learn from the Other's (possibly ill-founded) prejudices.

Two other aspects of the social work relationship given prominence in the literature - the ability to listen and to empathise - are dealt with very briefly by Dominelli. She believes that social workers need to learn to listen to their black clients and black or anti-racist colleagues: "White social workers need to make humility part of their willingness to listen to black clients and learn to treat seriously their views of a situation "

(p79; and see also p117), and seems to believe that some genuine learning or understanding can come from such an exercise. Again, I would suggest that on first impression, the remark quoted above seems to 'fit' comfortably into a Gadamerian framework, and appears to endorse a dialogic approach to the pursuit of understanding between social worker and client.

However, while this may prove to be a fruitful approach if considered as a regulative ideal, it is not without problems. What does Dominelli envisage happening, when white social workers show their "willingness to listen" and "treat seriously" their clients' views of a situation? Will white social workers simply 'take into account' the clients' expressed wishes or explanations when coming to a decision - with the option of course remaining that they take these points into account, find them unconvincing or erroneous, and come to the 'same' decision that they would have reached before? Or is Dominelli asking for a firmer commitment from the social workers, to not only listen, but then to abide by the decisions, judgements or accounts provided by their clients? And, if the latter, then would all clients, no matter how distressed, disorientated or dangerous be treated in the same way? Again, while finding in Dominelli's account much that is thought-provoking and positive, the practical application of her prescriptive statements - and from the perspective of Gadamerian hermeneutics, understanding is only achieved through application - suggests an altogether more complicated situation, one which cannot be 'transformed' by fiat.

It is not clear, then whether the kind of understanding that Dominelli advocates can be distinguished from mere acquiescence to the views of the Other.¹⁰ One distinction though can be emphatically made: the understanding that she seeks is to be sharply distinguished from empathy, a concept that she dismisses. Her comments are exceedingly brief (see pp33 and 45), but it would seem that it is to be equated with having a shared experience - but at such a basic level that the term seems virtually devoid of content. So can the idea of 'empathy' amount to anything useful?

Gadamer's hermeneutics presents a very particular view of social interaction, one which is apparently more benign than that envisaged by either Dominelli or Derrida. The model for understanding in the hermeneutics of tradition is the conversation (Gadamer, 1979:330ff). And the possibility of a 'genuine' conversation must rest on the presumption - if only for the duration of the particular interchange - of equality between the participants. In keeping with Dominelli's own acknowledgement of the importance of listening, and an emphasis drawn from the hermeneutics of tradition on the importance of language

and dialogue, I have offered an alternative understanding of empathy: empathy involves seeing the Other as "conversible with" (Whan), as an equal partner in dialogue. This may again seem a very limited usage, but I would suggest that such an understanding could provide the first step towards the establishment of the "egalitarian relationships" that anti-racist social work promises.

But can such an attitude of respect for, or humility towards the other partner's contribution be assumed? As the earlier discussion of Gadamer's position has already indicated, the dimension of power seems curiously absent from the text of *Truth and Method*, and Gadamer's writing seems to exist 'out of time' - an odd contradiction for a writer whose preoccupations are with the inescapable influence of tradition and the essential historicity of all attempts at understanding. By 'out of time' I mean that Gadamer does not satisfactorily address the particular problems of trying to engage in genuine dialogue in a stratified society, a point critically examined by Habermas, among others.¹¹

Hermeneutics may well offer an approach to understanding that appeals very directly to social work as it is presently conceived, and beyond that to Western, bourgeois-liberal pluralism; but what is to stop the free dialogue envisaged by Gadamer from degenerating into a one-way transmission from the powerful to the powerless? Good faith and moral commitment on the part of the participants are necessary but not sufficient conditions for ensuring equality of opportunity in a systematically unequal interchange.

Both Dominelli and Derrida recognise power as a central feature of social relations. For Dominelli, power is a crucial element within patriarchal capitalist society, and racism is held in place through the exercise of particular power relations which favour the white-British majority population: "in my view *all* white individuals in Britain exercise some power over black individuals by virtue of their being *white* people in a predominately *white* society. Even in one-to-one interactions between black and white, that power balance hangs in the air by an invisible cord, and shifts in favour of the white person" (p80).

She talks of the need to "reverse" the hierarchical power relations between black and white, and of "[e]qualising power differentials" between them (p125). By forming "anti-racist collectivities" white people can change their practice and make moves towards overcoming racism. And with typical rhetorical punch, she states that, "[a]nti-racist social work has got to introduce change at both personal and institutional levels. Individual conduct in interpersonal relations and the allocation of power and

resources in society have got to be transformed if racism is to be eliminated" (p162).

Power in Derrida's deconstruction is present in the concept of hierarchized sets of conceptual opposites, where one term is accorded superiority and the other term denigrated, or kept in a position of inferiority: male/female, white/black, rational/emotional, fact/value, nature/culture - to suggest some of our society's characteristic pairings. Within the context of social work practice we can elaborate typical binary oppositions - worker/client, theory/practice, care/control, and so on - and note a similar dynamic, in the sense that the 'left-hand' term or concept is elevated at the cost of down-grading or suppressing the 'right-hand side of the pair. Deconstruction involves a recognition of these oppositions or hierarchies, and a moment of reversal where the hierarchy at issue is displaced and the 'underneath' term accorded precedence. The move beyond that initial reversal is more problematic, and does not presuppose any privileged end-point.

One of the more powerful ideas in this book is that of reversing power relationships, for example through the "apprenticeship model", where social workers would be required, as part of their training, to work in placements with black supervisors. Dominelli argues that white and black students would benefit from this arrangement, though in different ways. The black student would have a valuable role model, and the white student would have the experience of working with a black person in a position of authority and seniority, perhaps for the first time. In terms of the oppositions that are contained in the concept of racism - white/black, power/dependence, superior/inferior - Dominelli has identified an area of practice where a reversal of power relations could be initiated.

But she expects a lot to follow from a procedural change of this kind - more, perhaps, than it can deliver in the form she proposes. Again, a switch or 'transformation' is being offered as a solution to an entrenched situation, leaving as many problems as she attempts to alleviate. In the discussion of Harding's work in chapter two, I drew attention to the drawbacks associated with what could be called an "equal opportunities" position (1986:58ff), and made the point that simply increasing the number of staff from a particular ethnic group does not mean that equality of opportunity has been achieved. In a similar way, it can be argued that appointing a number of black supervisors is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the pursuit of equal opportunities.

Neither does such a move necessarily have, in itself, the

power to bring about the end envisaged by Dominelli. Who will be appointed? If Dominelli is not going to argue that blackness is itself the defining criterion of suitability, then how will 'suitable' candidates be selected? Are all black people anti-racist in the sense favoured by Dominelli? Is it not possible that some black people will have made a personal accommodation with the status quo, such that while they might personally abhor racism they do not see themselves as directly personally affected by it - a position that might in turn affect their ability to impart 'anti-racism' to their white students? Who would decide whether a black supervisor was challenging a white student's racism in an 'appropriate' way?

At a more philosophical level, the apprenticeship model fails to address other important points. From a Gadamerian perspective, an opportunity to engage in authentic dialogue and test one's prejudices against those of an Other presents the individual with a space for self-reflection and possible self-criticism which allows that individual to become more *gebildet*. Seeing the apprenticeship model in these terms would situate it more precisely in the process of understanding, as a means rather than an end in itself. What Dominelli is proposing, in Gadamerian terms, is to displace attention toward the dialogue of social work, away from the conversation between worker and client, and towards that between the worker and her supervisor. One is no substitute for the other; both are needed for the genuine pursuit of understanding.

It could also be said that Dominelli shows a curious faith in the power of hierarchy: in itself, reversing black and white positions does not obviate the 'original' problem. At the most basic level, one could ask whether a white person who had difficulty working with black clients would find it any easier to engage with a black supervisor. Dominelli might answer by saying that it was never meant to be easy! The experience could well be both difficult and painful, but this would not be a reason to forego it.

The apprenticeship model seems to assume that this new relationship between black supervisor and white student will provide a context for change; the act of reversing the white/black hierarchy will promote certain desirable changes in attitude and behaviour on the part of the student. A deconstructive view of this model suggests, yet again, that the hoped-for 'transformation' may be harder to achieve than this simple act of reversal implies. To deconstruct an opposition involves more than a moment of reversal, which in itself leaves the broader conceptual field or economy of difference unchanged. And it is a sense of that move 'beyond ...' that is missing from

Dominelli's account. Without it, there is a risk of remaining stuck with mere rehearsal of the same, stale antinomies.

iii) Dialectics.

