

School of Social Work and Social Policy

**The construction of personal and professional
boundaries in Australian social work: A qualitative
exploration of the self in practice**

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Doctor of Philosophy
of
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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

Signature: ---

Date: 8.4.04

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Abstract

The boundary between the personal and the professional self is a site of professional and personal creativity and tension, a space that reflects some of the key ontological and epistemological issues confronting social work. Exploring the social construction of the self through the stories of fifteen Australian social workers brings these issues into stark relief. The participatory and reflexive research process facilitated the development of knowledge about how a group of culturally diverse social workers construct personal and professional boundaries in practice.

The need to explore these processes and relationships was predicated on a concern that while the self is generally recognised as shaping practice, there has been a paucity of attention given to what lived experiences constitute the self. Social work practice is broadly defined as a socially constructed profession, yet the personal and professional boundary is regarded as individually constructed and defined. This discourse neglects the influence of contextual, cultural, relational and structural dimensions of the self, thus denying the possibilities of practice being continually informed by a myriad of experiences.

Recognising that the socially constructed self is situated within intersections of knowledge and meaning opens up possibilities for the development of dialogical practices within an ethics of care. The research also has implications for social work practice and education and for the way that we supervise and manage social work staff. Professional dialogue, debate and practice needs to reflect a diversity of experiences and recognise that the dominant discourse about boundaries and the self leaves many workers feeling that their practice reality is not a shared one.

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1 Developing the research question

1.1 Introduction

When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. (Rich, as cited in Rosaldo, 1989, p. ix)

Adrienne Rich's powerful statement encapsulates the essence of my thesis. My area of inquiry, the intersection of the personal and professional self, contains practice experiences that are often not openly shared by workers and for which practitioners feel unprepared. The research participants in this qualitative inquiry reveal that the intersection of the personal and the professional is a site of complexity, creativity and tension. The overarching description which Rich identifies as potentially alienating, is the contemporary social work discourse that does not reflect social workers as individuals, whose professional practice is strongly informed by their personal and cultural constructions of meaning and identity. Their moments of psychic disequilibrium involve feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty.

The construction of personal and professional boundaries has received scant professional and academic attention and the professional discourse about boundaries is narrow and cautionary, focusing on boundary incursions rather than on creative or culturally sensitive practice. This means that the intersection of the personal and professional remains a private space in which social workers individually deal with the overlapping influences

arising from their personal and professional worlds. While the practice literature, informed by critical and postmodern theories, encourages workers to develop the skills of reflexivity (Fawcett, Featherstone, Fook & Rossiter, 2000; Ife, 1999; Pease & Fook, 1999) in order to engage the self in practice, there is a lack of attention given to how workers experience the use of self. This means that a narrow ethically based discourse has become the professional template within which workers conduct their practice. This does not mirror their daily practice experiences nor the perceived needs of their clients and communities.

A focus on the relationship between the personal and the professional self explores the degree of interdependence between these two aspects of a worker's identity. The factors which influence the merging of these identities, mirror some of the core ontological and epistemological issues in contemporary social work practice. These include the construction and application of knowledge in social work, the use of self in practice, the influence of context (community, cultural, organisational and professional) and the nature of relationships between workers and their clients. Importantly the research sheds light on the cultural construction of Australian social work. The research participants include Anglo-Australian, Celtic-Australian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers as well as those from cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The influence of the cultural context on their practice highlights the 'white' underpinnings of Australian social work.

The purpose of this first chapter is to outline the influences that led to the development of the research question - How do Australian social workers construct their personal and professional boundaries? This will be achieved by first identifying the genesis of the research - what personal and professional experiences facilitated the development of this area of inquiry? Second, an exploration and analysis of the current conceptualisation of social work boundaries and the self in the social work literature will be undertaken in order to establish the need for a broader structural conceptualisation of personal and professional boundaries in social work. The final section of the chapter presents the inductive and socially constructed definitions of the core concepts - boundaries and the personal and the professional - that are incorporated in this research. The chapter will conclude with an outline of the thesis structure.

1.2 The genesis of the research

This research arose from a number of diverse sources, including my own personal and professional experiences, as well as a recognition that the social work literature does not focus in any depth on the nature or construction of personal and professional boundaries. As a practitioner I felt ill-prepared to manage these aspects of my practice. My social work education presented the relationship between the personal and the professional as linear and one-dimensional, and this meant that I (and the colleagues that I shared these experiences with) often felt isolated and uncertain in our practice. These experiences motivated me to explore how social workers construct their boundaries in practice in order to identify the complex nature of the use of self. The next section highlights the formative personal, practice and teaching experiences that influenced the way that I worked and which motivated me to embark on this research.

The influence of the personal on the professional

“Our obligation is to come clean at the hyphen, meaning that we interrogate in our writings who we are as we co-produce the narratives we presume to collect” (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 25). According to Fine and Weiss it is the responsibility of the researcher to talk about their identity in order to elucidate why certain research directions have been chosen and not others, why only some areas are presented, and who is and who is not presented in the process (p. 25). In qualitative research in particular the researcher is inextricably immersed in the research process and this requires “a high level of reflexivity or self-reflections about one’s phenomena under study” (Darlington & Scott, 2002, p. 18).

My childhood and Polish heritage

There are a number of key personal influences that have played a role in developing this area of research. The first is that of my own cultural identity and childhood. I was born in Australia, a first generation Polish-Australian, the youngest of four children. My parents and maternal grandmother fled Poland during World War 2. My mother and grandmother sought refuge in the Middle East before finally settling in England, while my father spent the rest of the war devoting himself to working for the Polish army and Government in exile. My father at the end of the war attended University in England, graduating with a doctorate in Sociology. Upon graduation he successfully won a position at the Australian National University in Canberra

where he established the Department of Sociology. My parents, grandmother and 2 of my siblings arrived in Australia in 1954.

My childhood in Canberra was strongly influenced by my Polish heritage. From birth I carried dual cultural identities requiring me to straddle both cultures simultaneously. I was raised as a bilingual speaker and often interpreted for my grandmother. My father's academic interests in the area of social policy, in particular multiculturalism, meant that my home environment was also strongly influenced by a recognition that cultural identity needed to be celebrated and preserved rather than assimilated.

The defining moment in the development of my cultural identity was as a teenager embarking on my first of many trips to Poland. I suddenly knew why I had often felt different and why my family seemed so 'foreign', compared with the families of my friends. From that moment I became a strong supporter of the need to understand that people may possess many different identities and that the cultural self has the potential to define behaviour, values and attitudes. But what happens to this aspect of our identity when we begin to work or study? How might it shape our interactions? Is the richness and potential of possessing a broader cultural knowledge creatively captured and appreciated by others?

Becoming a social worker

My first 'real job' as a nurse did not shed a clear light on these questions. I found the vocation somewhat narrow and rigid. I was interested in exploring society more broadly and engaging with people to achieve their rights. In 1982 I embarked on a career in social work and felt immediately that I had found my true vocation. I was passionately interested in social theory and enjoyed the application of this knowledge in the field. Upon graduation I worked in a number of areas including equal employment opportunity policy, Polish welfare services, disability services, adolescent mental health and acquired brain injury. I was attracted to working with ethnic groups in all of these different contexts and found myself engaged with a diverse cross section of communities including the Polish community.

This bilingual role raised particular challenges for me as I was often working with newly arrived migrants who were unfamiliar with the delivery of welfare services in Australia, in particular the non-authoritarian role of the welfare provider. They needed me to not only translate the language but

also the discourse of welfare. In fulfilling this role I felt that I had to work differently, for example sharing more of my personal self in order to gain trust and rapport. This felt awkward and I found myself responding intuitively rather than in a manner that I was trained for. Was this OK? My conversations with other ethnic social workers revealed that many were grappling with similar conundrums.

Motherhood and social work

The other key personal influence that I recognise on my research was the formative experience of becoming a parent and returning to work as a changed person. My identity now incorporated Joanna as a Polish-Australian woman and a mother. My parenting became another lens through which I experienced and practised social work.

This was particularly striking in my work with adolescent parents at an adolescent medical unit situated in a children's hospital. I often found myself comparing my parenting experiences with those of my clients. I was also aware of my capacity to be more judgmental than previously and at times I was more susceptible to 'taking the work home'. I also felt that in many ways I had more empathy towards parents and more capacity to work with them on parenting issues and when my clients asked whether I was a parent they seemed relieved. What was this all about? Was it OK for my professional practice to be so heavily influenced by personal experiences? Was my practice being compromised or enriched? Conversations with other social workers and health professional parents revealed a secret world of uncertainty and angst. I was motivated to explore this experience in more depth.

Conducting research on parenting and practice

In 1997 (3 years after making the transition from practice to academia) I was successful in gaining a small research grant that allowed me to explore the experiences of parents as practitioners (Zubrzycki, 1998, 1999).

My discussions with the research participants were extremely affirming of my own practice experiences. The research participants spoke poignantly of feeling both the creative potential that their parenting brought to their practice, as well as the tension that arose from issues such as the stress of dealing with parenting in their personal and professional worlds, especially when working with people who had children of a similar age. Their personal

and professional boundaries were permeable, allowing for the flow of influence from the personal to the professional when it was desirable and becoming more rigid and protective, during periods of stress for example. This implied a degree of control in the construction of this boundary.

It was also interesting to hear the level of insight that the workers had about their use of self. There was an overwhelming sense of caution from the social workers as to whether their experiences were acceptable to the professional community. This meant that these aspects of practice were not necessarily shared with supervisors or other colleagues. Fundamentally the workers felt unprepared to deal with the influence of the personal on the professional and vice versa.

Teaching about the self

During this period I was also involved in teaching social work theory and practice and co-coordinating field education. I found that the social work texts (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larsen, 1997; O'Connor, Wilson, & Setterland, 1995; Payne, 1997; Shulman, 1992) used in my courses were frustratingly narrow in their presentation of the self in practice. The dominant discourse was the need for workers to be cautious and controlled in their presentation of the self. While the teaching of ethics provided essential guidelines to students about the inappropriate use of self, these messages further reinforced the dualism of the personal and the professional.

Preparing students for practice needed to encompass some consideration of both the varied nature of the self and the construction of personal and professional boundaries. I wanted to teach this aspect of practice in a way that reflected the diverse experiences of practitioners. Being able to conceptualise the influence of lived experience in practice became an important goal in the development of my teaching and further motivated me to conduct my own research on the intersection of the personal and the professional.

The research as a blending of the personal and the professional

The topic of my Doctoral research reflects, therefore, a blending of my personal and professional experiences. I have been fascinated by the experience of carrying dual cultural identities, and as a parent, practitioner and lecturer I am motivated to explore how such formative life experiences

shape professional practice. However, my research question is quite broad. I am keen to hear about how other aspects of the self such as class and gender engage with practice, and the participants have been encouraged to identify these. I have also deliberately chosen to involve social workers from different cultural backgrounds, including Indigenous practitioners, in the study and recognise that this decision stems from my commitment to cultural pluralism. One of the aims of the research is to give voice, not only to their experiences of social work, but to explore how their culture influences Australian social work practice.

1.3 Conceptualising boundaries in social work: An overview of the literature

The first two areas of literature presented in this section are primarily concerned with conceptualising boundaries in social work. Firstly, the boundaries or borders within and between the profession and the boundary issues arising from dual relationships are examined. The second body of literature encompasses an overview of the social work literature that explores ideas about professionalism, the use of self in practice and the interaction of the personal and the professional.

Professional boundaries and borders

The sociologist Abbott (1988, 1995a, 1995b) regards social work as the profession of interstitiality that is a profession of boundaries, "While the phrase 'boundaries of social work' describes the central determining factors around the profession at any given time, the phrase 'social work of boundaries' captures the idea that local sites of difference always exist" (1995a, p. 558).

Abbott's (1995a) argues that a number of different boundaries can be identified as relating to social work, including boundaries between institutions, boundaries between and within the profession and boundaries between social workers. These boundaries are all constructed to achieve different purposes. For example, turf wars, the tensions and conflicts at the boundary between social work and other professions such as psychiatry, are a defining feature of the social work profession. These conflicts facilitate the development of professional identity as the worker fights for recognition of their particular perspective and expertise.

Boundaries also exist within the profession and between social workers. The boundaries in this case define the different types of practice, or agency contexts in which practitioners work. In this sense boundaries reflect locations of difference. Abbott (1995a) also recognises that boundaries can be constructed along gender lines within practice contexts and cites psychiatry as one area where occupational boundaries reflect gendered divisions of labour. That is, the men are primarily the psychiatrists and the women the social workers, each undertaking to a certain extent similar professional activities (p. 557).

Abbott's (1995a) conceptualisation of boundaries is only partially useful. While he recognises that a boundary can be the site where professional identity and difference emerge, his theory reflects a predominantly functionalist perspective that considers the purpose and structure of social entities rather than their meaning. In other words the boundaries that are the focus of his theory of occupation define spaces that are sites of difference, primarily differences in structure rather than meaning. For example, Abbott's boundaries between the different contexts of practice within social work, such as mental health and aged care, are largely descriptive categories of practice and do not explain the way social workers construct their practice in ways that create difference and similarity within practice contexts.

Another problematic aspect of Abbott's (1995a) conceptualisation of professional boundaries is his emphasis on zones of conflict. The intersections of professional activities can also be sites of creativity that lead to the development of professional practices rather than spaces that are merely dominated by turf warfare. While differences between professional groups such as the medical profession and social workers help define professional identities, the construction of identity and practice is not just based on difference and conflict. The ability to work across boundaries and recognise similarities facilitates professional co-operation and the development of practices that are responsive, such as the establishment of therapeutic groups built on multidisciplinary foundations.

A more contemporary perspective on the boundaries of and within social work is the literature that analyses the various borders of the profession (Ife, 2002a). The adoption of the term 'border' exemplifies the semantic differences that characterise this literature (Abbott, 1988; Ife). It is

important to note that while the term 'boundary' may not be discernable, the focus of inquiry is the various intersections within and between the profession, the so-called borderlands in which some of the key professional debates about the purpose and structure of the profession take place. Ife recognises that social work is about reaching and working across borders, "We work at the border between the personal and political, between the person and the environment, or between the individual and the society. We seek to break down these borders and reach across them" (p. 2).

According to Ife (2002a) globalisation is challenging social workers to actively work across geographical borders. The issues that confront clients are increasingly due to a complex interplay of global forces. Importantly, Ife recognises the existence of a range of borders in social work, including the borders of knowledge and professional identity, as well as those between the personal and the professional. Ife regards borders as capable of being both fixed or/and permeable. The social work profession, under the influence of critical and postmodern theories, tries to break down dualisms that exist at either side of any border, for example male/female, personal/professional, theory/practice, in order to challenge hierarchies and minimize power imbalances. The profession is also simultaneously embarking on the task of constructing new borders. This is partly due to the inevitable existence of dualisms and also as a result of the profession's perceived need to engage in border protection in order to preserve professional identity and integrity. Ife states, "We live in a world that is dominated by dualism and dualistic thinking, and whenever we set up a dualism, we set up a border" (p. 4).

The strength of Ife's (2002a) work is his focus on the construction of borders informed by a structural analysis of the type, nature and purpose of borders in social work. This draws attention to the usefulness of conducting research into the activities that take place at these crucial intersections. They are not only sites of professional struggles such as border skirmishes and border controls, but are also areas in which social work creatively engages with the challenges posed by different practice contexts and communities. This is in stark contrast to the body of literature discussed below which reveals that social work boundaries are problematised in the social work literature and conceptualised as predominantly existing in direct practice settings.

Ideas about professionalism and boundaries

According to Abbott and Meerebeau (1998), the concept of 'profession' was generally regarded by sociologists as referring to an occupational group with a defined status (p.1). This traditional approach to defining what it means to be a professional emphasised professional structures and boundaries. The discussion in the previous section of Abbott's (1988, 1995a, 1995b) professional territories highlighted the narrowness of this perspective. Exploring what it means to be a professional also needs to include the study of professional behaviour. This requires a distinction to be made between professionalism (behaviour) and professionalisation (the acquisition of status and monetary rewards). Being a professional is linked to particular behaviours and responses that reinforce role and status.

Expanding the study of professions and professionals, from a focus on roles and status to the analysis of professional strategies and behaviours, creates opportunities to explore how social workers engage the self in practice. The exploration of professional behaviour draws attention to the ways in which professionals respond to practice situations and challenges. The aim of this research is to explore on aspect of professional behaviour , in particular how social workers construct the boundary between the personal and the professional. This is linked to the context of practice (chapter 4) a worker's gendered (chapter5) and cultural identity (chapters 5 & 6) and to the knowledge developed and applied in practice (see chapter 7).

Jones and Joss (1995) identify a number of models of professionalism that variously conceptualise what it means to be a professional in the caring professions: the practical professional, the technical expert, the managerial worker, the reflective practitioner. Each model presents a professional as having a particular theoretical orientation, knowledge base, practice theory, value base, relationship with clients and a process for professional development.

These various models of professionalism implicitly reflect a view about the relationship between the personal and the professional self with contrasting perspectives readily identifiable between the technical expert, the managerial worker and the reflective and practical practitioner. For example, the technical expert is a practitioner who is objective and authoritarian in order to secure control and certainty in a problem-centered

practice. In contrast, the reflective practitioner engages with clients in a collaborative ongoing dialogue which emphasises on the development of knowledge as an ongoing process and not as a product (Jones & Joss, 1995, p. 24-25).

According to these models of professionalism, the participants of this research are reflective practitioners who engage in professional processes that are characterised by continual dialogue and the development of a partnership with their clients. Importantly this requires the engagement of the self as a resource in practice and the construction of permeable boundaries between the personal and the professional (see chapters 4,5,6 &7).

However this form of professional behaviour is challenged by the common claim that in order, "to be professional, the caring professions are expected to be selfless, putting the needs of others before their own" (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1999, p.15). Abbott and Meerabeau (1999) regard this definition of professional behaviour as one that reflects a patriarchal need to control the female dominated caring professions. "The discourse that defines professions has developed in tandem with male specialisms such as medicine and the law and incorporates a range of essentially patriarchal assumptions and definitions" (p.16).

In other words, the professional discourse asserts the importance of ensuring common standards of professional behaviour that are based on historical constraints and expectations. This suggests that expectations about professional conduct reinforce the need to present the professional self as controlled and objective. The practitioner stories presented in the research challenge the veracity of these claims and suggest that professional behaviour reflects a creative engagement with the self.

Becoming a professional is also about engaging in a process of socialisation. This involves being exposed not only to the discourse about what it means to be a professional, but also to formal social work curriculum such as field education. According to Jamrozik (2001) this curriculum "serves not only as a test of professional competence but as a test of personal norms and social conduct" (p.194). Jamrozik goes on to argue that this aspect of the socialisation process has the potential to reinforce particular notions of power that are underpinned by class distinctions and knowledge claims that

serve to reinforce distance and power inequity between the worker and their client (p.193-194). The social control functions of social work are highlighted by professional expectations that workers remain objective and controlled in their actions and reactions.

The practitioner stories presented in this research suggest that practice responses are highly variable and sensitive to the needs of the individuals and communities with whom social workers are engaged. The socialisation process is a continuous one, contextually driven and client centered, thus broadening the traditional perspective of professional socialisation. Expectations about how personal and professional boundaries are constructed are another feature of the professional socialisation process. A critique of the professional literature that reinforces these behaviors is the focus of the next section of the literature review.

Boundary crossings and dual relationships

The 1990's heralded a plethora of social work literature concerned with what were broadly termed boundary issues (Bonosky, 1995; Guitheil & Gabbard 1993; Herlihy & Corey, 1997; Mattison, Jayaratne, & Croxton, 2002; Reamer, 2001; Strom-Gottfried, 1999; Strom-Gottfried & Dunlap, 1998). Dual relationships, boundary incursions or boundary crossings are all regarded as activities that challenge professional ethical standards (Herlihy & Corey; Strom-Gottfried; Strom-Gottfried & Dunlap). According to Kagle and Giebelhausen (1994), "A professional enters a dual relationship whenever he or she assumes a second role with a client, becoming social worker and friend, employer, teacher, business associate, family member or sex partner" (p. 213).

Dual relationships are identified as challenging core social work values and ethical principles that reflect notions of obligation and responsibilities to clients (Mattison et al., 2002). Reamer (2001) draws attention to the destructive potential of boundary incursions in terms of the professional relationship, professional integrity and as experiences that are harmful to clients. Establishing a liaison that extends beyond the client-worker relationship is regarded as leading to a confusion of roles and identities. Attention is particularly given to the dangers posed by the establishment of sexual relationships with clients, with the dynamics and effects of such

relationships compared to those of rape, child abuse and other forms of violence (Kagle & Giebelhausen, 1994).

The workers that are regarded as the most vulnerable to such unethical activities are men, with a growing body of research (Pope, 1988; Strom-Gottfried, 1999; Strom-Gottfried & Dunlap, 1998) identifying male workers who are engaged in therapeutic practice as having the greatest number of inappropriate sexual relationships with their female clients. Female workers are regarded as having an increased awareness of the need to have very clear boundaries in practice and tend to be more conservative in their view of boundaries than men. The reasons why these gendered differences exist is not explored in any depth.

There is, however, some limited exploration by writers about the unanticipated circumstances in which dual relationships may occur (Reamer, 2001). The circumstances that are identified primarily include rural practice settings where practitioners have documented that close geographical proximity makes it difficult to avoid informal contact with clients (Kember, 1995).

Herlihy & Corey (1997) take a broader perspective in relation to the nature and purpose of dual relationships and acknowledge that there is a body of counselling literature that regards the development of dual relationships between the counsellor and their client as central to the therapeutic alliance (Bograd, as cited in Herlihy & Corey, pp. 6-7). In fact the maintenance of interpersonal distance potentially compounds the power differential and promotes the objectification of the therapeutic relationship:

Dual relating invites greater authenticity and congruence from counselors and that, in fact, a counselor's judgment may be improved rather than impaired by dual relationships, which can make it more difficult to use manipulation and deception or hide behind the protection of a professional role. (Tomm, as cited in Herlihy & Corey, p. 7)

The prevailing message is that duality itself is not the core problem. The essential issue is the existence of a power imbalance between the worker and client which means that all social workers have the potential to exploit clients and misuse their professional power. The practice response that is

needed is the development of ethical risk management in order to minimize any potential for harm to both parties.

Reamer (2001) suggests that workers need to adhere to a sound risk-management protocol, which "should increase the chances that a practitioner would prevail should a disgruntled client or third party allege malpractice" (p. 17). The protocol that he presents involves the worker being vigilant about potential or actual conflicts of interest in their relationships with their clients or colleagues. In particular, Reamer encourages workers to be aware of any feelings of attraction that they may have towards their clients, to seek regular supervision and to consult relevant professional literature including ethical guidelines (p. 18). It is interesting to note here that the bottom line appears to be the avoidance of a legal backlash rather than the protection of the more vulnerable person in the relationship.

While it is crucial to ensure that clients are protected from exploitation by the misuse of power, it is however a matter of concern that this body of literature reinforces dichotomous thinking and lacks a structural analysis of the whole area of client - worker relationships. Given the diversity of the communities within which practitioners engage, it is problematic that such limited attention has been given to the diversity of issues confronting workers. Issues such as complex demands arising from cultural pressures within different practice contexts, mean that workers may need to engage with their clients or their communities as longer-term role models. These issues will be explored further in Chapter 4 of the thesis.

A limited gender analysis identifies male workers as having the most potential to enter into inappropriate dual relationships with their clients, with little consideration as to why this may be the case, and more importantly, what consequences these issues have for men joining the profession (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of these issues).

While the boundary crossing literature recognises the abuse of power as a crucial area of concern in dual relationships, a more sophisticated analysis of the power differential between the worker and their client may reveal that differences in power and class could provoke an array of responses from the worker. These responses have the potential to both reinforce

professional identity as well as require the personal self to emerge more prominently (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of these issues).

The narrow focus on direct counselling practice also fails to consider the nature of the relationships that workers engage in when working at other levels of practice such as community work. While there is some acknowledgement of the nature of the rural context as being an unintended circumstance in which dual relationships may occur, the creative potential that arises within different contexts is minimalised (see Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of these issues).

The next area of literature that needs to be explored in relation to this research is the writing in social work about the self, in particular the use of self in practice.

The self, the use of self and self-reflexivity

There is a significant body of social work literature that recognises the need for social workers to develop self-awareness in their social work practice. These writings are informed by a range of theories including socio-ecological and systems perspectives (Compton & Galaway, 1994; Hepworth et al., 1997; O'Connor et.al., 1995; O'Connor, Wilson, & Setterland, 2003), feminist theories (Foley, 1994; Nice, 1988; Sims, 1994), postmodern theories (Fawcett et al., 2000) and critical theory (Fook, 2002; Ife, 1999; Mullaly, 1997; Pease & Fook, 1999). The process of identifying clear theoretical distinctions between these different writers is only partially useful, as many draw from a range of theories to inform their discourse on the self, one of the most common being the blending of critical and postmodern theory (Fook).

While these writings variously draw attention to how and why the self needs to be integrated into practice, the construction of the boundary between the personal and professional self receives scant recognition. The reasons for this are unclear and can only be elucidated by embarking on an analysis of the literature. The purpose of this next section is to identify some of the key issues about the use of self that are presented in the literature.

The aim is to further establish the need to develop a broad structurally based conceptualisation of the personal and professional boundary in social work.

The self in social work literature

The social work literature on the use of self encompasses three interrelated areas of concern: the need for social work students to develop self-awareness as part of their training; the importance of ensuring that the use of self in direct social work practice is ethical and purposeful; and the presentation of the self as fundamental to the facilitation of dialogical practice. While, as previously observed, different theoretical positions are located within this body of literature, underpinning each is an emphasis on the need for social workers to demonstrate competence and skills in self-awareness and self-reflection. The differences that emerge in the literature focus on the way that the self is conceptualised and the role that the self plays in practice. For example, does the personal self contribute to the development of knowledge in social work or is it merely a reflection of a worker's personal values and as such needs to be purposefully captured?

The first area of concern regarding the use of self is the emphasis on the need for beginning social work students to consider the range of factors that motivate them to study social work (O'Connor et al., 1995, 2003). A range of personal experiences (e.g. experiences of drug dependency) and factors such as gender and class are regarded as potentially formative influences in the process of choosing a career in social work. Students are encouraged to engage in the process of exploring their own biography in order to identify how their life histories influence their understandings and perceptions of the world.

Rees (1991) extends the notion of biography to the development of empowering practise. He argues that social work students, practitioners and clients should be encouraged to tell their own stories of power and powerlessness and to link these experiences with those of others. Thus the promise of biography becomes an active process of joining ideas and actions with personal experience.

The second focus in the social work literature is on the need for social workers to use the self purposefully and ethically, "In practicing social work or welfare work our aim is not to eliminate our pre-existing ideas and feelings but rather to subject them to critical scrutiny, so that our use of self is conscious and disciplined" (O'Connor et al., 1995, p. 50). This perspective is primarily located in American and Australian social work texts concerned

with direct practice with clients, incorporating groupwork and casework (Compton & Galaway, 1994; Hepworth et al., 1997; O'Connor et al., 1995, 2003; Shulman, 1992).

In order to achieve ethical practice, students and practitioners are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the Code of Ethics of their professional associations, which establish guidelines regarding the ethical use of self in practice. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Code of Ethics, for example, identifies the need for social workers to recognise that conflicts of interest can arise when workers engage in dual or multiple relationships with their clients, supervisors, colleagues etc (AASW, 1999). The underlying message to practitioners is that the self needs to be positioned very carefully. The self can influence aspects of what we do and how we react, but the influence needs to primarily flow in one direction from the professional to the personal. The discourse is one of caution rather than any real consideration of the creative possibilities that may arise when aspects of the self, such as the cultural constructions of meaning, become part of daily practice (see Chapters 4, 5 & 6 for a more detailed discussion of ethical literature and professional boundaries).

There are however some notable exceptions to this perspective. The American social work academic Shulman (1992) for example, regards the split between the personal and professional self as artificial and based on a false dichotomy. He argues that the anxiety in the social work profession concerning the potential destructive use of self is influenced by the medical model which emphasizes that professional practice can only be maintained if practitioners such as doctors and social workers suppress personal responses and feelings.