Within Dominelli's text, certain antagonistic pairings can be recognised; white/black or racist/anti-racist are probably the most obvious but other oppositions include professional/client, care/control, and others could doubtless be formulated. A critical difference between Dominelli's and Derrida's analysis of power lies in the activity that follows from recognition of these hierarchical pairs. Dominelli's position is clear-cut and involves a rhetoric of battle and transformation. In the previous section I emphasised the point that deconstructing a conceptual opposition involves more than just switching the order of priority of the terms of the pairing and leaving it at that. A deconstructive position is altogether more subtle, and needs to be considered in relation to the third dimension I identified: dialectics.

In this section, I continue the three-way conversation between my reading of Dominelli's text and positions derived from the hermeneutics of tradition and the more radical, deconstructive wing of hermeneutics. In considering the concept of dialectics, the relationship between the three positions shifts; Gadamer and Derrida can be placed together in terms of the centrality they each give to dialectics, leaving Dominelli occupying somewhat different ground.

For Gadamer, again using conversation as the model for hermeneutic understanding, dialectics is at the heart of the process. The interplay between interlocutor and text or between the partners in a 'genuine' dialogue is characterised by the "strange art of the dialectic" (1979:330). Gadamer expresses this as follows: "Dialectic, as the art of asking questions, proves itself only because the person who knows how to ask questions is able to persist in his questioning, which involves being able to preserve his orientation towards openness. The art of questioning is that of being able to go on asking questions, i.e. the art of thinking. It is called 'dialectic', for it is the art of conducting a real conversation" (1979:330). In terms of the oppositions that are contained in the concept of racism - white/black, power/dependence, superior/inferior - Dominelli's text identifies an area of practice where a reversal of power relations could be initiated.

The point of engaging in dialogue is not, for Gadamer, to allow one partner to bludgeon the other into accepting the opposing opinion, or simply to find faults in the other's

argument for the sake of 'point-scoring'. Rather, each partner is engaged in an attempt to bring out the truth of the matter under discussion, and in the course of the process each will be drawn by the logic, the development of the conversation to a position some distance from where she started: "To reach an understanding with one's partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the successful assertion of one's own point of view, but a transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were." (1975:341)

I have said in my earlier exposition of hermeneutics that Gadamer's commitment to dialectics does not presume any teleological certainty; there is no absolute truth to end the conversations of humankind, but an endless series of opportunities for dialogue - and the more open or truly gebildet the individual, the greater the range of situations that will be recognised as opportunities for learning. Understanding does not come to an end in a final moment of transcendent clarity, but remains part of a potentially endless process.

Derrida's approach to dialectics is also rigorously un-teleological in that his analyses presume neither absolute beginnings nor any certain end-points to be reached. His investigations push the concept of dialectics to the limit, showing the way any text is prevented from achieving what its arguments ostensibly promote. In examining the *Phaedrus*, for example, Derrida finds that the language of the text, the rhetorical devices employed by Plato undermine the logic that the text purports to display.¹² And the procedure that Derrida adopts to bring out these hidden or suppressed aspects of the text involves more than a simple reversal of the conceptual opposites that order it. "More than this, it involves the dismantling of all those binary distinctions that organize Plato's text, to the very point where opposition itself - the very ground of dialectical reason - gives way to a process where opposites merge in a constant *undecidable* exchange of attributes" (Norris, 1987:35).

Tied up with this, perhaps, are ideas of opposition and appropriation. Gadamer's dialectics involves appropriation, Derrida's a form of restless opposition. Dominelli too takes up an oppositional stance, but lacks the dialectical movement that gives the hermeneutic analyses their power. Neither Gadamer nor Derrida know beforehand where their conversations or textual investigations will lead, because the path has not yet been mapped out. A genuine conversation is not just the rehearsal of each party's 'set piece', but a living exchange of views which has the power to change both participants. A deconstructive reading is equally unpredictable, producing only more text that will itself

be amenable to further analysis.

One effect of Dominelli's text is simply to invoke a new hierarchy - of anti-racism/racism. From the perspective of deconstruction, her analysis remains within the terms of the old conceptual order as it involves a gesture of reversal without a further move towards reinscription, as if this first gesture is sufficient in itself. Deconstruction is not about the replacement of one set of political or ideological building blocks with a new, more politically correct set. And the process of challenging racism, where it operates at the level of a linguistic resource, is just that - a process. Dominelli opposes racism, and wants to replace it with anti-racism and, eventually, with 'non-racism', as if the contours of these new states are readily to hand. But neither anti-racist social work, nor anti-racist anything else, are available to be 'slotted in', when racism has been taken out of the system.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NOTES

1. Kuhn (1962 and 1977) coined the term "paradigm shift" to describe the way in which patterns of ideas change across time, although the dynamics of this - how it actually happens - is, not surprisingly, contested.

2. All references in this chapter are to Dominelli (1988), unless otherwise specified.

3. It is interesting to note, in passing, that Dominelli refers to black people as "victims" twice in this section, in comments identifying the racism of statements number 4 and 16. This usage stands out, contrasting as it does with one of the main themes of the book - black people as powerful and autonomous agents in the fight against racism.

4. This seems to raise similar problems to those encountered in Gadamerian hermeneutics: how does one decide between two conflicting traditions or aspects of one overall tradition? And, further, how can one know when to stop trying to learn from a particular (possibly flawed) tradition or prejudice?

5. It gets us no further forward to appeal to 'social work values' to provide the basic components of "good practice". As the continuing discussion of suitable candidates for the role of 'social work values' indicates - see Timms (1983) and Horne (1987), for example - agreement at this level has not been achieved. From a deconstructive point of view, an appeal framed in these terms can be taken as an attempt to define social work as a transcendental signified, an attempt that the endless disseminating play of meaning continues to foil. By contrast, Clarke adopts an approach that recognises the "diverse and fragmentary nature" of social work (1993:1).

6. See chapter five above for discussion of and further references to both logocentrism and phonocentrism.

7. *ibid.*

8. Using 'contain' in the sense both of "comprise" and "keep within limits", "hold back", and "control" (all definitions taken from the *Longman Concise English Dictionary, 1985 Edition.*)

9. Within the hermeneutics of tradition, contradiction is

acknowledged but, through the dialogic process that produces understanding, is always open to further discussion. As has already been observed, the most fruitful opportunities for learning come from an engagement with 'difference'. So from this perspective, the experience of contradiction is potentially productive - it can highlight a particular aspect of one's own tradition or world-view as problematic and invite reconsideration of the assumptions supporting it. Contradiction does not necessarily have to be resolved, though the assumption in Gadamer's work that understanding entails agreement, seems to make this the preferred outcome.

10. Though Dominelli's position at least has the novelty of requiring the traditionally more powerful dialogue partner to acquiesce in the views of the traditionally inferior partner, it nonetheless exhibits the same problem as Gadamer's account of the dialogic nature of understanding: namely, how to decide when 'true' understanding has been achieved?

11. See discussion of and further references to the Gadamer/Habermas debate in chapter four above.

12. The analysis of *The Phaedrus* can be found in *Dissemination* (Derrida, 1972), where a discussion of the Greek word *pharmakon* is used to illustrate "a process where opposites merge in a constant *undecidable* exchange of attributes" (Norris, 1987:35). The more general question of undecidability is also broached in Derrida (1976). For further commentary on this issue, see Culler (1983:142-146) and Norris (1987:37ff).

CHAPTER EIGHT

READING AHMAD'S *BLACK PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL WORK: AN ENCOUNTER WITH DIFFERENCE*

8.1 Introduction.

In this chapter, I return to a text that addresses the emergence of black perspectives in social work: Ahmad's book can be taken as an example of a text written from such a perspective, and one whose subject matter is directly concerned with the application or involvement of a black viewpoint in social work (Ahmad, 1990).¹ This work is further of interest because it illustrates the hermeneutic problem in at least three ways. In the first place, as a text which a white social worker can and should read, it does itself present a challenging exercise in hermeneutic understanding. Second, Ahmad's approach in some respects exemplifies the branch of hermeneutics which I associate with Gadamer. Third, it exhibits a certain incompleteness which can be analysed by reference to the other branch of hermeneutics, the one I associate with deconstruction and the work of Derrida.

In what follows, I shall explore each of these three points in more detail. In sections 8.2 and 8.3, I review my own responses to the book, and try to show why the questions raised by my own reading of the text have to be placed within a hermeneutic context. In section 8.4, I focus again on the content of the book, though to avoid undue repetition of the material of chapter two, this will necessarily be a much briefer exposition, drawing out certain points which, I suggest, link it to a Gadamerian perspective; from this perspective, I propose that Ahmad's observations can be interpreted as a realisation of the "fusion of horizons". Finally, in the last section, I raise further questions about what I have identified as the book's 'incompleteness', and suggest that a more Derridean approach can make sense of this.

8.2 Reading Ahmad.

By one set of standards and conventions this book fails: it is clumsily written, poorly edited and copy-edited (if indeed it was proof-read at all), and uses a referencing 'system' that is near to useless. The text raises a number of problems - of semantics, grammar and syntax. Ahmad has an odd habit of lapsing into inverted commas apparently randomly through the text which, together with her failure to provide adequate references to material drawn from

other authors, makes it difficult for the reader to know whether she is quoting verbatim from an external source, paraphrasing or simply drawing attention to an unusual or controversial usage. There are a number of examples where none of these explanations seems to apply, leaving the reader in something of a textual wilderness.

In the following section, I present examples of the kind of textual oddities and difficulties I have identified. Although taken in isolation each one may seem fairly trivial, the effect on the (this?) reader is cumulative, and unsettling. The examples are placed in six groups:

a. The first, and possibly least controversial, group contains typographical or copy-editing errors which may well have nothing to do with the actual author of the text, but which are, nonetheless, made significant by their very abundance. The kinds of error I include here are:

- talking about "the five points above" when six are listed (p75);
- the use of single subjects with plural verbs and vice versa, e.g. "assessment practice which ... do not relate to their real needs" and "inadequate resources ... has such debilitating effects" (p8 and p.20 respectively);
- basic mis-spelling, for example: "advise" where 'advice' is meant (p16) , "occurrences" (p?), "dependant" (p61), together with other misprints like "cleints" (p47) and "being" for 'begin' (p6);
- uncorrected expressions, for example: "overemphasis on of Black men's sexism" (p17), "most highest" (p25), and "the statutory and legal framework" (p31), "for e.g." (p53, p54 and elsewhere).

b. Inappropriate and inconsistent use of capital letters. Odd words or phrases suddenly appear with initial capital letters, where normally no such distinction would be expected; for example, "Caring Profession of social work" is found on page 29, whereas throughout the rest of the text, allusions to the social work profession are not thus highlighted (examples ad lib); the "Welfare of the Child" and "Black Children" are capitalised for no apparent reason on page 89; on a later page we have "childminders" but "Day Care providers" (p90), and it is no clearer why "Affirmative practice" is capitalised (PP75 and 76) when "anti-racist practice" (p74) and the "ethnically sensitive approach" (p76) remain stubbornly lower case.

c. Apparently random use of inverted commas (' ... ') and quotation marks (" ... ").

I raised this problem earlier in this chapter, and start to illustrate the point here with two examples from the text. Ahmad's discussion of Solomon's work on empowerment (p34) uses a mixture of "... " and '... ' and seems to treat

them as interchangeable. On page 51 there is an outbreak of inverted commas - which may or may not indicate words being directly quoted from another text, as no reference is given - followed halfway down the same page by a global reference to Vickery's paper *How to Provide Social Services with Task-Centred Methods* which is in turn attached to a very general remark to do with the assessment of the nature of the 'problem' (my inverted commas!) in social work. A degree of confusion results from this aspect of Ahmad's unusual style, further instances of which are sprinkled through the text, and are discussed below.

On a number of occasions, passages or words are placed in inverted commas and followed by a superscript number denoting reference to a work listed at the end of the chapter (examples can be found on virtually any page). Initially, I assumed that these passages were meant to indicate that words had been quoted from the work named at the end of the chapter. But two difficulties arise with this: if the words contained within the inverted commas are verbatim quotes, what is the point of using quotation marks as well? And if the inverted commas do not signify direct quotation, why does Ahmad make such extravagant use of them? It is common usage to identify an unusual expression or an original coinage by placing it in quotation marks/ inverted commas, but very straightforward, widely accepted expressions are distinguished by Ahmad in this way; for example, on pages 46-47 this passage appears:

Liberal social work approach, in effect, is a safe approach. On the surface, it can make safe assumptions "that the interests of the client and the worker are compatible", but can mask its "importance of power in shaping worker-client relations"⁴⁴ ... behind its bureaucratic structures, which provide "a rather safe and secure context out of which the definition of professional and professional roles ... can be clearly described."⁴⁵ So, why shake the structures? Why lose 'earned right' to hold 'privileged status'? Why 'risk' management 'intimidation', 'nullification', 'isolation', 'defamation' or even 'expulsion'?

I have omitted quotation marks of my own in this case, for clarity.

Do the words in inverted commas refer back to passages in one or both of the books already mentioned (Ahmad's references 44 and 45), or perhaps simply to paraphrases of these other authors' words? If this is the case, why are they not, in turn, placed in quotation marks or provided with superscript numbers? Alternatively, if the words are Ahmad's own, why do they require this treatment? Does she intend to imply that the 'risk' of unfavourable management response is not genuine, that there is in fact only an

imagined risk of negative repercussions against the social worker? Are the listed consequences of management displeasure also imagined or overstated? Is Ahmad presenting real social workers' fears anonymously? With no clues forthcoming from Ahmad herself, the reader must make up his or her own mind - possibly by providing a more imaginative response than I have managed!

The same problems recur in other passages in the book, for example, in the section entitled "Empowerment in Group Work Approach" (pp61-3), the paragraph "Example 3" (p67), and "Case study 11" (p68). And I include one last example here that manages to combine the spurious use of inverted commas with unnecessary capital letters: on page 52, Ahmad refers to "the notorious occurrences [sic] of 'Racial Harassment' in the area".

An adjacent problem concerns the superscript references and what they actually refer to. In chapter 2, Ahmad provides a list of "empowering characteristics" of the unitary approach in social work. Item 6 reads as follows:

6. Intervention, whether at client level and/or agency level, "demands considerable knowledge of the various systems affecting individuals and the families in the community", "collecting information", "contacting various elements of the client, target and action systems" in order to collating [sic] "data".⁹⁶

Again, I have hoped to minimise confusion by avoiding the use of quotation marks around the preceding passage, which can be found on p56.

On checking this reference (see p72), the reader is presented with a puzzle for at number 96 it says "ibid nos 91 and 93"; reference 91 is mercifully straightforward in that it points the reader to a specific text - by Currie and Parrott - though there is no indication which of Ahmad's quotes are taken from this work as opposed to number 93. But turning to reference 93 only leads the reader further into the mire: "93. R.J.Evans - *Unitary Models of Practice and the Social Work Team* - ibid no. 87". And no.87 turns out to be an entirely separate text, with no obvious connection with R.J.Evans' beyond the shared use of the word "unitary" in their respective titles! Which, if any of the three texts listed provided the inspiration for Ahmad's 'quotations' recorded above?

d. This fourth group contains examples of familiar words used in unexpected contexts: on page 2, social work with black families is described as "enigmatic due to its concern, anxiety and paranoia". My understanding of Ahmad's position suggests that she finds social work with black families as presently practised perfectly understandable and unmysterious; the problem is rather that this practice is unacceptable. Elsewhere, we find, in

a comment about the promotion of a community social work approach, that "this advocacy has not been without inexpedience" (p13, emphasis added). And, unfortunately on the very first page of the book, Ahmad talks about a "periodical phenomenon" which has nothing to do with popular social work weekly magazines, but is rather intended to refer to the recurrent features of the debate about "the different experiences and needs of Black and Minority Ethnic families living in Britain".

e. In this group, I have noted some examples of words that are either typing errors or new coinages by Ahmad; given the overall state of the text, there is little to help the reader decide which explanation to adopt. Examples include: "accredation" (p2), "well intentional" (p12), "epistyle" (p16), and "immuned" (p18).

f. The last group consists of examples of text that I would describe as 'understandable but odd'. By this I mean that a first reading may not prove particularly transparent, but that meaning can be found if one persists. Three examples are offered to illustrate this point:

"Assessment of Mrs. J. and her family's housing need would not be totally left unchallenged to the procedures of Housing Department." (p19)

"... despite the increasing commitment to make social work profession ethnically sensitive and responsive to Black clients, there are still certain oppressive forces that disallow transference [sic] of racial awareness to recognising oppressive practices, that disaccord the rhetoric of commitment from social work action against racist procedures."

"There is now considerable evidence of Black communities adversely effected [sic] by mortality ... and ill health specific to Black people." (p61)

My criticisms of Ahmad's text at this level have been given in some detail, and are clearly extensive. However, I have not 'exhausted' the text by conducting this kind of examination of it; and in the next section I shall present some ideas on both the experience or process of reading such a piece of writing, and the approach to social work that Ahmad is promoting.

8.3 Reading Ahmad again - a white perspective.

My experience of reading this book, and finding myself confronted - perhaps unexpectedly - with something 'alien' and disturbing, can be used as an example of the

attempt to achieve hermeneutic understanding through an encounter with otherness. Having read through *Black Perspectives in Social Work* for the first time, my initial reaction was very negative. I was puzzled and disappointed by the peculiarity of a text that was not written in any patois or dialect I recognised, but was nonetheless clearly not 'standard English'. The language was a curious mixture of ordinary terms and constructions together with many that were highly idiosyncratic, as detailed earlier. And this unusual melange was further complicated by the inclusion of what plainly must have been straightforward typographical errors. All in all, a most unsatisfactory read.