This artificial split between the personal and the professional is also created and sustained by anxiety within the profession about the potentially unethical behaviour that can ensue from an inappropriate use of the self. The concern about countertransference is a useful example. Shulman (1992) identifies countertransference as a process in which workers might project onto their clients an unresolved personal or family issue, such as when a worker relates to an elderly woman client as if she were their grandmother. Concerns about workers sharing their personal problems with clients, or becoming inappropriately angry or judgmental, are also cited as reasons

that underpin a professional need to maintain separation between the personal and the professional self (p. 25-26).

While some of these fears are well founded, Shulman (1992) asserts that "the adopted solution to separate personal from professional led to more problems than it resolved" (p. 26). Citing a number of practice examples, Shulman argues that social workers engaged in direct practice are often at their most creative when they are able to integrate their personal self into their professional roles, "Thus, when workers or students ask me, 'Should I be professional or should I be myself?' I reply that the dualism implied in the question does not exist. They must be themselves if they are going to be professional" (p. 27).

Feminist theory and the self

A broader perspective on the self is also located in the social work literature informed by feminist theories. Historically feminist social workers influenced by socialist and Marxist feminist theories not only emphasised the link between the personal and the political but importantly recognised social work as a female dominated profession in which women bring a range of personal experiences to their practice (Marchant & Wearing, 1986). The origins of the profession arose out of the efforts of women to transfer the societally caretaking and nurturing functions from the personal sphere to the broader social arena (Brown, 1986). These areas of personal experience needed to be recognized for their potentially positive contribution to practice. However, these writers were also acutely aware of the structural disadvantage that women experienced as a result of their allocation to caring duties, rather than to administrative or supervisory functions, leading to a decline in professional status and influence.

This professional dilemma has been further explored by writers such as Freedberg (1993) who recognises that female social workers bring to their professional roles a complex matrix of social and self-defined roles around the issue of care, and that as a profession we have failed to recognise that female social workers are influenced by feminine notions of caring:

Professional caring does not simply reproduce the prototypical mothering role; within the perspective of the feminine ethic of care, the social worker who enacts the caring role consciously identifies and recognises her own self as a separate entity from that of her clients and never achieves complete

identification with her clients in the caring relationship. This process requires conscious, disciplined thinking and clearly defined personal boundaries. (p. 538)

This quotation is a good example of some of the tensions inherent in social work literature on the use of self and role of boundaries in practice. On the one hand feminist writers, such as Freedberg identify and affirm the creative use of self in practice and the influence of the knowledge that may be reflected in the self, such as perspectives on caring. Yet the need to maintain a professional identity and relationship separate from the self is also considered crucial. While the role of the boundary ensures that a separation is maintained and identified, this dual focus on the role of the self also creates tensions for social workers as they negotiate their various identities in practice.

Foley (1994) asserts in her paper that personal and professional boundaries can be maintained if the professional is encouraged and supported by their supervisors to openly discuss the use of self. She cites the example of the personal experiences of social workers who are abuse survivors as being potentially constructive in their practice in professional child abuse services. In her experience, these workers are often extremely motivated, sensitive and committed and bring a level of intuition to their work that facilitates creative practice.

Sims (1994) also describes the use of self as a creative force in her work at a children's hospital. Through the presentation of a case study, Sims explores the influence of existentialism, feminism and personal experiences, "This synthesis of my professional self and my woman self has enabled me to become more creative as a social worker, take risks and try out new techniques in my direct work" (p. 28). Sims does not raise any dilemmas about the maintenance of personal and professional boundaries and appears confident that her personal self supports and enhances her professional role.

A more complex analysis of the self in social work is located in postmodern feminist literature, which critiques the modernist positioning of the self as pre-given and presents the self as historically and socially situated (Fawcett et al., 2000; Rossiter, 2000; Sands, 1996). The self and identity is understood as an internal sense of personality integration and continuity that encompasses one's life history, accrued identifications, values, and

relationships with others (Sands). The self is “socially constructed and can be multiple, contradictory and in process” (Sands, p. 177). For example, an individual’s identity such as that of a single mother can be located within an array of complex and contradictory categories and identities that can shift across time and space e.g. mother, single, white, disabled, middle class.

There is no essential category woman, rather women are located at any one time at the intersection of multiple discourses that influence the social construction of their identity. Postmodern feminist theory embraces the need to come to terms with the plurality of women’s experiences (Brown, 1998). The process of assuming fixed categories of experience on the basis, for example of a person’s cultural identity, needs to be deconstructed in order to allow other aspects of identity to emerge.

Postmodern feminism also challenges the traditional construction of masculinity and seeks to break down dualisms that capture men as prisoners of their gender. Writers such as Pease and Camilleri (2001) stress the need to focus on the social construction of masculinity so that men’s work in the human services can be better understood. This broader conceptualisation of gender resonates with my research as I seek to explore how men in social work can be influenced by their personal identity in practice (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of these issues).

The postmodern feminist perspective on the self therefore offers a number of important insights in relation to my research. Any critical exploration of the construction of self in social work needs to encompass a framework that allows for diversity of the self to emerge and yet does not privilege any areas of self over others. In relation to the development of an understanding of boundary, the analytical insights offered by Featherstone and Fawcett (1995) also encourage me to view the constructions of boundary as potentially fluid, relative and diverse.

One of the applications of postmodern theory in social work is the development of narrative practice (Freedman & Coombs, 1996). The practitioner’s personal self in narrative work takes an active role in the therapeutic process, “Therapeutic interaction is a two way phenomenon. We get together with people for a period of time over a range of issues, and all of our lives are changed by this” (Freedman & Coombs, p. 275). Workers

engaged in narrative therapy are encouraged to situate themselves by identifying those aspects of their own experience, imaginations and intentions that could inform their practice. This process breaks down the expert/client dualism and the worker enters into a working relationship with the client as a whole person who has also been shaped and affected by a range of experiences. This requires workers at times to engage in self-disclosure, not to dominate the interaction, but rather to facilitate a level of transparency in the process. The narrative practice framework also pays attention to the potential of therapeutic relationships reinforcing cultural dominance and oppression.

While the narrative practice discourse places some emphasis on the worker's personal self as playing an active therapeutic role, there is little examination given to the different factors that can influence the degree to which a worker engages the self and how workers construct the boundary between the personal and the professional.

Postmodern theory, critical theory and the self

Another social work perspective of the self and the use of self is presented by social work writers informed by post modern and critical theory (Fook, 2002; Ife, 1999; Mullaly, 1997; Pease & Fook, 1999). Critical theory complements and reinforces key aspects of postmodern feminism. These are the valuing of subjective experience, the affirmation of difference and the continual reconstruction of reality within a structural analysis (Mullaly, p. 220). The blending of both theories is aimed at ensuring that the emancipatory goal of social work is not totally deconstructed by postmodernism, "we need both types of theorizing in order begin to understand our complex world and the plethora of experiences within it" (Fook, p. 16).

This body of social work literature strengthens the conceptualisation of a number of key areas linked to the exploration of personal and professional boundaries, namely the construction of knowledge and meaning.

A postmodern and critical social work practice is primarily concerned with practising in ways that further a society free of domination, exploitation and oppression. The proponents of postmodern critical theory in social work (Fook, 2002; Ife, 1999; Pease & Fook, 1999) focus on the dialectic, emphasising that praxis occurs across both the personal and political. A

range of critical theorists influenced their conceptual framework, including Freire (1972, 1994), Giddens (1991) and Rosaldo (1989).

The common threads that are woven by these diverse writers are the conceptualisation of the self as a social construction that is informed by factors such as class, culture and context and the importance of critical reflexivity as the process that facilitates the political use of self in social work practice. Giddens (1991) in particular asserts that the construction of the self is a reflexive project, "We are not what we are but what we make of ourselves" (p. 75). The social comprises the private and public sphere and both are influenced by the development of modernity, which identifies these two domains as comprising the public as the site of State activity and surveillance and the private as resisting the encroachment of the state. "The private/public opposition in a second sense concerns what is kept concealed from, and what is more openly revealed to others" (Giddens, p. 151). While Giddens does not actually define or discuss the boundary between the personal (the private) and the public, his definitions of the self infer the presence of a boundary that is transgressed by the self as it moves from the public to the private. This implies that the boundary, as a tool of separation, is a product of modernity.

Giddens (1991) also suggests that self-identity varies socially and culturally and that "in order to know who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become and of where we are going" (p. 54). This self-reflexive process is internally referential, that is our self is a reflection of our life experiences, our belief systems and the construction and reconstruction of our life history (Giddens, p.80). Writers such as Fook (1999) argue that in order to capture these aspects of the self social workers need to engage in the process of critical self-reflection and reflexivity:

Reflexivity involves the ability to locate oneself in a situation through the recognition of how actions and interpretations, social and cultural background and personal history, emotional aspects of experience, and personally held assumptions and values influence a situation. (p. 199)

The active recognition of the self in practice must also facilitate the development of a sense of agency, a linking of the worker's personal experiences and background with perceived wisdoms which then, "act as a springboard to broaden our thinking" (Fook, p. 199). The concept of agency

is informed by Freire's (1972, 1994) notion of dialogical practice that centers on the encouragement of self and self-reflection in order to enter into dialogical and transformative practice. Dialogical practice also recognises that knowledge and action cannot be separated and the knowledge and wisdom of the workers is not privileged over the knowledge and wisdom of the client, "The relationship between the two is one of mutual education. Each learns from the other's experience, and as a result they can together engage in some form of action which may have been impossible in isolation" (Ife, 1999, p. 221).

Importantly the principle of dialogical practice encourages the practitioner to be reflective about what aspects of the self are informing their practice and questions whether social workers should maintain separateness between their professional and personal worlds. The underlying assumption is that individuals have the capacity to reflect on their action, understand and offer explanations about what they do, and influence change. In essence my research explores the tensions and relationships between these two spheres.

The social work literature informed by postmodern critical theory offers some strong theoretical insights into my area of inquiry, yet there is still a paucity of literature that focuses on what happens at the intersection of the personal and the professional self. While the process of critical reflectivity facilitates the development of understanding about the application, generation and creation of knowledge in order to challenge dualisms and hierarchies of power (Fook, 2002), I would argue that the missing element in this process is an exploration of how workers construct the boundary at the intersection of their identities.

This exploration has the potential to provide insights into the production of knowledge and meaning that contribute the development of social work practice. Pease and Fook (1999) allude to the need to further explore the construction of social work practice, "Post modern critical theory is clear on process and values, but uncertain about specific expressions and strategies" (p. 206). The aim of my research is to fill this void by exploring what lived experiences influence practice and how the self informs the construction of personal and professional boundaries. Further discussion of the influences of critical postmodern theory in this research is located in Chapter 2, where

clear links are established between critical postmodern theory and the ontological foundations of the research.

The next section of this chapter presents the inductive definitions of the key concepts that are at the center of the research.

1.4 Defining the socially constructed nature of the key concepts

The definitions that I have adopted in the research are inductive, that is they are informed by the perspectives of the research participants. My emphasis on the process of construction is influenced by the theory of social constructionism, which reflects the epistemological position adopted in this research (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of social constructionism as an epistemology).

The defining aspect of the theory of social constructionism is an assumption that social order is a human invention and not a natural extension of the human world. "Social order is not biologically given ... it is not part of the nature of things and it cannot be derived from the laws of nature. Social order exists only as a product of human activity" (Berger & Luckmann, 1984, p. 70).

Social constructionism has been described in the social work literature as a metatheory, a theory that provides a framework for explaining the construction of past and current knowledge in social work. The emphasis is on the social construction of knowledge and meaning as well as on conceptualising the process of how people come to understand themselves and the purpose of such understandings (Houston, 2001). The self is regarded as having a pivotal role in defining social reality.

Social constructionism is also regarded as a generative theory. This means that it is a theory that is capable of generating significant changes in the way we perceive reality and respond to it (Houston, 2001). Social constructionism focuses on the socio-cultural rules, language and historical precedents that influence construction of dominant understandings and meanings in our society. In relation to my research this generative capacity contributes to the development of an understanding of how the interplay of various factors, including the cultural identity and knowledge of the worker,

influence the construction of the boundary between the personal and the professional self. By exploring and elucidating these factors the aim is to generate new understandings about boundaries.

Key definitions

In the research I am defining the *professional self* as encompassing the professional identity of the worker including their defined roles, responsibilities and knowledge base.

The *personal self* refers to a worker's personal identity that incorporates socio-economic status, cultural background as well as personal roles and responsibilities such as that of carer, parent, spouse and partner. The personal self encompasses the knowledge and meanings that are developed from these experiences.

The boundary is the point of separation or intersection between the professional and the personal self. A rigid boundary involves the compartmentalizing of the two identities while a permeable boundary allows the flow of knowledge and experience between identities. Workers are aware of the existence of a boundary when they can articulate what aspects of the self they are engaging in practice.

In this research *social work practice* refers to a range of activities in which social workers participate. These include working in diverse contexts with individuals, groups and communities in a variety of roles such as counsellor, advocate, group worker and community worker. Social work practice also encompasses research and policy work.

The client with whom the social worker engages, is the individual, family, group and/or community that is receiving some form of social work assistance and intervention. The purpose and characteristic of this assistance is broad and includes the assessment of need, the application of interventions such as counselling, advocacy, groupwork as well as community work thus reflecting the diverse nature of social work practice.

researcher, while *emic-reflexive* reports are often referred to as “confessional tales that focus largely on the researcher’s perspectives.” (Darlington & Scott, pp. 160-161)

In this research I have chosen to adopt an *etic-reflexive reporting/writing style*. This encompasses a combination of the above approaches. It emphasises the presentation of the research stories as told by the participants, the analysis of the data as well as the researcher’s experiences of the research. According to Darlington and Scott (2002) this approach serves two functions, “It reports the substantive content of the research but also takes seriously issues of reactivity and reflexivity” (p. 161).