But I then found myself in something of a dilemma: how to assess such a book? Could I dismiss it as an irritating episode, a small amount of time wasted in my long-running studies, or did I have to think seriously about how to address this material, treat seriously its contribution to the development of anti-racist social work practice? Should I try and find out the circumstances under which it was written and/or produced? Would I react differently if I learned that the text was, for example, written originally in another language and then translated into what was supposed to be mainstream English by the author? Or, that the author had adopted a dialect/non-standard form of English with which I was not familiar hitherto? Clearly, different language forms can be deliberately used in unexpected contexts, with the aim of surprising the 'standard reader' into re-viewing his initial assumptions concerning the type of text and its content. But I have no way of knowing whether this was the case here. In short, and knowing this book to have a black author, the question I found myself formulating became: is my reaction racist?

In previous chapters, I have tried to indicate how a hermeneutic approach can usefully be brought to bear on questions of understanding in social work. Within a Gadamerian approach, priority is given to the role of tradition in shaping our relations with the 'outside world', and in providing a framework of "prejudices" that orientate our understanding. From a hermeneutic perspective, then, I should certainly be wary of being overtly critical of a book written from and about a black perspective or black perspectives, as I am conscious that my position as a member of the white middle class provides me with a particular vantage point and frame of reference from which to make judgements about textual material. My point of view is further differentiated by membership of an academic community which provides both the context within which this particular piece of work has been produced and at least some of the values and standards around which my own writing and reading have been organised.

So in order to understand this text, an approach drawn from the hermeneutics of tradition suggests that I will have to start a dialogue with it, and this will involve trying to put my own prejudices into play, testing and evaluating them as part of the process of negotiating with the text. And some of the prejudices in action here will concern 'proper' use of language, the format of 'academic' versus 'popular' texts and the definitions of these and other categories of writing.

I posed the question earlier whether my initial reaction to Ahmad's book was racist, but did not try at that point to answer it, partly because I do not think that there is a straightforward answer to give. However, starting to formulate such questions is a necessary corrective to the attitude that has long prevailed, namely that if you don't ask the question, no-one can accuse you of racism. The white person's fear of being (however unwittingly) racist, or of being put in a position where such a charge can even be levelled, can be paralysing.² But, having said this, if I allow my opportunity to engage with this text to 'slip away' - that is, if I do not try to honestly confront the puzzles, areas of difficulty or apparent confusion in the text - and hide behind a fear of appearing racist, then I have learned nothing from this encounter. I have, in Gadamer's terms, lost the opportunity to become more *gebildet*, and have closed off an avenue for exploring both my own tradition and the new world of the text before me.³

So what follows is my attempt to take a risk, and start a dialogue with Ahmad's text. I do so on the understanding, drawn from Gadamerian hermeneutics, that to do so represents an opportunity for learning and for increasing my understanding of *die Sache*, the matter at hand - in this case, the articulation of a black perspective on social work. I will therefore now offer a closer consideration of what Ahmad actually says, mediated by the thoughts which I have presented in the first two sections of this chapter, and try to move towards a 'fusion of horizons' with her text.

8.4 Social work from a black perspective: empowerment for all.

Running through Ahmad's critique of social work as it is currently practiced, and her proposals for bringing about a greater degree of "sensitivity and consideration of cultural expectations" (p11) in routine interventions in black families, is an appeal to a form of understanding, a relationship between social worker and client that calls to mind the dialogic model explored in Gadamer's

hermeneutics. Thus, I would suggest, the kind of understanding sought via a hermeneutic exchange can be 'mapped on' to the approach Ahmad describes in chapter one for the adequate and accurate identification and assessment of the needs of black clients. The first case study (p9ff) charts various welfare agencies' involvement with the B. family, and highlights the damage done when (white) workers draw on a restricted and derogatory set of cultural stereotypes to 'inform' their assessments of black clients and then use these ill-founded assessments as the basis for action plans.

Ahmad's discussion of the case, and her pointers toward improvements in practice involve the worker and client(s) in trying to arrive at an understanding of each other's position - an understanding based on authentic dialogue rather than untested preconceptions. It is perhaps worth emphasising again that a position altogether free of preconceptions is, from a hermeneutic point of view, literally unthinkable. The point is not whether one has prejudices, but the extent to which the individual in pursuit of understanding will allow these prejudices to be tested.

Going on, I would suggest that there are similarities between what Ahmad, in chapter two, calls empowerment and the kind of understanding sought by the hermeneutics of tradition: although not using this language, Ahmad is advocating, in part at least, a dialogic model of understanding. There is a need for the social worker to see the other parties to the exchange as "conversible with" (Whan). This theme runs through many of the case studies, where 'bad' social work is presented as the result of the social worker being unable or unwilling to engage in real dialogue, and hiding behind stereotypic 'understanding' of the client (and, in some cases, other workers too).

In case study 7 (p36ff), for example, each participant allows herself to engage fully with the 'conversation' that the social work intervention process has become. No viewpoint is ultimately privileged, though each person's particular (and necessarily partial) contribution is respected. The white social worker's view does certainly not get priority, though her access to specific pieces of specialised knowledge and information about social services' procedure is acknowledged. Neither is Ms. H., the nominal client, elevated to a point where her interpretation of events is unchallenged - and unchallengeable - simply because she is black.

Each participant has taken a risk - that her previous way of looking at the world, at colleagues, friends, and 'professionals', may need to be revised. No-one is asked

to abandon her previous prejudices (even if such a thing were possible), but rather to put them into play with and against those of the other participants. One result of this exercise is that each party in the process ends up on new ground; each has learned something about the world of the other and, further, can use this experience to inform her ways of thinking and making judgements in the future.

If chapters one and two of Ahmad's book have indicated the need for, and direction of, change in the way social work is conducted, chapter three, "Resources for Change", effectively summarises and consolidates the changes envisaged in the way the potential participants in the social work exchange see themselves and each other. The kind of 'good practice' that Ahmad advocates involves a greater emphasis on openness and accountability than currently obtains. She is concerned with making practice - and decision-making processes which inform practice - more 'transparent' and less private, which in turn has consequences for traditional ideas of confidentiality. Achieving Ahmad's ideal of 'good' social work clearly requires the cultivation of a different attitude towards practice right through the social services hierarchy, and an acceptance that SSD staff would be less able to appeal to confidentiality as a reason for avoiding scrutiny or monitoring of their work.

There are implications in this change of attitude for recording (i.e. case files), and social work writing more broadly. Ahmad does not herself really deal with the question of social work writing per se; the subject only arises in the context of the discussion of the open file policy at the beginning of the book. But I think that the empowering practice endorsed by Ahmad could not leave traditional recording methods unchanged. The question of writing in general, and social work writing in particular has been a primary focus of this thesis, and here again, the implications of a hermeneutic approach can be seen.

A more open, collaborative approach to practice, as outlined in *Black Perspectives in Social Work*, could support a similar approach to recording, perhaps involving direct discussion between worker and client, or worker and community group representative, to decide on relevant material for inclusion in the SSD file. An agreed form of words could then be recorded on the file and initialled by those concerned. Where agreement could not be reached, there could be provision for the differing views to be recorded, perhaps with some comment from each party on why this occurred. I would not underestimate the difficulty in bringing about even this degree of change in SSD habit - after all, the idea of open files is not greeted with universal enthusiasm, for a variety of reasons, and what I have sketched above would take the process of 'opening up'

social services to scrutiny one step further on.

But even without the organisational commitment to change, which such a policy would require, individuals taking their cues from Ahmad can try to adopt a more positive and questioning attitude towards black individuals and groups who, within a hermeneutic perspective, come to be seen as having something to offer white people. To repeat an earlier point, we can learn from the Other's understanding of *die Sache*, the assumption here being that the black person or group will have access to a different point of view, coming from a different tradition - or a different place in the same tradition - and that this has something to teach us, if we are willing to learn.

Although a hermeneutic approach clearly offers an opportunity to achieve greater understanding of the Other, and thence, of ourselves as culturally and historically situated individuals, there is nonetheless the very real possibility of such an approach lapsing into conservative acquiescence in the status quo. This, in essence, repeats a familiar criticism of Gadamerian hermeneutics, a criticism associated with Habermas in particular. Dialogue, even as Gadamer understands it, retains the potential to become another means of control when it fails to recognise (as Gadamer is accused of doing) the inequalities of power between cultures. If members of an oppressing culture are unable to 'step outside' their initial prejudices or forejudgements, as Gadamer suggests, the danger remains that any adjustments will ultimately be self-serving; the 'tradition' will maintain its authority.

Habermas' critique of Gadamer's version of hermeneutics has already been rehearsed, and his alternative proposals for a critical theory briefly sketched.⁴ I have attached more weight to the critique of hermeneutics than the theory Habermas in turn derives from it, and have looked elsewhere for a way of thinking about text - using 'text' in the broadest sense - which maintains a critical and inquiring focus. In the final section, therefore, I return to some ideas based on the more radical interpretation of hermeneutics that I have associated with the work of Derrida. I shall try to show that the application of these ideas points to a certain 'incompleteness' in Ahmad's work, and that trying to make sense of them in a social work context could mean moving even further beyond the status quo than she has done. As the preceding discussions of deconstruction have indicated, it is impossible to specify from here, as it were, what the end result of this further movement should be - and equally impossible to give it a convenient label. But I shall suggest that this version of radical hermeneutics illuminates areas in which a latent conservatism might otherwise struggle - despite

dialogue, and despite attempts to 'fuse horizons' - to maintain itself.

8.5 Writing from the margins of social work: black perspectives and deconstruction.

That certain ideas or ways of thinking have pre-eminence in different cultures at different times, or that a hierarchy of 'epistemologically correct' concepts holds a dominant tradition in place, is a commonplace observation. Yet, while a dominant tradition has the power to circumscribe and prefigure our ways of understanding, it does not function as a hermetically sealed capsule. This, after all, is the message of the "fusion of horizons" and the guarantee of the possibility of understanding between individuals and between ages. Hermeneutics suggests that a tradition is, to some extent at least, permeable, but initially accepts the conceptual framework around which it is organised: in Gadamer's account of understanding, the tradition is allowed an authority over us, by virtue of the idea of the anticipation of completeness (Gadamer, 1979:261-2).

Deconstruction also acknowledges our inevitable location within a tradition, but accords its conceptual hierarchy no such privileged status. On the contrary, the undoing or cracking open of our culturally protected hierarchies is the very stuff of deconstruction - though again it is worth emphasising that this is pursued neither in a nihilistic nor in a frivolous way. The deconstructive critic or analyst is firmly rooted in the discourses of her own tradition - indeed, she has no other language - but adopts a strategy that calls into question every fundamental of that tradition. In the translator's preface to *Of Grammatology*, Spivak writes, "It is the strategy of using the only available language while not subscribing to its premises, or 'operat[ing] according to the vocabulary of the very thing that one delimits' (MP 18, SP 147)" (Derrida, 1976: pxviii).

The point at issue here is the impossibility of 'escaping' language or of finding a prejudice-free place from which to apply one's critical lever. Thus, in the context that I am examining - social work practice - anti-racists, whether black or white, are bound to use the vocabulary and concepts that are presently available, knowing them to be implicated in the maintenance of (racist) hierarchies of domination and suppression. As Norris explains, "It is only possible to criticize existing institutions from within an inherited language, a discourse that will always have been worked over by traditional concepts and categories. What is required is a kind of internal distancing, an effort of defamiliarization which prevents

concepts from settling down into routine habits of " (Norris, 1987:16).

perhaps the case that the skill black people employ to survive with dignity and a sense of worth, and employ daily in their negotiations with a society, is exactly the sort of "internalising" that Norris highlights above: a way of writing that constantly questions the received wisdom of the roles and destinies of both blacks and whites, allows the articulation of alternative frameworks, in form of the different 'black perspectives' currently tested out? However one answers this question, the question remains: even a black writer cannot occupy a privileged position in the sense of being somehow 'outside' language, though he may be able to use the experience of being marginalised by the majority society to throw new light on an otherwise familiar scene. "Since deconstruction attempts to view systems from the outside and look at the inside, it tries to keep alive the possibility that the eccentricity of women, poets, fools and madmen [and, we might add, ethnic minority writers] might yield truths about the system to which they are marginal - truths contradicting the consensus and not translatable within a framework yet developed" (Culler, 1983:4).

Writing from a black perspective in a white society *deconstruction* involves writing from the margins (Derrida, 1982) and brings into focus a whole range of hitherto marginalised groups and minority voices. Such writing challenges the power to subvert existing hierarchies; for example, in this case the hierarchies of centre/periphery, theory/practice, subject/object are challenged if the traditionally marginal and down-rated voice of ethnic minority practitioners is elevated, placed 'centre stage', given the kind of hearing usually only accorded to the voice of traditional (that is, white) academic scholarship.

Questions remain to be asked. What does this new voice (should it be voices?) say? What is it that white workers are hearing? What is it, finally, to write from a black perspective? Ahmad herself explicitly poses this last point early in her book, starting with a clear statement of her position: "This book is written from a Black perspective" (p3). She notes that while it is a good place to ask what a 'black perspective' is, the same question is not posed in relation to a 'white perspective' where 'white' is accepted as the norm against which the Other is measured and defined. Ahmad continues, "Black writers do not refrain from any demands made on them to produce a definition of Black perspective. For Black perspective is much more than a string of words. It is

more of a statement of 'White norms'; ... The circumstances that shape a Black perspective stem from the experience of racism and powerlessness, both past and present. The motivation that energises a Black perspective is rooted to the principle of racial equality and justice. The articulation that voices a Black perspective is part of a process that is committed to replacing the white distortion of Black reality with Black writings of Black experience" (p3).

This passage bears closer consideration because it is here, I suggest, that the 'incompleteness' referred to earlier manifests itself. Disentangling the different strands of Ahmad's statement, the radical implications of her argument seem less clear-cut and we are left with a situation where, despite the apparently challenging rhetoric, the social work system can remain fundamentally unaffected - even by the application of a 'black perspective'. A conservative tendency can be discerned in the way Ahmad formulates her position that undermines or at the least restricts the impetus for the much-needed change that is the ostensible 'message' of her text. This point is explored in more detail below.

It is possible to argue that the passage quoted above, in which Ahmad makes her statement about black perspectives, incorporates three distinct threads: a) the idea that the black perspective is basically a 'negative' critique, appealing to the principles of racial equality and justice; b) the idea that the black perspective is an attack on, is defined in opposition to "White norms"; and c) the idea that the black perspective is an articulation of black experience. Three very different ideas are expressed here. One is that a black perspective consists of an appeal to principles - to norms - that white social workers would themselves acknowledge: equality and justice. The second is that it is white norms themselves which are at issue, and which must be resisted. And the third is that, irrespective of norms and principles, the black perspective is an articulation of black experience.

To express these ideas somewhat differently: each position can be re-stated - without, I hope, oversimplifying the points being made - in terms of what Ahmad calls 'norms': thus, a) white 'norms' (such as equality and justice) are valid, but whites ignore or suspend them when dealing with black people; b) white 'norms' are basically not acceptable; and c) black experience has an authenticity that white 'norms' distort. I would argue that the 'incompleteness' of Ahmad's work that I have referred to is related to the fact that, analytically, she does not explore the differences between these positions.

I have, at various points throughout this thesis, drawn on

feminist writings to illuminate particular dynamics in what I have termed the race and social work debate. And here again, it seems apposite to consider such writings in relation to this suggested lack of analytical clarity in Ahmad's text, paying particular attention to Harding's analysis of androcentrism within the institutions of science (1986) discussed in chapter two. Taking the three ideas or positions drawn out of Ahmad's statement on black perspectives, it is possible to frame a parallel set of positions in relation to gender - in the paragraph above we can substitute 'male' for 'white' and 'female' for 'black' throughout to see what these positions are - and these have provided a focus for extensive feminist debate. Many have argued, with respect to position a), that male 'norms' oppress women precisely because they do not take account of the 'difference' that women represent.⁵ It has also been argued, with respect to position c), that women's experience is always already embedded in male discourse, from which it should be the task of feminist analysis to free it. 'Articulation' is not enough.⁶

Translating back into the language of race, similar arguments can be set out in terms of 'black' and 'white', which challenge the usefulness of the ideas expressed at a) and c), namely that white norms oppress black people precisely because they do not acknowledge the 'difference' that black people represent, and that black people's experience does not exist in a vacuum, it is already embedded in a dominant white discourse. We are left with position b) and the possibility, to put it no more strongly, that white 'norms' are not okay. The 'tradition' is itself flawed and, in part perhaps, in need of revision. It is this possibility that Gadamerian hermeneutics fails to address adequately, and which accounts for the charge of latent conservatism in this case.

In this context, there are two noticeable characteristics of Ahmad's book. One is that she writes almost exclusively about "work with black families". the other, and I would suggest related, feature is that she draws heavily on established (that is to say, white) social work norms. Indeed, in the paragraph immediately following the one already quoted from page 3, she says: "the content of this book is placed in the context of the basic principles of care, including some of the main principles of social work and professional ethos and values"; and throughout the book she is apparently quite sanguine about using such familiar concepts in an unexamined and unanalysed way.⁷

A Derridean version of hermeneutics, I suggest, would interrogate precisely those concepts that Ahmad appears to take for granted and attempt to deconstruct them much more systematically. There is, after all, no *a priori* reason

why a black perspective should have to limit itself to discussing 'work with black families' drawing blindly on white concepts. Arguably, the expression 'work with black families' itself already presupposes a white framework. If, as Ahmad advocates, the black perspective is to be a "statement against White norms", then surely it has licence to tackle these norms head-on, and ask how far they are implicated in the control and oppression of black people.