The adoption of an *etic-reflexive style* means that the presentation of my research reflects a combination of researcher and participant voices. This approach supports the adoption of the first person style of writing, which facilitates the unambiguous presentation of my voice as that of the researcher reflecting openly on the influence of my self in the research process. This is particularly evident in the opening chapters (Chapters 1 & 2), which present the research question, the context of the research and the research process. The participant voices have a strong presence in the subsequent chapters (Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7), which focus on the presentation and interpretation of data. The voice of one of the participants as a co-researcher (Bindi) emerges from a number of chapters, in particular Chapter 2. The concluding chapter (Chapter 8) is primarily dominated by my voice as that of the researcher. One of the participant’s stories brings closure to the thesis.

In terms of addressing the Indigenous and CALD workers’ experiences of marginalisation, I have paid careful attention to present their stories throughout the thesis in order to ensure that their experiences are recognised as part of, and not separate from, Australian social work. The purpose is to try and ensure that their stories can inform our professional culture and how we understand the construction of personal and professional boundaries. Their experiences must be part of the process of developing a new conceptual understanding of boundaries in practice. In identifying what is Australian social work, I also want to stress the importance of recognising the diversity of Australian cultural experiences and identities. While the research identifies experiences which appear to be culturally defined, Anglo Australian and Anglo Celtic social workers are

presented as a diverse group of social workers who have their own cultural construction of practice. Further issues of reflexivity and representation in the research process are addressed in the next chapter of the thesis (Chapter 2).

The thesis structure

The thesis is divided into eight chapters. The first three chapters establish the research process and context with *Chapter 1* identifying the research topic and the personal and professional issues and debates that led to the establishment of the research question. *Chapter 2* presents the research structure, identifying the ontological and epistemological underpinnings.

The chapter also clarifies the structure of the research process. The purpose of *Chapter 3* is to introduce the research participants.

The focus of the next three chapters is data presentation and analysis. *Chapter 4* (context), *5* (gender) and *6* (class and professional identity) reflect the key factors that influence the construction of social work personal and professional boundaries. In each chapter the participant stories are presented and conceptualised alongside a critical analysis of the social work literature.

The final two chapters are devoted to the presentation of new ideas about the self and personal and professional boundaries in social work. *Chapter 7* is a transitional chapter, divided into two parts. The emphasis in the first section is on the presentation of research data (participant stories) about the role of the self in the construction of knowledge in social work. The second part explores in greater depth how social work knowledge is conceptualised and why the intersection of the personal and the professional is a site of contested meanings and practices. An important feature of this chapter is the consolidation of links to key themes arising from the preceding chapters (Chapters 4, 5 & 6).

The final chapter (*Chapter 8*) is primarily devoted to the presentation of a new knowledge about the self and boundaries in social work. The development of a link between the self and an ethics of care is explored, with consideration given to the implications of the research for social work education, supervision, management and practice.

1.6 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to present the key influences that motivated me to undertake this area of social inquiry. This chapter has mapped both the process that captured and shaped the research question as well as the structure of the thesis. I have highlighted the interplay of personal and professional influences, and identified the lack of discussion and analysis of the personal and professional boundary in social work discourse. The research that I have undertaken aims to redress this gap.

While the current practice literature informed by an array of theories and understandings of the self promotes the idea of reflective practice and self-awareness as important professional skills, the implications that this has for how the personal self influences the professional and vice versa, and how the boundary between these areas of self is constructed, remains unexplored. I would argue that there are a number of reasons why this area has received scant attention in the social work discourse. These include the existence of a professional ethical discourse that establishes clear requirements of how workers locate their 'self', alongside an increasingly influential social work literature that challenges workers to engage the self in practice in order to facilitate the emancipatory potential of social work. While each discourse is informed by different theoretical understandings of the self, it is possible to discern a unifying message that the application of the self is a unilateral process. This does not invite an exploration of a multilateral relationship (between the personal and the professional and the professional and the personal) and the intersection of identities is not regarded as a site of practice.

My argument is that the professional community needs to recognise and value the multi-faceted nature of the self so that the experiences of workers can shape and broaden the professional discourse. Developing new knowledge about personal and professional boundaries has the potential to give voice to the complexity of issues arising at the intersection of self. These include the challenges confronting practitioners from different cultural backgrounds, their responses to the demands of their clients and communities, as well as the underlying gender and power issues that confront social workers as they strive to make meaning in complex practice contexts.

The following chapter identifies the methodological structure of the research and explores how this changed as the research responded to the needs of the participants and the cultural context in which Australian social work practice is located.

2 Engaging in a dialogue: The research structure and process

2.1 Introduction

Through reflexive inquiry on our ways of constructing the world, and the practices which we sustain, we open doors to emancipation, enrichment and cultural transformation. (Gergen, 2001, p. 113)

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research methodology and methods used to explore the construction of personal and professional boundaries in Australian social work. The inquiry, is situated within a qualitative and reflexive methodology that identifies research as a dialogue in which all of the participants in the process, including the researcher, are engaged in reflection and learning (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001; Powell, 2002). Underpinning this dialogical perspective is a critical approach that stresses participatory and emancipatory processes and seeks to take account of a diversity of perspectives that have been traditionally silenced in social work discourse. The epistemological and ontological assumptions of social constructionism, critical theory and postmodern feminism inform the decisions made in relation to the methodology, the role of the researcher and participants, the choice of method, the analysis and interpretation of the data as well as the perceived outcomes of the research.

The inquiry is situated within a collaborative research paradigm that has been constructed to achieve the process of dialogical knowledge creation. This is linked with the notion that research is a practice in which the self-

reflexivity of the researcher plays a crucial role in the ongoing process of interpretation and knowledge creation. "Knowledge is not conceived abstractly but is viewed as a dynamic process in which theory develops from practice" (Munn-Giddens, as cited in Powell, 2002, p. 29). In this inquiry, the knowledge that has been developed about the construction of personal and professional boundaries arises from the personal and practice experiences of the participants, myself as the researcher (as identified in Chapter 1) and the meanings that are constructed from these experiences. This means that the focus of this inquiry has been engaged in a reflexive manner, so that the different elements involved with the construction of the personal and professional boundary are identified and explored.

The emancipatory aims of the research are facilitated through the adoption of dialogical processes as exemplified by one of the participants taking on the role of co-researcher and cultural broker in the development of knowledge with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants. In this way the cultural location of the research plays a significant role in shaping the inquiry as one that is underpinned by critical dialogue and participation.

This chapter has two interconnected purposes. The first is to elucidate each of the different elements that I have brought together in the development of the research process and structure. The second is to argue that this 'blended approach' has been necessary in order to achieve the aims of the research as established in the first chapter of the thesis. My discussion also includes consideration of the ethical issues as well as the insider/outsider factors that are omnipresent when an inquiry is conducted by a social work researcher and practitioner with, and in, the social work community.

Before embarking on this methodological journey, it is important to present the definitions that have been adopted for the different research elements. These definitions have been informed by Crotty's (1998) model of social research:

Methods: the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis.

Methodology: the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes.

Theoretical perspective: the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria.
Epistemology: the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology. (p. 3)

The delineation of these elements allows not only for the theoretical assumptions that underpin the study to be identified, but importantly ensures a degree of theoretical and methodological consistency or fit. This is particularly significant in the research where I have developed what Crotty refers to as a 'unique' methodology. That is, I have brought together a number of elements that are considered crucial in achieving the research objectives. Crotty regards the development of a unique methodology as the responsibility of the researcher as "every piece of research is unique" (pp. 13-14).

2.2 Unearthing the epistemological and ontological foundations

According to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2001) it is the epistemology and ontology rather than the methods, which are the determinants of good research (p. 4). Any presentation and discussion of a research structure and process is therefore predicated on a number of key assumptions:

These are assumptions about human knowledge and assumptions about realities encountered in the human world. Such assumptions shape for us the meaning of research questions, the purposiveness of research methodologies, and the interpretability of research findings. Without unpacking these assumptions and clarifying them, no one (including ourselves!) can really divine what our research has been or what it is now saying. (Crotty, 1998, p. 17)

This research inquiry is informed by the epistemological assumptions of social constructionism and the theoretical perspectives of critical theory and postmodern feminism. In the next section I will identify how the epistemological and ontological assumptions chosen in the research provide a useful lens through which the inquiry is conducted and how they contribute to key decisions regarding methodology and method.

The epistemological position - social constructionism

The epistemological position chosen for this study is social constructionism which is based on the view that "all knowledge, and therefore all

meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially human context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Subjectivity therefore is not fixed and social order is a human invention comprised of the meanings that are ascribed to it by social actors (Atherton, 1993; Billington, Hockey, & Strawbridge, 1998). As identified in Chapter 1, social constructionism is also a generative theory that aims to “challenge the taken-for-granted conventions of understanding, and simultaneously invite us into new worlds of meaning and action” (Gergen, 2001, p. 116).

According to Crotty (1998) the ‘social’ in social constructionism refers to the way that meaning is produced with culture playing a significant role “our culture brings things into view for us and endows them with meaning and, by the same token leads us to ignore other things” (p. 54). The focus on the cultural construction of meaning is particularly useful for this research, as I seek to explore how social workers from Anglo-Australian, Celtic-Australian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and those from (CALD) backgrounds construct their personal and professional boundaries. Their practice stories reveal that their personal and professional identities are strongly influenced by culturally defined relationships (see Chapters 4, 5, 6 & 7 for a more detailed analysis of this issue).

A focus on the relational self is another important feature of social constructionism. This means that a social constructionist dialogue identifies knowledge as developed within interpretive or communal traditions in which relations are celebrated (Gergen, 2001, p. 122). This resonates strongly both with the view that “social work is a sense making activity” (White, as cited in Houston, 2001, p. 848) and in turn with a number of the participant stories presented in the research. Many of these social workers recognise that their practice evolves as a response to the perceived needs of the people that they work with. In other words their meanings about the purpose of social work and their application of personal knowledge in practice are constructed within their practice and are not external to it (see Chapters 4, 5, 6 & 7 for a more detailed discussion of these issues).

Developing a research methodology and choosing appropriate methods and modes of data analyses are also contingent upon the theoretical underpinnings of a research inquiry. The next section presents the defining

features of the theories that have been chosen to fulfil this fundamental task.

The theoretical perspectives

Critical theory and postmodern feminism have been chosen for the critical contribution that they make to social research and to the analysis of society. In Chapter 1 of the thesis, I identified some of the social work literature on the self that is informed by critical theory and postmodern feminism and argued that these writings facilitate the profession's understanding of the dialogical and gendered nature of social work and the dynamic role played by the self in practice.

The next section discusses these theories in greater depth in order to identify the link between the theories and the construction of the research methodology, the development of participatory and emancipatory research processes, the role of the researcher, the selection of research participants and the interpretation of the data.

Critical theory

A key feature of critical theory is a focus on the dialectic view of society that identifies social phenomena as existing within a historical context, heavily influenced by power imbalances and vested interests. One of the aims of conducting research in a critical theory paradigm is the achievement of an increased awareness of the political nature of social phenomena. Research is challenged to go beyond surface meanings to the subconscious noises that expose the way that meaning is developed and existence is constructed (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001; Cox & Hardwick, 2002; Crotty, 1998).

The researcher is required to critically reflect on the often 'taken for granted' social reality in which they and the research are located. According to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2001) this alerts the researcher:

... not to adopt too narrow or one-sided an approach to the problem, but instead to consider the social and historical contexts and to interpret the empirical material as socially constructed phenomena produced in part by dominant ideologies. Research must not reproduce such ideologies uncritically and unreflectingly nor take the legitimacy of prevailing institutions for granted. (p. 130)

These cautions are particularly useful in my research for a number of reasons. First, it is crucial that I consider not only the historical and professional context in which the social work profession is located but also identify the underlying values that construct assumptions about the self and the application of personal and professional knowledge. The historical context in particular has defined the contemporary social work profession as gendered and ethnocentric, reflecting dominant 'white' values about issues such as the provision of welfare and the role of the social worker (Brown, 1986; Camilleri, 1996; Lawrence, 1965; Lynn et al., 1998; Marchant & Wearing, 1986). Any exploration of the profession must critically engage with how this gendered and historical context also influences the construction of boundaries (see Chapters 4, 5 & 6).

Second, in relation to the need to critique prevailing institutions, the professional discourse about the self is strongly reinforced by professional tools such as the AASW (1999) Code of Ethics, which seek to give legitimacy to professional standards and practices. The aim of my research is not to dismiss the need for guidelines to ensure ethical practice, but to argue that the instruments of professional practice such as the Code of Ethics do not adequately reflect the lived experiences of practitioners (see Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8).

There are also a number of political dimensions of this research inquiry, including recognition that the decision to identify one area of research reflects choices made to leave other areas unexplored. The political and social dimensions of this decision involve making deliberate choices to include, as previously discussed, participants who do not represent the majority of Australian social workers. On this basis I have invited social workers from different cultural backgrounds as well as a number of male social workers to participate in the research. "Critical theory stimulates reflection which encourages multiplicity; this in turn gives the marginalized quieter voices a greater chance of being heard, as well as enhancing the research project's political relevance over a broader field" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001, p. 258).

Another aspect of the political and social dimension of the research is that the process of personal and professional boundary construction is a fundamentally political one, encompassing and reflecting issues of class, power and professional identity. This is contrary to the current social work

perspective that regards the intersection of the personal and the professional as the site of predominantly personal decisions about the self (see for example Hepworth et al., 1997 and Chapter 6 for further consideration of these issues).

A further element of critical theory relevant to this research is Habermas' theory of communicative action, as cited in Alvesson and Skoldberg (2001, p. 117-120). Habermas asserts that communication is a reciprocal process requiring dialogue aimed at achieving an understanding of the multiplicity of meanings that are inherent within any communication. Importantly, the contextual nature of these meanings needs to be recognised including the relativity of cultural meanings. Developing an awareness of this level of communication may counteract issues such as ethnocentrism in research (Habermas, as cited in Alvesson and Skoldberg, p. 135). Feminist writers assert that difference in communication should be regarded as a resource, "Expressing, questioning and challenging differently situated knowledge adds to the social knowledge of all participants" (Young, as cited in Powell, 2002, p. 27).

This is a useful lens to adopt in the research, as I seek to identify the influence that a worker's cultured and gendered identity play in the construction of boundaries and how this interacts with other more dominant forms of culture such as the professional and agency culture. (See Chapters 4, 5 & 6 for a more detailed discussion of these issues).

Critical theory and reflexive research

Critical theory also gives prominence to the role of reflexive processes in qualitative research. According to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2001), reflexive research processes variously refer to the complex multi-level processes of knowledge production, the interaction of the context in which this takes place and the involvement of the knowledge producer, "A reflexivity that constantly assesses the relationship between knowledge and the ways of doing knowledge" (p. 5).

This resonates powerfully with the subject of this research inquiry. It is possible to discern that the construction of personal and professional boundaries is strongly linked to the development and application of personal and professional knowledge in practice. In order to capture and understand these contextual and individually dependant processes, I have paid careful

attention to the way that different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements are woven together in the process of knowledge development (see Chapter 7 for a discussion of the confluence of these elements).

Reflexivity is also linked to an interest in the process of construction - both the construction of the objects of social research and the context in which it occurs - and how this context in turn constructs the research and the researcher. "Reflexivity in the research context means paying attention to these aspects without letting any one of them dominate. In other words it is a question of avoiding empiricism, narcissism and different varieties of social and linguistic reductionism" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001, p. 246).

In this research being reflexive also means being able to locate the influence of my self in the research process (Fook, 2002). This challenges me to constantly think about the relationships between my own practice and personal experiences and the interaction of these values and experiences with the theoretical, cultural and political context in which the participants are located. It also means giving voice to the experiences of a diverse group of social workers and paying attention to the dangers of constructing dualisms and privileging some voices over others.

Critically reflexive interpretation

Interpretation is a central element in qualitative research informed by a critically reflective paradigm. This implies that there are:

No self-evident, simple or unambiguous rules or procedures, and that the crucial ingredients are the researcher's judgement, intuition, ability to see and point out something as well as the consideration of a more or less explicit dialogue with the research subject. (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001, p. 248)

The process of interpretation comes at the forefront of research work and as such is influenced by the researcher's theoretical interpretations occurring within an ideological and political context that is not value-free. It means that the research process moves between "the handling of the empirical material, interpretation, critical interpretation and reflection upon language and authority" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, p. 248). The researcher is therefore required to continually reflect on, without

privileging, a number of issues such as the relationship between language and reality and the political context.

There are two levels of interpretation, preliminary or primary interpretations and secondary level interpretations. Preliminary interpretations typically occur at the data constructing level and precede the transcribing of the interview material. At this stage the researcher is making preliminary interpretations of observations and discussions or interviews with people. In this inquiry the primary level of interpretation consisted of decisions made prior to the interviews, such as who is to be interviewed and what was to be discussed, as well as the interpretations of what is interesting and meaningful during the interview. Recognition was also given to the participant's interpretations during the interview. In this respect the actual interview is regarded as an expression "of the interpretive work of the subject, both in relation to relevant aspects of life and in connection with the interview situation" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001, p. 261).

In other words, the participants' responses to the interview reflect their conscious or/and subconscious ideas about the researcher and the subject of the inquiry. It is important to be aware that these responses can be framed in a politically conscious manner. During the interpretive process I was aware that this had occurred during a number of interviews, reflecting the professionally sensitive nature of the discussions. I often had the feeling that some of the participants were keen to ensure that they presented their practice in a 'professional manner'.

Continual interpretation also means engaging in what Giddens, as cited in Alvesson & Skoldberg (2001, pp. 247-249) refers to as the double hermeneutic. This occurred when, as the researcher, I interpreted the participants' interpretations of their practice. In critical research this takes place on a continual basis and is referred to as reflexive interpretation "indicating the open play of reflection across various levels of interpretation" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, p. 248).

At the second level of reflexive interpretation the researcher is required to systematically engage with the data. This process is:

... guided by ideas that are related to academic theories (scientific paradigms) or to other frames of reference (cultural ideas or taken for granted assumptions, implicit personal theories and so on). Ideally the researcher allows the empirical material to inspire, develop and reshape theoretical ideas. (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001, p. 249)

An important aspect of this process is recognition that as researcher I am making interpretations of the data from an incomplete perspective. That is, every researcher works from a limited repertoire that gives priority to some understandings while limiting others (Ezzy, 2002). In other words, prestructured understandings can dominate seeing and this can reduce the capacity for reflection. For this reason I, as a Polish-Australian woman, willingly accepted the assistance of one of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, Bindi, in the secondary interpretation of the interviews with the Indigenous participants. In this sense Bindi's role was to broaden my interpretive potential of the Indigenous workers' stories (see section 2.3 for a more detailed consideration of Bindi's role).

Another important emphasis in the second stage of the interpretative process was the exploration of the motives for participating in the research. This can provide revealing insights about the values and aspirations of participants and whether these were met by the research. These were certainly very useful areas to explore, in particular with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, some of whom (Bindi, Clinton and Julwul in particular) were keen to see the research as facilitating the professional recognition of their practice.

Engaging in this second level of interpretation also requires the researcher to "thoroughly scrutinise the less obvious consequences of a particular social institution - rather than accept it at face value and reproduce it in research as something neutral and given - is an important ingredient in a critical interpretation" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001, p. 269). This is particularly relevant in the study of boundaries, as they have previously been conceptualised in a neutral apolitical way. My interpretations of this research have highlighted the cultural, contextual, structural and gendered nature of their construction.

There are a number of further reasons why engaging in critically reflexive interpretation of the data contributes meaningfully to this research. An

emphasis on the research process as continuous rather than staged resonates with the processes undertaken in this inquiry. The interpretation that I have undertaken has occurred not only on a number of levels but has also taken a circuitous route. This interpretive process involved initial reflection of personal practice experiences, discussions with colleagues, analysis of literature and the interviewing of research participants. Understanding their stories has involved going back to each stage and being informed by these interpretations in my subsequent interviews with participants.

Critically reflexive interpretation focuses on the many levels in which interpretation can and does occur, such as those interpretations made by participants during the interview process, and exposes the influence that these interpretations have in the development of knowledge. This process parallels contemporary social work practice, in particular the reflection-in-action paradigm that is emphasised in current teaching and practice discourse where the focus is on the inductive development of knowledge (Fook, 2002; Pease & Fook, 1999). In this way it is possible to discern in some of the interviews conducted for this inquiry, an emphasis on practice being constructed through continuous interpretation and reflection. Adopting an interpretive approach in the analysis of the data therefore feels congruent with the area of study.

The self-reflection and critical self-analysis of feelings are also integral to the interpretive process, "The capacity to swing between empathy and understanding on the one hand and critical questioning, reflection, conceptualisation and theoretical abstraction on the other, is the hallmark of good research" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001, p. 219). This parallels strongly with my research as I have tried to engage with the workers' reflective processes in order to capture the often-subconscious process of boundary construction. This has required me to interpret my feelings throughout the research and to reflect on my intuitive impressions. In this way the research inquiry again parallels social work practice as not only a perceptual and cognitive project but also an emotional one. I will now turn my attention to postmodern feminism, the second theoretical perspective that informs the ontological underpinnings of the research.

Postmodern feminism

The theory of postmodern feminism makes a number of important contributions to this research inquiry. These contributions include: diverse conceptual insights about gender that facilitate dynamic interpretations of the participant's stories; a focus on analytic narrative analysis that enhances the interpretative processes-encouraged by critical theory; consideration of the interview as a dialogue; and the recognition of the emancipatory potential of social research. A brief presentation of these contributions is the purpose of the following section.

A major theoretical contribution of postmodern feminism is the deconstruction of gender with an emphasis on the diversity of gender relations and their interconnections with context and the social construction of the self and knowledge. Understanding these complex gender relations involves "interrogating how masculinities and femininities are constructed and operate in relation to each other. Men, women, boys and girls are located within a system where expectations around roles and responsibilities are sites of struggle and definition" (Trinder, 2000, p. 50). Thus social research that is informed by postmodern feminist theory engages in the analysis of gender, rather than solely on issues related to women's experiences and emancipation that is a feature of more traditional feminist research (Oakley, 2000; Trinder, 2000).

The shift away from reified and fixed notions of woman and man provide me with opportunities in this research to conceptualise gender broadly and dynamically. This is particularly important as I interpret the stories of the male social workers. Their constructions of personal and professional boundaries are often a response to issues such as the gendered discourses of caring in social work. Identifying these discourses and locating them at the intersections of other discourses, such as those of professionalism, open up exciting areas for interpretation and reflection (see Chapter 5).

An additional level of interpretation about gender that is useful is my exploration of the identities and practice of both the Indigenous and the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse social workers. These men and women identify their gender as partly culturally as well as professionally constructed. This creates tensions when they practise in their own communities with whom they need to negotiate their professional identity,

amidst often conflicting cultural, community and professional expectations (see Chapters 4 & 5 for more detailed examples and analysis).

Another aspect of postmodern feminist theory that needs to be considered in this inquiry is the notion of whether or not women bring to research (and practice) different ways of knowing (Oakley, 2000). While this issue will be explored in greater depth in Chapters 5 & 7 in relation to the application of personal and professional knowledge in practice, it is useful to briefly consider what a feminist orientation means in this research, and how this fits with critical theory in terms of the decisions made about methodology and method.

Postmodern feminist research like critical theory emphasises the interpretive role of the researcher, although emphasis is also placed on the process of analytic narrative analysis. Narratives are identified as being produced interactionally reflecting cultural or/and public meanings. Importantly analysis is based on an exploration of patterns within the data, which are both consistent and inconsistent (Fawcett, 2000; Trinder, 2000). In this research, variations, tensions and paradox are a particular feature of the stories of many of the participants as they speak about the transferability of personal knowledge in their practice. Embarking on an analysis of these aspects of their stories exposes the complex processes involved in boundary construction (see Chapter 7).

Research that is influenced by postmodern feminism also recognises the subjective and dialogical nature of the research interview (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Oakley, 1995; Street, 1998). That is, the interview process comprises an exchange of ideas and stories between the researcher and participant that minimise status differences and power relationships:

Methodologically this new approach provides a greater spectrum of responses and a greater insight into respondents-or participants, to avoid the hierarchical pitfall, because it encourages them to control the sequencing and the language of the interview and allows them the freedom of open-ended responses. (Fontana & Frey, p. 65)

While this perspective has not escaped criticism for overtly minimising the inherent power and class differentials that are inevitable between the researcher and their participants (Oakley, 2000), the recognition that a

dialogue of mutual learning and sharing does occur in a research interview reflects the approach that I undertook in this inquiry. I will discuss this in greater detail in the section titled 'The interview as dialogue' that is situated in the second half of this chapter.

Perspectives emanating from postmodern feminism have also informed my understanding of the interview responses (or stories as I have identified them). That is, I have regarded these stories as not constituting the truth about the construction of personal and professional boundaries, but as accounts that are inherently partial and, "as captured meanings that are context specific and bound up with the varying discursive practices" (Fawcett, 2000, p. 69). These responses have been gathered in a research process that is collaborative and justice-orientated. Research as not a neutral fact finding mission but rather, like social work practice, is about power and empowerment (Trinder, 2000).

The inclusion of postmodern feminism alongside critical theory reflects my commitment to the research leading to the development of new but inherently partial understandings of social work practice. The blending of both theoretical perspectives is regarded by writers such as Cox and Hardwick (2002) as providing a critical theoretical grounding upon which to analyse and critique the social work profession alongside an understanding of the lived experiences of the workers who inhabit it.

The focus in this chapter so far has been to consider in some detail the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the research. It is now time to turn to the other elements that Crotty (1998) identified as comprising the scaffolding of a research inquiry, that is the methodology and methods. The emphasis in the remainder of the chapter will shift to a discussion of the processes that were undertaken in the inquiry. This will include consideration of the participatory features of the research.

2.3 The methodology - A qualitative and participatory inquiry

As previously identified, the research methodology is the strategy, plan of action, or process that lies behind the choice and use of particular methods and their links to desired outcomes (Crotty, 1998). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), "Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed

nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is being studied, and the situational constraints that shape the inquiry” (p. 8). The researcher is regarded as biographically situated and influenced by the community perspectives within which they are located. This incorporates the influences of class, gender and culture. “The gendered, multiculturally-situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways” (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 23).

The subject of this inquiry, as well as the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin it, require the adoption of a qualitative methodology. It is crucial that the stories about how social workers construct their personal and professional boundaries are gathered utilizing a process of naturalistic inquiry to ensure the interpretation and analysis of experiences in a contextually sensitive manner (Mason, 1996; Sarontakos, 1995). For these reasons a number of studies that explore how social workers experience practice have utilized a qualitative methodology (Camilleri, 1996; Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000).

Qualitative research also emphasises that the personal and professional experiences of the researcher (as highlighted in Chapter 1) play a role in the inductive development of knowledge that arises from reflexive interpretation. Being reflexive means acknowledging that “we are always on some corner somewhere and that there are no privileged views on getting at the truth in the generation of research problems, processes and accounts because these things are, like the researcher, socially situated” (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998, p. 7).

Writers such as Silverman (1997) assert that there is no standard approach to qualitative research and point to the wide variations that exists between various identified approaches such as ethnography and action research. Given this diversity of approaches it is however, according to Silverman, possible to identify a fundamental shared understanding or common element of qualitative research, that is a commitment to naturally occurring data (p. 23).

In this inquiry I have adopted a participatory or collaborative approach to qualitative research. This means that I invited the research participants to

collaborate in the interpretive process and in the development of new knowledge about social work personal and professional boundaries. Importantly, the extent of collaboration of the research participants varied, and was predicated on their personal and cultural expectations as well as their levels of interest, motivation and availability. Before elaborating on these aspects of the research process, I will first consider how collaborative or participatory research in social work is discussed in the literature and identify why this aspect of qualitative research was chosen.

Participatory social work research most commonly occurs in qualitative research with service users and is often presented as an alternative to the strongly pragmatic approaches of evidence-based practice (Darlington & Scott, 2002; Fawcett, 2000; Powell, 2002). It is characterised by the development of new 'grass roots' knowledge that is used to challenge more predominant or privileged forms of knowledge held by professionals. The focus is on achieving change and the generation of action at a local level (Powell).