A deconstructive analysis, which went beyond the Gadamerian "fusion of horizons", would be one method of probing this essential thought. It could point the way to a black perspective on social work, rather than a black perspective on 'social work with black families' (via an articulation of black experience). Admittedly, this would mean continuing to use the familiar concepts - but they would be "under erasure", following Derrida's usage, pending the emergence of something more genuinely non-racist.

I am aware that this idea may be open to misconstruction - or rather, my motives in suggesting it may appear suspect: what I have written may be interpreted as a white person yet again telling black people how to go about 'solving' racism; or, to put it slightly differently, it may seem to offer to whites an opportunity to evade their own responsibilities by finding new ways for blacks to confront racism. My intention is to make neither of the above points, but to open up for debate the whole question of how 'we' produce, read and use text. This is not an exercise to get white people 'off the hook' - quite the reverse. What I am suggesting is a broadening of the range of texts that are considered suitable or relevant for study, where necessary by challenging the bases on which decisions as to 'suitability' or 'relevance' have been made by different 'authorities'. In addition, I am proposing an equivalent enlarging of the 'critical base', by which I mean those whose comments and analyses should be considered part of the critical process.

In conclusion, then, I suggest that both traditional and the more radical versions of hermeneutics would give black writings serious consideration, though for different reasons and with different effect. For hermeneutics, any point of view different from one's own should be treated with respect, and should be interrogated judiciously to find out what can be learned from such contrasting thinking. We know that our own viewpoint can only be partial, and that the truth claims of competing views may prove compelling. But understanding, in Gadamer's terms, involves agreement; hermeneutic understanding is achieved through the fusion of horizons, the incorporation or

integration of the apparently alien into the fabric of the enquiring tradition. To be sure, that tradition is itself changed by the encounter, but its hegemony is not necessarily threatened.

Deconstruction, on the other hand maintains a healthy scepticism in the face of all claims to truth and insists on probing all such claims in an attempt to re-shape our conceptual map - though in ways as yet unpredictable. One aspect of the development of an anti-racist stance might therefore be the attempted deconstruction of the white/black hierarchy that racism holds in place. As Culler says, though in a different context, "Affirmations of equality will not disrupt the hierarchy. Only if it includes an inversion or reversal does deconstruction have a chance of dislocating the hierarchical structure" (1983:166). Elevating 'black' at the expense of 'white' would then be a necessary preliminary step in such a deconstructive process, signified, perhaps, by the promotion of writing from an overtly black perspective.

This, it seems to me, is plausibly the stage that social work practice and training have currently reached. Documents such as the recent CCETSW publication *One Small Step* urge the articulation of black perspectives in all aspects of social work training and practice, and the active incorporation of these perspectives throughout the profession. While it may be premature to sound a note of caution - after all just gaining acknowledgement of the importance of black perspectives in social work has not been easy, or even now, wholly successful - nevertheless, it is important to avoid simply swapping orthodoxies, such that 'black writing' is elevated to the point where it is effectively unchallengeable, and takes on the status of the (politically correct) new improved truth. The deconstructive 'reading', as I have suggested at several points in this study, typically involves a double movement, of which the reversal or inversion of the contested hierarchy is but one stage, and there remains "that essential feature of a deconstructive reading that consists, not merely in reversing or subverting some established hierarchical order, but in showing how its terms are indissociably entwined in a strictly undecidable exchange of values and priorities" (Norris, 1987:56).

CHAPTER EIGHT

NOTES

1. All references in this chapter are to this work, unless otherwise indicated.

2. This point is recognised by Ahmad herself (p30). A Derridean analysis might question the ability of certain labels to be so powerful. Why is it so damaging to one's self-esteem or self-definition to be accused of racism, or to be labelled a 'racist'?

3. This approach chimes with ideas found outside mainstream philosophical works, for example some recent texts in anthropology. Take, as one instance, a book by Marcus and Fischer, 1986: *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. The title itself implies - something the rest of the book confirms - that anthropology is not primarily about 'studying' other cultures from a Eurocentric perspective, pinning them down like dead butterflies, or tracing their social structures as one might draw a map of the underground. Instead, the significance of anthropology is found in the idea of an encounter between cultures which, rather than giving one an 'objective' knowledge of the other, leads to a reflexive analysis of both cultures and, in particular, the culture doing the 'studying'.

This, it should be clear, is entirely in line with a Gadamerian view. We who consider ourselves as 'investigators' - that is, we as members of our own culture - become *gebildet*, and are challenged to explore our own tradition as well as the 'new' world before us. Properly conceived, the experience is one whereby we become investigators of our own culture at the same moment as we become investigators of an 'alien' culture - and in virtue of that very process. the "cultural critique" of the Marcus and Fischer title is a critique of ourselves, made possible (and only made possible, if we choose to accept the invitation) by an encounter with difference; and it leads, through *phronesis*, to an alternative way of seeing and an alternative way of doing.

4. See the preceding discussion of the Gadamer/Habermas debate in chapter four above.

5. See Harding (1986) for a discussion, and criticism, of feminist empiricism.

6. This criticism has been levelled against what Harding (1986) calls the feminist standpoint position.

7. Thus, Ahmad is able to use the expression "good social work practice" with ease; she gives no hint that there may be less than universal agreement about the criteria by which to judge 'good' practice, apparently assuming an already existing (and unchanging?) general accord. In this context, her position seems to mirror Dominelli's, and similar concerns about her use of language can be expressed (see chapter seven for a fuller account of these concerns).

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSIONS

9.1 Introduction.

"No matter how great the commitment to clarity, no matter how intense the desire to communicate, when we are trying ourselves to delineate and differentiate the practices and objects which are crucial to understanding our own functioning and for which we as yet lack an adequate vocabulary, there will be difficulty" (Habermas, quoted by Spivak, 1988:x).

It would perhaps be customary to conclude an exploration of the problems of race and racism in social work with a series of recommendations for change which would, if implemented, ensure that anti-racism replaced racism in the education, training and practice of social workers. The social work texts which I have analysed in this thesis typically adopt this course. However, for me to follow suit would directly contradict the view of racism that I have developed in the preceding chapters. The problem is not amenable to the application of a once-for-all 'solution'.

Having followed the discussion so far, even the idea of a 'conclusion' may seem out of place, sitting somewhat uncomfortably with both the Gadamerian notion of the unending conversation that provides the intellectual and moral underpinning of understanding, and the deconstructive approach of Derrida which is also rigorously opposed to closure. Hermeneutics does not, in either form, offer the hope of a conclusion to the process of understanding. What it can perhaps offer is some ways of thinking about two broad areas of concern to what I have called the race and social work debate: the first of these involves our understanding of 'race' and the ways in which we construe issues of racism and anti-racism; the second involves strategy - the process of how we move on from where we are now,¹ given that social work has yet to find a satisfactory *modus operandi* in relation to ethnic minority clients. The opening quotation (above) suggests the general orientation or attitude of this concluding chapter, although the position I wish to expand upon here is a long way from the model of communicative competence that Habermas would endorse.

9.2 Construction of the race and social work problem: 'racism', 'anti-racism', and the 'black perspective' reconsidered.

My contention has been that, so far, social work across ethnic, cultural and racial boundaries has been largely unsuccessful - at least from the perspective of many black clients and black workers both within and without the formal social welfare system. The discussion in chapter one followed the changes - as documented in the social work literature - that practice, and understanding of the 'problem', have gone through: the progression from assimilation to integration to cultural liberalism and pluralism has been recorded, as has the failure of 'multiculturalism' to deal with the problem of endemic racism. Moves beyond multiculturalism have included the articulation of 'anti-racist' positions and the emergence of increasingly clearly framed demands for the incorporation of 'black perspectives' into all aspects of social work education, training and practice. This, I would argue, is the point that has been reached in the social work literature.² And it is at this point that I have joined the debate, to try and understand what, in practice, follows from the attempt to adopt an anti-racist position and/or a black perspective on social work.

Looking first at anti-racism: to define oneself or one's actions as 'anti-racist' suggests some prior understanding of the kind of entity 'racism' itself must be. The literature that I have examined seems to operate with a restricted understanding of this phenomenon and thus is led to propose forms of action that are, in my assessment, doomed to failure - not because of ill-will or lack of commitment on the part of the anti-racist protagonists, but simply because they are being 'set up' to do something that cannot be achieved. My criticism of, for example, Dominelli's text is not intended to excuse or condone racism, but rather to draw attention to the impossibility of the task of anti-racism as she conceives it. Opposing racism is not the same as removing racism, whether personal or institutional, and it is here, I have argued, that Dominelli's text breaks down. Exhortations like hers can only work if the object of concern - in this case, racism - is under the conscious control of her readers. If it is not, then no act of will can dislodge it.