In order to meet these aims the researcher adopts the role of the non-expert and engages the participants in a dialogue, a process of shared learning, "an explicitly emancipatory stance ... in promoting the interests of the less powerful" (Powell, 2002, p. 21). The emphasis is on research as a form of practice with the researcher integrating practice skills such as self-reflexivity and negotiation into the research process in order to promote participation and dialogue. Power relations are acknowledged and examined, "and built in inequalities challenged rather than reinforced" (Powell, p.28). The methods that are favoured in this form of research are generally individual or group interviews with an emphasis on personal story telling.

In this inquiry I have chosen to adopt these principles of participatory research in an attempt to ensure that their experiences of practice are influential in the development of knowledge. While it could be argued that the participants do not necessarily command a weaker position of power or influence in relation to their professional colleagues, I assert that current understandings of personal and professional boundaries reflect a narrow privileged 'white' masculine discourse and that diverse and complex understandings of boundaries are not widely recognised or understood. In this sense the experiences of a group of social workers who are culturally

diverse, incorporate men and women and are located in different practice and geographical contexts, do have the potential to challenge this paradigm and to develop new understandings of personal and professional boundaries. The process of engaging the workers in a collaborative reflexive dialogue acknowledges my position as a researcher and colleague and reflects the importance of responding to different cultural and personal expectations. I will elaborate on this aspect of the research process in the next section.

The development of a collaborative research partnership with an Indigenous social worker

The adoption of a qualitative and participatory methodology facilitated, as already identified, the development of a range of collaborative relationships between myself and the research participants. These encompassed both more traditional forms of researcher-participant relationships that constituted participants taking part in the research interview, reviewing their transcript and then having no further contact, to the development of a more dialogical partnership between myself and one of the participants, Bindi. This relationship featured joint interpretation and analysis of interview transcripts and an ongoing dialogue about the research that encompassed joint writing and presentation of knowledge generated from the inquiry (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2001, 2003; Zubrzycki & Bennett, 2002).

It is generally acknowledged (Bowes, 1996; Gibbs, 2001; Ivanitz, 1999; Nelson & Allison, 2000) that non-Indigenous researchers who conduct research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people run the risk of perpetuating the dominance of 'white' values, increasing the oppression of Indigenous people rather than facilitating their empowerment. In order to overcome the perpetuation of oppression through the objectifying of research participants, non-Indigenous researchers are encouraged to adopt participatory and collaborative research paradigms, which embrace the view that research is a process of mutual knowledge production in which participation is regarded:

... not as a stand-alone, instrumental process but is conceptually and operationally interactive with power and culture. Participation is only effective when power and culture are balanced through a research process that enables equitable power sharing between the research and participants. At one extreme, participatory research amounts to little more than token involvement,

while at the opposite extreme it refers to genuine power sharing. Between these two ends is a range of processes resulting in decisions and actions that reflect the perspectives of local people. (Ivanitz, p. 54)

As previously identified, it is important to acknowledge that in this inquiry a continuum of processes and levels of participation occurred. In relation to the most collaborative partnership, Bindi's involvement began when I conducted the first research interview with her. I have known Bindi for approximately 5 years, since she enrolled in the School of Social Work as our first Indigenous student. Following graduation we had maintained contact, with Bindi (as part of a group of Indigenous workers) often returning to the School to speak to students about their practice. In this research Bindi's role was to give me honest feedback about the interview process, especially given that I was planning to interview a number of Indigenous social workers and I thought Bindi would enjoy this educative role.

Bindi's response to the interview was one of excitement and enthusiasm. She felt ready to talk about her practice and especially issues about maintaining appropriate boundaries. After reading her interview transcript, Bindi said that she wanted to be part of this journey of discovery about the complex nature of boundary construction that is experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers and assist me in whatever ways possible to achieve these aims. Bindi regarded her role in the research as potentially that of a co-researcher and cultural broker, as someone who could help me to understand the stories of Indigenous social workers as well as facilitate the dissemination of knowledge gained from the research amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. For this reason, Bindi decided not to adopt a pseudonym and was prepared to remain readily identifiable throughout the research process (see section on ethical issues in the second half of the chapter for more detailed discussion). Bindi also regarded participation in the research as an opportunity to develop more confidence in research and to further her skills in writing and presentation.

Gibbs (2001) identifies the range of issues that need to be considered by the researcher when embarking on a collaborative inquiry such as loss of control, shared decision making, greater accountability and extra time demands. These factors were part of the discussion in which Bindi and I engaged. We also needed to consider how the other Indigenous participants might respond to Bindi's involvement, the ethical issues arising from joint

reading and analysis of their transcripts, as well as the issue of how Bindi's involvement would impact on the substantive project - the doctoral research. Following further discussions with my supervisors and with Bindi, the decision was made to involve Bindi in the process of gathering the stories of the Indigenous participants. This group of participants were also invited to become cultural brokers and co-researchers and their permission was sought regarding Bindi's involvement in the co-reading and analysis of their transcripts. In this way participation "signalled a message to participants that they are viewed as knowledgeable, as potential partners, as keepers or guardians of treasured cultural and personal information and as worthy advisors" (Gibbs, p. 30). Importantly Bindi and I recognised that the Indigenous workers would become co-owners of the information gained in the research and that as much as possible we needed to encourage them to share this knowledge with their own communities.

None of the other Indigenous participants agreed for various reasons to become co-researchers. The most common reason cited by these participants (Alf, Clinton, Julwul, Jess and Sue) included a lack of time to give to the research due to the ongoing demands arising from work, family and community commitments. They have however in different ways become cultural brokers. Bindi and I made a conscious decision to maintain contact with the participants. We have introduced them to each other (generally by email and in person), informed them of the research findings and sent them drafts of subsequent articles and conference papers that have been jointly written and presented, seeking their feedback and comments. Their dissemination of this information within their own communities is an important aspect of the role of cultural broker.

One of the most significant developments that has arisen, partly from this exchange of ideas amongst other Indigenous social workers and their communities, has been the foundation of the first National Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Workers. While it is not appropriate to regard this solely as a direct outcome from the research, Bindi and I both feel that it is important to acknowledge that the co-founders of the Association are both research participants.

In summary, Bindi's involvement included: jointly reading and sometimes transcribing the interviews from the Indigenous workers, discussing with me at length the meaning of their stories, meeting and contacting the

participants, discussing the research with her own community and jointly writing and presenting the research findings (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2001, 2003; Zubrzycki & Bennett, 2002).

Collaboration with the other research participants

The level of participation with the remaining group of participants was, as previously stated, determined by their interest, availability and motivation. In describing the research I spoke to each participant about the different levels of involvement that had occurred in the research and invited them to also participate in the collaborative development of knowledge about boundaries. They were encouraged to read, change and/or correct their transcript upon completion of the interview and to stay in touch (usually by email) regarding the progress of the research.

The interview process reflected a non-expert, conversational style, in which I discussed with them their practice in a collegial manner (see 'interview as dialogue' section below). I was also open to any offers of collaboration, including the joint writing and presentation of the research findings. While their most common response was to read the interview transcripts, a couple of the research participants have stayed in close contact and I have engaged them in further discussions about the research, including my interpretations of the workers' stories and of the literature. Their reflections upon these interpretations have been incorporated in the thesis.

In presenting this commentary on the research process I am mindful of the issue of not privileging some of the participants' stories over others. This is a basic tenet of research that is informed by a critical and postmodern feminist ontology. While I do not feel that I have necessarily privileged the stories of the Indigenous participants I have responded to their interest in being engaged in a more collaborative research process. It is important to briefly reflect on the meaning of these processes.

I regard this aspect of my research as a response to the cultural context in which it is located. The Australian social work profession has a chequered history with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Any research that engages Indigenous social workers in a reflective process about their practice needs to be sensitive to this historical context (see Chapters 4 & 6 for a more detailed discussion of these issues). I believe that the creation of opportunities for the joint examination of the meanings of Indigenous

social work practice is an important step towards the development of a broader conceptualisation of what it means to be an Australian social worker.

I will now turn to the presentation of the method used in this research- the interview.

2.4 The research method

"Methods are not passive strategies. They differentially produce, reveal, and enable the display of different kinds of identities" (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 29). Researchers that are informed by critical and postmodern feminist theories frequently adopt the individual interview as their main research method (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001; Fawcett, 2000; Oakley, 1995, 2000; Powell, 2002; Trinder, 2000). Choice regarding method of data collection must also take into consideration the nature of the data sought, the purpose of the research, answer the research questions and respond to the practical constraints posed by the context (Darlington & Scott, 2002). In this section I will briefly outline my data sources, sampling method, my interview technique and the process of data interpretation and analysis.

Data sources

The data for this research arose from a number of sources, including audiotaped individual interviews with 15 social workers, interview transcripts, my observations and reflections of the interview process and notes of the participant's non-verbal responses. I also listened, on a number of occasions, to the taped transcripts in order to identify nuances in the recordings such as voice tone and emphasis, pauses, silences and hesitations (Darlington & Scott, 2002).

The process of data collection also involved undertaking an analysis of the social work and related literature and making graphic representations of my emerging theory. Notes of supervision sessions and reflections on my practice experiences were also documented in a number of forms, including a reflective journal and work in progress notes. Data collection and interpretation occurred as a continuous and cyclical process allowing emerging themes to influence judgements about further data collection (Sarantakos, 1995). Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to this process as theoretical sampling. In the next section I will deal with the question of

sampling; who did I recruit as participants in this research and how were they identified?

Sampling

Huberman and Miles (1997) assert that qualitative researchers should engage in sampling purposively and conceptually, [the researcher] “needs to sample an intricately nested range of activities, processes, events, locations and times. Such choices are theory driven” (p. 204). In this inquiry decisions made about sampling are linked to the project’s ontological and epistemological foundations. A clear example of the theoretically informed nature of these decisions has been my desire to include in the sample a culturally diverse group of male and female social workers. In previous sections of this chapter I have linked this decision with the emancipatory aims of critical social research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001; Powell, 2002).

A combination of sampling methods was employed - snowball sampling and theoretical sampling. Snowball method is a means of gathering participants as the research progresses and involves asking participants to suggest people that they think would be interested in participating in the research (Yegidis, Weinbach, & Morrison- Rodriguez, 1996). Theoretical sampling refers to the cyclical process of data collection, analysis and further data collection. “After the first few interviews further participants are sought specifically for their capacity to fill the gaps in the data that are thrown up by the analysis” (Darlington & Scott, 2002, p. 52).

The rationale to adopt a snowball method arose from the need to contact social workers who shared similar characteristics. This was particularly useful in the identification of Indigenous participants as, for a number of reasons, it is often difficult to locate these workers. These reasons include their location in generic practice contexts and their reluctance at times to openly identify as Indigenous to their colleagues. Adopting a snowball technique to find these workers was also useful when conducting research in geographically diverse locations with which I was unfamiliar (Western Australia, for example).

The use of theoretical sampling was also pivotal to the research. The cyclical process of interpretation (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001) required me to be open to new possibilities emerging from the data, including the issue of revealing tensions and paradox (Fawcett, 2000). It was important to

explore a range of practitioner perspectives and meanings about the construction of boundaries that varied not only in relation to contextual location (agency, practice and geographical context) but also in terms of practitioner experience in order to, "add variation and depth of understanding" (Darlington & Scott, 2002, p. 52). The final sample size of 15 was reached after identifying that the point of data saturation had been achieved, that is when no new areas of understanding emerged from interpretation and analysis (Alvesson & Skoldberg).

For these reasons the following sample emerged - fifteen social workers in total were interviewed over a two-year period (2000-2002). The group comprises six Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers, four social workers from Culturally and Linguistically diverse backgrounds (the Philippines, El-Salvador, China and Jordan) and five social workers that variously described their backgrounds as Anglo-Australian and Celtic-Australian. Six men and nine women were interviewed. This group of social workers practise in geographically diverse (urban and rural) areas of Western Australia (2), the Northern Territory (1), Queensland (2), New South Wales (1), and the Australian Capital Territory (9). Their main areas of practice include direct and indirect practice in: hospital social work (1), mental health (3), child protection (2), community health (1), migrant support (1), University teaching and research (2), social policy (4), rehabilitation (1) and drug and alcohol services (1) (see participant tables in Chapter 3).

While fifteen social workers participated in the research, a total of seventeen were initially invited to participate. The two social workers who declined to be involved in the study cited various reasons for their inability to participate. These included time constraints and uncertainty about their future careers in social work.

The interview as a dialogue

Individual interviews were chosen for methodological and practical reasons. In my previous research on the use of self with social workers who are parents (Zubrzycki, 1998, 1999) I adopted both individual interviews and focus groups to gather data. Focus groups in the previous study certainly gave workers the opportunity to share with their colleagues different aspects of their practice and this led in some cases to the development of supportive networks for workers. However, for this larger and more detailed

piece of research I was interested in speaking to a diverse group of workers (in terms of age, gender, cultural background, geographical and practice location) and the logistics of getting these workers together in a group precluded the adoption of a focus group method. The individual interview was also more flexible in terms of the broad time frame in which the interviews took place (from 2000-2002). The data collection has taken a circuitous route, allowing time for interpretation of the data and readings to inform subsequent interviews.

My 'conversations' with the participants (15 in total) involved hearing about their daily practice experiences, including decisions about when they integrate what I have broadly termed personal knowledge, skills and experiences, into their practice. This exploration required workers to reflect on their practice in ways that they may not have previously considered:

The often tacit nature of clinical judgement leads the practitioner and others to dismiss their professional knowledge as unresearchable intuition. This type of knowing is not always easy to state explicitly in a generalisable propositional form ... experienced professionals often know more than they can say. (Darlington & Scott, 2002, p. 4)

Thus the discussions could potentially be quite personal and it was important to create a safe space in which participants could reflect on those experiences. I also wanted to establish a dialogue with the participants in order to facilitate the development of a collaborative relationship based on joint sharing of experiences and knowledge. Individual interviews are an important tool in this process as "they hold out the promise of mutual listening" (Oakley, 2000, p. 47).

Oakley (1995) in her seminal work on interviewing mothers describes in some detail the reciprocal nature of the interview process:

It becomes clear that in most cases the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship. (p. 41)

The interview as a dialogue incorporates an understanding of the participant as the expert of their own experience as well as the exploration of the meaning of the questions and answers by both the researcher and the participant. Both parties take an active role in the process of knowledge creation. "Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge, treasures of information awaiting evacuation so to speak, as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 114).

In this research I have grappled with the issue that the interview as a dialogue can mask inherent power differentials. Throughout the research I have been careful not to objectify the research participants by taking away their story in order to analyse it according to my perspective. I have encouraged the participants to become involved in the interpretive process by including in the interviews a discussion of how other participants (maintaining anonymity) have reflected on their practice. In this way the interviews have developed as an ongoing dialogue about social work boundaries each building on the meanings developed throughout the research.

Establishing rapport and trust has been an essential part of the interview process. These factors are recognised by qualitative researchers (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Oakley, 1995, 2000; Wengraf, 2001) as core ingredients in the development of the relationship between the researcher and participant. In my research I facilitated the development of rapport by being open with the participants at the beginning of the interview about my interest in the research topic and then structuring the interview around the discussion of a number of themes (May, 1997).

The first area of discussion involved exploration of their decision and motivation to participate in the research. The first half of the interview also focussed on their experiences of becoming a social worker. Questions such as; "What motivated you to become interested in social work? Tell me about your experiences of studying social work?" established early recognition of my interest in their experiences of becoming a social worker.

The second part of the interview generally involved exploration of their practice. Questions such as; "I would like to find out about your experiences as a social worker. What areas of social work have you been involved in?" I

then moved more specifically into the exploration of the self in practice by asking the participants; "What aspects of your personal identity have influenced your practice? Can you give me some examples of how your self influences your practice? Has the influence of the self changed during your career as a social worker?" Exploration about personal and professional boundaries then ensued; "How were boundary issues presented in your social work education? What have been your experiences of boundary construction?"

In presenting the different questions for discussion during the interviews, I was also open to sharing my experiences and to responding with support and interest to the participants' stories and to any questions that they had of my practice. This was particularly pertinent with the Indigenous participants with whom, as previously identified in this chapter, I did not want the research to reflect a historical othering.

The interviews, which generally lasted up to 2 hours, were audio taped, with written permission sought from each participant. The interviews were then transcribed and sent back to the participants for their perusal and they were informed that they could make any changes, including deletions or additions to the transcript. The next section outlines the processes undertaken to interpret and analyse the interviews. This will build on my discussion of interpretation and analysis presented throughout the chapter.

Interpretation and analysis

In previous sections of this chapter, I identified how the ontological and epistemological foundations of this research have informed my analytical and interpretive methods. While each theory places emphasis on different aspects of the interpretive and analytical process, qualitative data analysis fundamentally involves, "trying to understand the practices and meanings of the research participants from their perspective" (Ezzy, 2002, p. xiii). This section describes in further detail how I undertook the interpretation and analysis of the individual interviews.

According to Denzin (1998) interpretation is a transformative and productive process that sets forth the multiple meanings of an event, experience, or text and throws light on experience. "Meaning, interpretation, and representation are deeply intertwined in one another" (Denzin, p. 322). Interpretation of the interview transcripts comprised both

deductive and inductive analysis and was partly informed by the principles of grounded theory (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001). This involved developing categories from the data (in-vivo codes) for example the term 'life experience' (see Elizabeth's interview in Chapter 7) and in-vitro codes that were established in some cases with my co-researcher Bindi during our analysis of the Indigenous interviews. One category that we developed was 'the shaming process' that was identified as a response that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers had when others judge their practice (see Chapters 4-7 for examples of these experiences).

An important consideration in this process was the need to pay careful attention to the danger, when comparing categories of data, of not detaching them from their contextual meanings. This was a crucial area of analysis and involved locating the participants' stories within their class, gender, agency, geographical, political, professional and cultural contexts. Bourdieu, as cited in May (1997, p. 127) refers to this process as the 'positioning' of the participant so that the socially constructed nature of meanings is acknowledged. In other words narratives are identified as being produced interactionally, reflecting cultural or/and public meanings.

Another aspect of the analysis and interpretation of the interview transcripts was exploration of the properties of core categories. For example, in exploring gender I examined, across all interviews, the number of different ways in which the participants spoke about the influence of gender on their practice, such as identifying how gender relates to professional identity, relationships with clients and supervisors etc. I was looking for difference, similarities, tensions and paradox in the participants' experiences and in their use of language (Darlington & Scott, 2002). In other words analysis was based on an exploration of patterns within the data, which were both consistent and inconsistent (Fawcett, 2000; Trinder, 2000). This coding process proceeded until theoretical saturation was achieved, which occurs when "additional analysis no longer contributes to discovering anything new about a category" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001, p. 25).

Acknowledging the influence of my own experiences and meanings in the analysis and interpretation of the interviews was a fundamental feature of this reflexive process. "One of the main challenges in qualitative data analysis is to ensure that the voice of the other is heard and allowed to enter into dialogue with pre-existing understandings" (Ezzy, 2002 p. xiii).

This required me to engage in continual reflection of the influences that my personal and professional experiences and pre-existing understandings had on my emerging knowledge about social work personal and professional boundaries. These were regularly documented in a reflective journal.

Underpinning the research process was an awareness of the ethical issues that can arise when undertaking social research. A discussion of these issues will be the focus of the following section of the chapter.

2.5 Ethical issues

“Ethics is not just a fun thing to have; research is fundamentally weak without it” (Deetz, as cited in Darlington & Scott, 2002, p. 34). The decision to undertake a collaborative and participatory inquiry challenged me to consider throughout the research process a number of important ethical issues. These included the roles of the research participants, questions about ownership of the data, the exercise of power and the maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity.

The subject at the focus of the inquiry - personal and professional boundaries and my identity as an insider - a member of the social work profession - potentially raised a number of ethical dilemmas. For example, what happens if a participant discloses to me, in the course of an interview, that the manner in which they have transgressed their boundaries resulted in exploitation or harm to a client or colleague? As a social worker and member of the professional association (the AASW) I was aware of my professional obligations in such circumstances, but how does the role of social work researcher fit within these guidelines? I was also aware that engaging Indigenous people (six Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers) in the research meant that I needed to be mindful of the sensitivities surrounding the issue of white people conducting research in black communities. Before embarking on a discussion of each of these areas, I will briefly describe the process that I undertook to gain University ethics approval in order to conduct the research.

The ethical framework in which this research is located reflects the basic requirements of a qualitative research project conducted by a postgraduate student. That is, at the beginning of the project I was required to develop and submit two papers that outlined the proposed research. The first was a

proposal providing details of the research question, the purpose of the research and potential outcomes, a literature review, a description of the potential participants, research methodology, methods (interview and sampling method) and data analysis process. The ethical approval stage required that I document in further detail (within a structured format) the research methods, sampling technique, potential participant numbers and characteristics, examples of interview questions, identification of any potential hazards or risks to participants as well as a copy of the information and consent form. I was required to demonstrate that when designing the research I had taken into consideration the Guidelines on Ethical Matters in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 1991).

Both the research and ethical proposals were vetted and approved without question at different stages of the research (the beginning and middle phases) by two research committees representing the Universities in which I have been enrolled (the University of Western Australia and Curtin University of Technology). The relocation of my primary supervisor (Professor Jim Ife) required me to transfer my enrolment mid way through the research.

A more complex process has been my ongoing reflection, as the research has unfolded, of the challenges of conducting a participatory inquiry within ethical guidelines. Street (1998) identifies some of these quandaries in her reflections on a collaborative inquiry that she undertook with a group of nurses:

There was a temptation to argue self-righteously that participatory critical research designs did not deal in deception or treat its participants (subjects) as objects of the research, rather they were collaborators who were active in the mean making, decision making and implementation process. There was a tendency to minimise the problem of confidentiality as the assumption was that we were exploring issues not personal lives and the collegial research structures enabled us to collaboratively manage the data. (p. 147)

Bearing these cautions in mind, one of the first issues that I confronted was that a number of the research participants (seven) did not want to adopt a pseudonym. Yet the maintenance of anonymity is a core requirement in social research (AASW, 1999; Fontana, 1998; Grinnell, 1993; May, 1997). I

discussed with the participants the consequences of this decision and explored their reasons for wanting to remain identifiable. This preference arose from a desire to talk about their practice and to share openly with others what they regarded as important experiences. They did not feel that there were any negative consequences in making this choice.

My response was to support the participants in their request and in doing so allow them to potentially be recognised by their peers when the study was published. I did however, after consulting with my supervisors, seek the advice of the University research ethics committee (Curtin University). On their advice I developed a further consent form (see Appendix 4), which identifies that these participants are fully aware of their choice to remain identifiable. Providing the participants with an opportunity to read excerpts from their interview transcript within the thesis is an important part of this process. This provides the participants with a final opportunity to adopt a pseudonym if they choose to. The remaining participants took part in the routine practice of adopting a pseudonym, reading the information sheet (see Appendix 1 & 3) signing the standard ethics form (see Appendix 2 & 3) and exercising their right to remain unidentified.

Another issue that arose in the early stages of the research was the shift in Bindi's role to co-researcher and cultural broker. As previously discussed in this chapter, this change of role required me to consult with the other Indigenous participants and to consider the implications of this decision in terms of power sharing, ownership of data, confidentiality and anonymity. Gibbs (2001) identifies some of the common concerns arising out of this type of research:

The control of research linked to the need to retain the right to publish; questions about the research ability or competence of the participants and co-researchers; the potential extra time and money demands; the fear that the quality of the research will suffer. (p. 37)

While I recognised these issues I do not believe that the quality of the research has suffered. On the contrary, the opportunity for Bindi and myself to jointly present and publish the research findings (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2001, 2003; Zubrzycki & Bennett, 2002) while taking time to organise and complete, has been mutually beneficial, and more importantly beneficial to other Indigenous social workers. In the process I have learnt a great deal

more about Indigenous social work practice than I could possibly have hoped to, while Bindi has frequently commented that her research skills and confidence in this area of practice are now much stronger. In relation to the issue of ownership of data, Bindi and I agreed that while the stories gathered from the interviews with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants were jointly owned, I had a right to include this data in the substantive project - my doctoral thesis. In this way we achieved the aim of mutual knowledge production (Ivanitz, 1999).

We believe that the success of this collaboration rests on our strong commitment to the research process being open and honest and based on continuous reflection. Importantly our negotiations with the other Indigenous participants were predicated on their right to make an informed choice about the level of participation that they felt comfortable with as well as their willingness to openly share their stories with Bindi. Ivanitz (1999) agrees that, "Issues of transparency are important in a participatory framework ... Unless there is full and open disclosure, the researcher may be open to criticism that s/he is not truly seeking meaningful participation and is engaging in covert research " (p. 51).

Another area of ethical consideration that arose during my reflections of the research process was a concern that the exploration of personal and professional boundaries could reveal examples of unethical practice. What would my professional responsibilities be in such circumstances? Would I discuss this with the participant with whom I was conducting the interview? Certainly the issue of unethical transgressions of personal and professional boundaries is not uncommon and is well documented in the American practice literature (as discussed in Chapter 1). In order to clarify my responsibilities I consulted the current AASW (1999) Code of Ethics. Section 4.5.2 of the code lists the ethical responsibilities for undertaking research. While the overwhelming focus in this section is on the social worker undertaking research with social work clients and in welfare agencies, Point (m) does state that the researcher has a responsibility to " bring research results that indicate or demonstrate social inequalities or injustices to the attention of relevant bodies" (p. 20).

My interpretation of this point was that in the event of a participant disclosing to me unethical conduct I would discuss this with my supervisors in order to seek their advice as to what further actions should be taken. I

did not encounter this issue during the interviews conducted for this research. This an interesting point in itself, especially given the strong focus in the literature on unprofessional boundary crossings, and I will consider this further in subsequent chapters (4-7).

2.6 Conclusion

The focus of this chapter has been on the elucidation of the research design, developed in order to achieve the purpose of exploring the construction of personal and professional boundaries in Australian social work. The rationale for choosing to locate the inquiry in a participatory and critical research framework has been identified. The outcomes of this unique methodology (Crotty, 1998) is a rich pool of stories that present a complex picture about how social workers construct personal and professional boundaries. The next chapter introduces the research participants.

3 Introducing the research participants

3.1 Introduction

Representing other people's lives is a risky and difficult business, but it is also profoundly rewarding and worthwhile. (Ezzy, 2002, p. 156)

This chapter introduces the fifteen participants of the research. Excerpts from individual transcripts identify how each participant chose to introduce themselves during the interview process. Brief notes and reflections about the participant's autobiographical details follow these narratives.

The order in which the participants are presented, mirrors the sequencing of the research interviews thereby introducing the research process and elucidating a number of key aspects of the research method such as the adoption of theoretical and purposive sampling, the interview as a dialogue as well as the continual interpretation and analysis of data. The chapter concludes with a summary of the participant characteristics presented in two tables.

Bindi

I see myself as mainly Indigenous with other cultural backgrounds actually. And that I think is a personal choice and it is about which voice speaks loudest inside of me. If you ask people who think about their culture how they feel, Australian or Dutch or, they have a voice that speaks the loudest.

Joanna – Is that something that has become clearer for you?

Bindi – Always was from very little and I guess I was always encouraged by my family to do that as well. Every time I have done this I have encountered resistance and I guess I am a natural fighter.

Joanna - Resistance from?

Bindi – Everyone else in the community, Anglo community sometimes.

Joanna - What do you think that is about?

Bindi – My colour, definitely

Joanna – So if you had darker skin that would be OK?

Bindi – It would definitely be easier. I am glad now that I don't. There was a while when I wish I had. I'm Ok.

Bindi is in her early 30's. At the time of this interview she had been practising as a social worker for three years and was working as a designated Indigenous mental health worker for a child and adolescent mental health service in a large regional city. Claiming her own Indigenous identity has not been a straightforward process for Bindi and throughout the interview she seemed to be grappling with the complexities of straddling two different cultures. Bindi's fair complexion has at times been a barrier to the recognition by the non-Indigenous community of her Indiginity.

Following this interview, Bindi took on the role of co-researcher (see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of this role). Bindi regarded the research as a unique opportunity to document Indigenous social work. She is a passionate supporter of Indigenous rights and takes every opportunity to incorporate Indigenous values in her practice.