Alternatively, if racism is viewed as a kind of poison or malfunction in the system of either the individual or social structure, then different tactics may be required; but it should still be possible to 'cure' the ailing system by the application of suitably strong 'medicine'.³ At the level of a social system or organisation, this could perhaps take the form of direct intervention to affect its composition and management, through the

implementation of equal opportunity policies. But again, while doubtless having the potential to improve the opportunities open to people from ethnic minority groups, such moves founder if they treat racism as an entity that can be surgically removed, as it were, leaving that system intact in all particulars - except that it is now 'not-racist'.⁴

In this thesis, I argue for a different understanding of racism, one that is derived from the philosophy of language, and presents racism as a cultural or linguistic resource rather than as a discrete item to be somehow slotted in to or removed from a system or individual at will. Such an understanding of racism, in turn, belongs with a reconceptualisation of the idea of race, and a move away from the reification of race.

The use of race categories has such a long history that there is a tendency in our (Western) thinking to treat them as given, necessary and therefore unavoidable. Despite the lack of reputable scientific evidence for the existence of separate and immutable racial groupings, race remains in use as a powerfully obvious organising principle. It is a culturally significant category and is therefore amenable to the same kind of treatment that hermeneutics applies to other such items. A hermeneutic approach acknowledges the presence of this category in our thinking, accepting that, while technically 'empty', we nonetheless use this term to mean something on our cultural map. We deploy the language of race as though it does indeed signify - and as though we know what it means.

Our commitment to race as an organising principle can be understood as an example of an unwarranted prejudice, using this term in the Gadamerian sense, and as such it is open to challenge. As I have indicated elsewhere, however, the conservative tendency of Gadamer's approach may mitigate the force of any such challenge and simply confirm the tradition in its tendency to operate within these particular racial parameters. But in spite of that, one could argue that, while the pernicious effects of racism are apparent in the lives of millions of people, the demands of *phronesis* oblige us to engage in debate with this aspect of our own tradition. To avoid the discussion or to simply change the subject to one that is, in Rorty's terms, more "edifying" (1980: passim), runs counter to the demands of the hermeneutics of tradition. Gadamer urges engagement with Otherness, whether the Other is encountered outside or, as in this case, inside one's own tradition. To ignore the chance to engage with an 'alien' dimension of one's own tradition is, for Gadamer, to miss the opportunity to become increasingly *gebildet*.

In terms of a Derridean dynamic, the use of race terminology is again unavoidable, in that ideas of race structure and infiltrate many of our basic contemporary conceptual hierarchies. So any attempt to re-figure these hierarchies must engage with race as a constitutive part of Western thinking. Race has a role in the maintenance of certain binary oppositions, which can only be challenged from within, as it were, by using the language of race itself. The opposition 'white/black' can be opened up by reversing the customary hierarchy and elevating 'blackness' at the expense of 'whiteness', and affirming a positive black identity - as in the slogan of the early 'seventies, "black is beautiful". But such a move only 'succeeds' by employing the terms of the hierarchy, the race language, against itself.

Gates writes of "the necessity of undermining the habit, in the West, of accounting for the Other's 'essence' in absolute terms, in terms that *fix* culturally defined differences into transcendent, 'natural' categories or essences. For, if we believe that races exist as things, as categories of being already 'there', we cannot escape the danger of generalizing about observed differences between human beings as if these differences were consistent and determined, a priori" (Gates, 1986:402). The influence of logocentrism can be seen at work in this apparent need for essentialising definitions of the kind Gates refers to.

To turn now to consideration of the idea of a black perspective: Gadamerian hermeneutics proceeds on the assumption that it is possible to engage meaningfully with a representative from a different tradition; an encounter with difference offers the prospect of enhancing one's understanding both of the Other, and of one's own tradition. From this starting point, the idea of engagement with a black perspective can, it seems, be comfortably accommodated, as my discussion of Ahmad's case studies in chapter eight suggests. The ethical thrust of Gadamer's approach to problems of meaning and understanding seems to fit it very appropriately into the client-centred models of social work.

In broader social work terms, the application of the hermeneutic approach would mean that white social workers, managers, teachers, treat seriously the understanding of their situation articulated by black clients, students and colleagues and, in addition, use this information as a basis for critical self-reflection. More easily said than done, to be sure, but suggestive of a general attitude to the Other that could be productive of greater mutual understanding. At the best, the hermeneutics of tradition points towards the development of a "non-coercive

politics of difference" (Code, 1991:303). But the criticism remains that the hermeneutics of tradition proceeds, by accommodation and incorporation of alternative viewpoints, to maintain the status quo which, for the concerns of this thesis, means a white-dominated consensus that continues to marginalise ethnic minority opinion.

Increasingly clearly articulated black critiques are being directed against social work education, training and practice, as the current literature demonstrates. From the point of view of deconstructive analysis, the notion of 'black perspectives' has a lot of critical force, challenging as it does the hegemonic views of white academic and more broadly social opinion. Social work, in all its dimensions, is urged to adopt 'black perspectives'. But it is here that the idea of a 'black perspective' becomes altogether more complicated, and its status more problematic. My discussion of Ahmad's book, in chapter seven, suggests that a number of questions are raised by the appeal to black perspectives in social work: whose perspectives? whose social work? How radical a rethink of the social work enterprise does the black perspective literature suggest/entail?

I would not attempt to minimise the importance of the development of black perspectives, nor suggest that the rights of black people to articulate their own analyses should be open to challenge. When any such gains or advances have been extremely hard-won, and remain vulnerable to attack, my position is not intended to criticise the existence or range of these commentaries and critiques. However, the logic of the argument I have pursued throughout is that text can, at best, only produce more text, without any definitive end-point being reached. Thus, engagement with a black perspective is a stage in a process, not an end in itself. Black perspectives do not, indeed cannot, provide the last word on the race and social work debate, and an opportunity will have been lost if they are allowed to simply solidify into the new orthodoxy. I suggest that what they do offer is a move towards the reversal of particular 'key' conceptual pairings - centre/margins, white/black, for example - which, in turn, allows for the possibility (though not the necessity) of reinscribing the opposition in a different order of textual signification.

9.3 Moving on: a strategy for change.

"Race is a text (an array of discursive practices), not an essence. It must be *read* with painstaking care and suspicion, not imbibed" (Gates, 1991:47).

The starting point for this discussion of strategy is the assertion common to both Gadamer's and Derrida's hermeneutics that we are always grounded within a particular social, historical, political and cultural configuration - a tradition, in Gadamer's terms - which provides us with the language with which we think the world around us. Neither Gadamer nor Derrida offers any possibility of a prejudice-free place to stand whilst contemplating one's own, or indeed any other, tradition. Gadamer's notion of understanding cannot be divorced from the idea of involvement in a tradition. It is the tradition that provides the basic tools, the concepts with which we can think about ourselves and the Other, and through which we can define the phenomena and events we encounter and the relations between them. The idea of unmediated perception is, in the end, literally meaningless.

I have suggested that Gadamerian hermeneutics appeals to the moral-practical dimension of interaction with the Other, and as such offers a valuable point of contact with social work practice as currently conceptualised, particularly in relation to the client-centred approaches discussed earlier. In addition, I considered the centrality to hermeneutics of the dialogic nature of understanding, and its possible relevance to a process of self-criticism and developing self-knowledge: from a Gadamerian perspective, dialogue also provides opportunity for self-reflection. The encounter with the Other can be productive of self-criticism, in the manner envisaged by Marcus and Fischer (1986).

One topic given prominence in the social work literature I examined was the social work encounter or relationship. This has been variously treated, being presented as a possible form of mystification by Dominelli, for example, but as a source of strength and a therapeutic resource by other authors. But however the relationship between social worker and client is conceived, it does, necessarily, involve an attempt at communication between at least two parties, who try to reach an understanding of the matter at hand, the event or situation that has brought the participants into contact - usually but not necessarily the 'problem' presented by the client. In this context, the value of the conversational model of enquiry is apparent. The ethical and dialogic dimensions of understanding can come together to allow the development of relationships that are based on "trust, respect and caring" (Code, 1991:108). Such relationships will not be easy to establish, on either side, but something will be learned in the attempt to make them a reality.

For deconstruction, the fact of cultural embeddedness is inescapable; the point at issue however is, simply, where does the cultural critic - of whatever denomination or conviction - stand, while formulating her criticism, and what are the implications of this situatedness? Can there be a black perspective that is completely independent of the white social and linguistic matrix that it critiques? Without questioning the need for, or the existence of, something called a 'black perspective', deconstruction interrogates the assumptions on which such a perspective is based. How can such a perspective be articulated, and what are its relations to the broader white worldview?

I have at various points looked to debates within feminist criticism and drawn limited parallels between the concerns of feminism and anti-racism; and here again, feminism offers some interesting insights, drawn from consideration of women as readers and writers, as producers and consumers of 'knowledge' in a system that is deeply androcentric.⁵ Deconstruction urges an acknowledgement of the extent to which even critical thinking is beholden to the very conceptual apparatus it seeks to destroy. The point has been made over and over again - there is no place outside language from which to apply one's critical lever. We speak and write from within a dominant tradition, however flawed we would claim it to be: in the end, "there is simply nowhere else to go" (Moi, 1985:81).

And recognition of this unavoidable location in a particular linguistic network can be used to assess the validity of efforts to remove racism from our language, characterised in the phenomenon of 'political correctness'. I have suggested that language is never static, but is always in a state of *dissemination*. Therefore attempts to somehow 'freeze' a particular set of expressions as either 'correct' or 'incorrect' are at best misconceived, and at worst run the risk of becoming seriously repressive. This is not to say that we should use language thoughtlessly, and accept the impossibility of ever finally 'purifying' it as an excuse for gratuitous offensiveness. Social work is a field where language clearly does matter, and the process of establishing certain words or expressions as 'acceptable' and of ruling others out of order cannot be dismissed as mere wordplay. It is significant, for example, if we call people receiving state welfare payments "claimants" rather than "scroungers", or if we recognise only "immigrants" rather than "black British". Language use is not a trivial matter, as I have argued throughout. Recognising the fact that language has the capacity to constrain as well as enable invites us to treat it with respect. But it does not give us the ability to expunge particular ideas from our thinking simply by removing certain words from our vocabulary.

Political correctness is predicated on a misapprehension of what, in this case, racism (and hence, also anti-racism) is. This statement does not imply a new definition of what 'racism' essentially is, because this would be to fall back into precisely that logocentric trap into which political correctness has fallen. Rather, it is to suggest that language is altogether more complex and subtle and cannot be 'cleansed' of racism by creating what would in effect be just another (new) logocentric space in which the play of meaning had temporarily been arrested.

Attempts to 'purge' language in this way seem to me both regressive and repressive, proceeding in a spirit of intolerance that is far removed from the open and questioning stance of much of the post-structuralist thinking from which it draws. It becomes a way of stopping discussion, rather than opening up a discursive field for further exploration. In Derridean terms, it sets up a new opposition, creating a new centre of the linguistically 'pure', and banishing to the margins everyone else whose language use does not - for whatever reason - conform.

For Derrida, then, the practice of deconstruction is heavily, and necessarily, implicated in the system it interrogates, and depends on the terms and concepts of that system even while working to undermine them. The process of reversing particular hierarchical oppositions very clearly remains within the 'old' economy of differences, but deconstruction does not remain there: "... to remain in this phase is still to operate on the terrain of and from within the deconstructed system. By means of this double, and precisely stratified, dislodged and dislodging, writing, we must also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new "concept", a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime" (Derrida, 1987:42).

As these remarks by Derrida indicate, deconstruction has the potential to surprise, to take us beyond the expected - even beyond the 'rational'. Indeed many of Derrida's own analyses have precisely that result, coming to conclusions that seem counter-intuitive or downright irrational, when measured against the current standards of 'rationality'. But these, Derrida would argue, are not transcendental standards; they are generated from within a particular metaphysical system, one that is governed by logocentrism, and within which his own analyses are placed. Derrida's position is not 'irrational' in the usual sense, in that his approach to textual analysis is 'thorough', 'rigorous', and indeed 'scholarly' - again when judged by the prevailing standards associated with those terms. However, the inexorable logic of his line of argument

leads to conclusions that are at variance with everyday thinking. Thus, deconstruction unsettles old habits of thought, without offering any new certainties to replace them. It allows for the emergence of ideas that were literally unthinkable before, with the 'old' conceptual apparatus, but which nonetheless have been drawn out of an analysis of precisely that system of thought.

So, deconstruction involves a further turn or moment - the attempt to 'reinscribe' the opposition under investigation, so that the bases on which that hierarchy was founded are themselves called into question. Derrida's treatment of the pairings presence/absence, speech/writing or centre/margin, for example, show this process at work. The 'either/or' logic that such binary distinctions depend on is dissolved, and the attributes of each 'side' of the divide can be re-thought in a new logic of 'both/and'. Derrida's approach makes room for the element of undecidability that logocentrism seeks to exclude.

Acknowledging the inevitable involvement in a particular language/practice network does not invalidate the enterprise of criticism, or necessarily reduce the force of challenges to the particular tradition from elements at the social or intellectual 'margins' - indeed, deconstructive criticism typically starts at the social or textual margins. Rather, it directs us away from the search for a 'pure' language as a solution to the problem of racism and towards an understanding of the process of change which can be put in train when a range of unexamined assumptions and conceptual 'givens' are critically investigated. This process has a few sign posts, and no certain destination, but has the potential to lead to the emergence of 'new' and unexpected ways of thinking. I leave the 'final' comment here with Derrida (quoted by Culler, 1983:179): "we are still at the stage of suspecting that *something* is going to have to change in our old ways of speaking, but not yet knowing *what*". So how, in the meantime, to proceed?

The textual nature of social work is demonstrated at every turn: the essays, process recordings, placement reports, the case records, applications, letters, case conferences, court reports: from the process of applying to go on a training course, through the training programme itself, to the daily practice of 'professional' workers - social work is inescapably involved with reading and writing. I have suggested therefore that within a critical practice there could be a place for a form of textual analysis. I am certainly not alone in making a connection between social work and literature, as England's text (1986) makes explicit. England's proposal for the establishment of libraries of practice accounts written by social workers is innovative and offers an imaginative way of moving

social work practice into a more reflective and self-critical mode. However, I do not feel that his proposals go far enough, and I would suggest a different emphasis based on a different choice of literary critical sources.

Social workers should indeed be encouraged to write accounts of their practice, and to think and write critically about the existing theoretical literature - though realistically, in the current economic and political climate, the scope for the average practitioner to engage in these activities will be limited, leaving the bulk of such work to be done by 'academics'. The texts produced will provide examples of the operation of a particular language-practice network which can then be critically examined in their turn. Deconstruction suggests a way of opening up issues of concern within social work by engaging with text, confronting 'slips' of language, language that is not politically correct, examining the rhetorical strategies employed in different pieces of writing, and their effects or implications.

And this approach can be generalised to the analysis of patterns of activity as well as written language: both are, within Derrida's terms, part of the "general text". Although deconstruction is a text-based approach, the dismantling of the binary pairings of logocentrism is not without concrete effect. A practical implication of the reversal of hierarchical oppositions can be seen in Dominelli's proposal for an apprenticeship model of social work (1988) where part of a student social worker's practical training would include a period of supervision by a black supervisor. Deconstruction, then, need be neither esoteric nor abstract in effect, but can form part of a strategy for engaging with the practical and theoretical dimensions of the social work and race debate.

My own approach, to put it at its most blunt, has been to argue that Gadamer's hermeneutics offers a useful regulative yardstick for practice, but that something else is needed to supplement it.⁶ The choice of supplement explored here, based on the understanding of racism as a linguistic resource, has been an approach that is itself directly concerned with the operation of language: I am suggesting that deconstruction can illuminate precisely those points of strain that Gadamer tries to accommodate. The discourse of social work, of race and anti-racism, can be investigated through the deconstructive reading of chosen texts.

Such reading and analysis is not designed to provide a racism-free version of social work, nor even a new understanding of what social work 'really' is. Rather it

is an attempt to interrogate the 'everyday' or 'commonsense' understanding we have of both the phenomenon of 'race' and the activity designated as 'anti-racism', as this operationalised in the practice known as 'social work'. Within a deconstructive reading, all these terms - which I have here put in inverted commas - would be placed "under erasure" (*sous rature*), to indicate their provisional nature. It is only by accepting the way in which our understanding of such terms is continually open to revision that we can begin to ensure that the process of developing anti-racist social work practice is accessible to a true plurality of voices and traditions.

CHAPTER NINE

NOTES

1. Having started with a number of disclaimers, I would again want to emphasise that 'strategy', in the sense in which it is used here, does not imply passage towards a known end-point; that is, we are not in the realms of the technical-rational solution or 'fix'.
2. See Dominelli (1988), Ahmad (1991), CCETSW (1991), and NCDP (1991).
3. Though metaphors of this kind have a knack of backfiring - see Derrida's discussion of the use of the word "*pharmakos*" in Plato (Derrida, 1972).
4. Harding (1986), as I indicated in chapter two, highlights the limitations of the "equal opportunities" position.
5. See Harding (1986), Culler's discussion of "reading as a woman" (1983:43-64), and Moi (1985: particularly chapter four).
6. I use the term "supplement" here with the double sense explored by Derrida (1976).

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