My next two interviews were held in Perth where my supervisor and one of his colleagues identified a number of potential research participants.

Zhara

I came from the Middle East six years ago. I was working as a social worker in the Middle East. I worked mainly in the mental health area for five to seven years. In between I had maternity leave. I came here to

Australia six years ago. I began working in different multicultural areas then I started to work in mainstream organizations.

At the time of the interview Zhara was a postgraduate student commencing her doctoral studies in the area of mental health service provision for people from diverse cultures. Zhara is in her early 40's and has three children. She follows the Muslim faith and wears the traditional headdress.

Zhara was keen to be interviewed as a way of sharing her experiences of being a Middle Eastern educated social worker in Australia. Following our discussions Zhara commented that this had been her first opportunity to talk about her practice. My impressions of Zhara are that she is determined to be accepted by the Australian professional community as an experienced social worker. While her first social work jobs in Australia were with the Muslim community, Zhara proudly spoke about her most recent practice experiences as a social worker in a mainstream non-Government mental health agency located in a large metropolitan area.

Jess

I am a social worker by profession. I graduated about three years ago. I studied as a mature aged student. I am also of Indigenous descent; I am from the Kimberlys. I am a Bard woman. I think before I studied social work I was working already with a government department, Family and Children's services. I think working there is what kind of made me to decide to go and do social work. I have had a fair bit of experience working in Government departments and prior to that I was working in the Aboriginal communities, so I have got experience going out and working out in the communities as well.

I don't look Aboriginal, so therefore I don't stand out in the crowd so therefore my Indigenous identity is more invisible than other Indigenous people but then it is invisible in a different way.

Joanna –That is interesting because the other Aboriginal person who I interviewed also said that it is often hard for her. She is of mixed race background and sometimes she does not feel accepted in the Aboriginal community.

Jess – That is interesting because that happens to me all the time. My social work training has helped me to reflect and make sense of my experiences.

Jess is a woman in her mid-forties and a single parent of two teenage children. At the time of the interview Jess was working on her Doctorate in the area of Aboriginal identity. She regards herself as an experienced Aboriginal social work practitioner and is involved in teaching social work and facilitating cross-cultural training in the welfare sector. My reflections about Jess include a strong impression that she is a very analytical person with her academic interest in cultural identity stemming from a strong desire to understand the complexities involved in being a member of a minority culture.

The next three interviews were conducted with Aboriginal social workers in order to further explore their practice.

Alf

My name's Alf Davis, I'm from Queensland, from Harvey Bay, that's where I spent most of my life growing up. My father was an Aboriginal South Sea Islander man, and he married my mum who was a white Australian, also Scottish descent as well. Probably the first big thing...in Harvey Bay we're always around our family up there, a really big extended family, my dad's family, about 13 people, and then his brother, my grandfather's brother were from a large family as well, so there's heaps of relatives and a lot of extended family to sort of be around. But Dad was a bad drinker, he was a very heavy alcoholic, so we left and we basically never saw them again for about 12 years until my Dad passed away, that was the last time we sort of went up there.

So I went from being in a community up there in Harvey Bay to living in the outskirts of Brisbane in a big Housing Commission area. It was like a big ghetto, everyone was in Housing Commission houses, single parents with a lot of issues themselves. By the time I went to grade 8 or 9, everyone I knew from that area wasn't going to school. They were sort of dropping out, getting locked up, having kids and getting killed in car crashes and all this sort of stuff.

When I was about 15 or 16 I got into a lot of trouble, stealing stuff and there weren't any sort of male role models, sort of dog eat dog, the only way to get out was through sport. Then I drifted into uni but found it really hard. I always wanted to do social work because of where I'd come from and a lot of social workers I'd seen. I thought I could put a lot back into the community.

Alf is in his late 20's and has been a social worker for three years. During the interview he introduced himself by describing in detail his childhood and adolescent experiences, identifying these as formative years. Alf's journey through his social work degree was defined by ongoing experiences of emotional hardship and loss, as well as the need to meet his obligations to family and community. Alf regards himself as a deeply political person who at the time of the interview was struggling to come to terms with his role as a Commonwealth public servant working in the area of Indigenous health. Following the interview Alf expressed a desire to meet with the other Indigenous participants and to hear about their experiences.

Julwul

I introduce myself as if I am speaking to another Aboriginal person. My name is Julwul, my English name is Christine. I am from the Northern Territory. My father was a Larrakia man, the head of our clan. He was a Dua. My mother is a Waramungu woman from Tenant creek and she is an elder of her people.

I'm a very cultural person so I will base the answers that I will give you on the experiences I have had in white society. I've grown up with both my traditional culture and the law, learning that as a child and also in the urban areas. So I've had a very wide upbringing and background.

Joanna- This identity is very powerful.

Julwul - It is very powerful and it has an effect on the way I work. It affects the way I think and it affects the way I see things around me. I find English sometimes difficult because it is not my first language and even in sometimes expressing it and sometimes writing it I need to stop and think about how to translate things.

My husband is not Aboriginal and my father in particular had a really hard time when I chose to marry someone who was not Aboriginal. But my husband has always been very supportive and willing to learn. He's English and as far removed from England as possible. He sits in the bush and the dirt learning with the elders and listening. He is very teachable, very supportive of everything that I have wanted to do and very supportive of our children being brought up as Aboriginal children and not as English children. They fit much more comfortably into black society than they do into white society and yet they are very fair. So it's always funny. But they think like blackfellas (laughter).

Julwul presents as a woman who has significant status in the Indigenous community. This was quickly recognised by Bindi and the other Indigenous participants. At the time of the interview, Julwul (aged in her early forties) was working as a Commonwealth public servant in the area of Indigenous aged care. She has three adolescent children, one of whom has a significant disability. Julwul regards her participation in the research as pivotal in her campaign for recognition of Indigenous social work. Following the interview Bindi and I introduced Julwul to the other Indigenous participants. Julwul has subsequently become a guest lecturer at a local school of social work and has launched a national Indigenous social work association.

Sue

I'm Sue Green. I'm Wiradjiri. Which means that my people come from far western New South Wales. I'm 36 years old. I finished my social work degree in 1998 from the University of Sydney and I'm currently enrolled in my Phd at the University of New South Wales.

I've always had contact with social workers all through my life. Right from the time of being a young child and having experienced removal through to being an adult and being married with small children and one of my children being sick and dealing with social workers at that level. So it's always been a part of my life. And being unhappy with quite a bit of the contact that I've had with social workers and I actually thought that I wanted to change the way that social workers interact with Indigenous people and parents of sick children. I thought one of the ways of doing that was to go and become a social worker myself.

At the time of the interview Sue was working for an Indigenous student support unit situated in a large regional University. Since graduating with her social work degree Sue has worked in the areas of income support, domestic violence and student counselling. I first met Sue at a forum on Indigenous education where she spoke openly about how being a member of the Stolen Generation and having experienced removal as a young child has galvanized her to work towards change for Indigenous people.

Following Sue's interview I presented a number of key themes from each of the first 6 interviews to my supervisors. They agreed with my impressions that I was hearing some extraordinary stories about social work and that I needed to ensure that a diversity of perspectives were being gathered. At this point (approximately four months since my first interview) I decided to speak to more Anglo-Australian and Celtic-Australian as well as Culturally

and Linguistically diverse social workers. In terms of interviewing more Indigenous social workers, Bindi and I decided at that stage to continue with our data analysis and jointly present our findings at a national conference (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2001).

Emma

My name is Emma and I'm a social worker in the child protection area and I am a mother of a 2 and a half-year-old boy. I'm 35 and I have been a social worker for twelve years. I've learnt to have what seems like two different lives. So that on the days that I'm at home I feel like the archetypal stay-at-home Mum and I really enjoy that and when I am at work I feel like the working woman.

Emma (an Anglo- Australian) expressed interest in my research after reading my article on parenting and practice in *Australian Social Work* (Zubrzycki, 1999). She related strongly to the relationship between the personal and the professional and was keen to explore this further. She cited her own experiences of parenting as being pivotal in her practice as a senior worker in the child protection field. Emma valued the opportunity to talk about her practice and spoke openly about some of the contradictory experiences that she had encountered in the area of maintaining appropriate boundaries in practice. During the interview I found myself openly sharing with Emma some of my parenting and practice experiences, exchanging stories of challenge, joy and uncertainty.

Jenny

I am a migrant. I came here in my twenties. So my cultural background is very important. I have so many years in China.

Joanna – You came from China, when was that?

Jenny – In late 1989. So I had my early adulthood in China. Very influenced by Chinese culture, but at certain times influenced by this Christian religion, but although I am an unbeliever, my grandparents and my mother are Christian. So Chinese culture with Western influence. I came here and really quite enjoy my time in Australia.

Joanna - What were your reasons for coming to Australia?

Jenny – I started the process of coming before the massacre incident. I was unhappy and my parents wanted me to get out of the country and go to University in Australia.

Jenny's Chinese heritage has been an important influence in her social work career. After graduating, Jenny worked with the Chinese aged community in a large metropolitan region before moving to a smaller city and gaining a short-term contract as a hospital social worker. My impression of Jenny (now in her mid 30's) was that she found mainstream social work quite difficult, preferring to put her cultural knowledge and experiences into practice with her own community. At the time of the interview Jenny had one young child and was uncertain about her longer-term job prospects. Jenny had agreed to be interviewed after being approached initially by a work colleague who I had contacted after hearing that a Chinese social worker had begun working at the hospital.

Edith

I am Edith and I'm currently working in the refugee and migrant area as a community settlement worker but in the past I was a social worker in El Salvador, my country of birth. I have worked over there for twenty years. I came to Australia twelve years ago as a refugee and I have been doing a social work course, which I enjoyed a lot, and I can see the value of doing studies in the Australian context. It is helping me to feel more comfortable with the job that I am doing here. I am here with my husband and my two teenage boys.

I came to Australia without my partner and with no English. With my little boys we were sent to Sydney to a refugee hostel. I decided to leave Sydney after I heard that women were raped in the flats so I was scared and had nowhere to go. I came to Canberra because I heard that you could get accommodation there. We stayed in a hostel for homeless people. It was so traumatic because before I left El Salvador I had been working in social security and health. Suddenly I was a homeless person with two children on the streets of Canberra. It was just because of the love for my children that I kept going.

During this interview Edith openly recounted her past experiences of political persecution in El Salvador and her traumatic settlement in Canberra. The transition from being a senior social worker in her own country to being homeless and underemployed and then a mature aged student are all significant influences in her current social work practice. Edith is in her late 40's and was a former student of mine at the School of Social Work. She readily accepted my invitation to become part of the research, identifying her participation as a way of contributing to a better

understanding of what it means to be a social worker from a non-English speaking country.

Following Edith's interview I was aware that my data analysis had so far yielded a strong impression of the cultural and contextual factors that inform practice but I needed to get a better sense of how gender influences the construction of personal and professional boundaries.

John

I'm John and I work at the ACT Alcohol and Drug Program. I've been here for about ten years. My current role is Senior Clinical Case Manager. I'm 53. I've got three kids, two of which are at home. I've got other qualifications. I had nursing qualifications but before I actually did nursing I've got a BA in Behavioural Science. So that was my first degree. And then in fact I did a Graduate Diploma in Counselling after that and then I did my Social Work Degree.

At that time I was finding radical stuff. So I thought, OK, the bigger context, the social context and external factors rather than just being in people's heads all the time is a much better rounded picture and a much better approach to things. So that was why I did social work I guess. Part of that I suppose was my fascination with academia.

My parents both left school when they were thirteen or fourteen. My father was a plumber's mate he never actually qualified as a plumber. Both my parents thought that education was sort of like the big thing. This is how you get the good jobs and achieve. Doing all that academic stuff, is actually like, it sounds a bit stupid I suppose, but it's like learning is freedom. I mean the more you learn the more you understand the more you can make good decisions about stuff and think about things. So it's like being free.

John, as can be identified clearly in this excerpt from his transcript, has a love of learning. His working class roots have influenced not only his educational pathways but also his social work practice. John incorporates a structural analysis in his practice and regards his involvement in my research as an opportunity to be part of a piece of social research that was exploring social work more broadly. His cultural background is Celtic-Australian.

Noonee

First of all I came to Australia when I was 15 years old in 1975 with my family to Melbourne and I did most of my secondary education, the significant part of my secondary education in Melbourne and I completed my Social Work Degree. That was a long time ago. It was 1984 when I graduated, so I've been a practicing social worker for the last sixteen years. Well there are a few breaks in there, a few years because of child rearing, but really maybe my professional career has spanned for about fourteen or fifteen years.

Joanna - Have you ever practiced in the Philippines?

Noonee - No, I didn't. What I did though, I did some journalism work there for about six weeks just when I was having a think about whether I wanted to go back. My father was a political prisoner for a few months in the Philippines. That's why we came to Australia. Not because of a desire to migrate to Australia but it was more because my father could not practice as a journalist for many years in the Philippines because he would not support the Marcos regime and so he was one of the most vocal people about the injustices, corruptions in the Philippines at that time, for many, many years.

Noonee is a woman in her early 40's who plays an active role in the Filipino community. She is also a playwright, poet and yoga teacher. I approached Noonee as a possible research participant because I was aware of her interests in social research. Noonee has a partner and two children and works in the area of rehabilitation. During the interview Noonee was keen to hear about my impressions of her social work practice and we exchanged stories about some of the boundary issues that can arise when working with your own community.

Scott

I have been a social worker since '95, although I feel like I've been one since I was three. When I was three, I remember it very well. I was in kindergarten and there was a guy there with a little helmet made of leather and I'm not sure what he had, cerebral palsy or something, I'm not sure, and he was copping a hard time so I decided to help him out and I decided that's what I wanted to do.

Scott is a community health social worker. He describes his practice as eclectic incorporating an interest in art therapy. Scott rejects any stereotyping of male social workers and he has a particular interest in the

ways that gender influences social work practice. His participation in the research stemmed from my observations of Scott as a supervisor of our social work students. Scott often spoke to them about the complexities of social work and the difficulty of always being clear in maintaining boundaries in practice. Following Scott's interview I decided that it was crucial that I explore gender issues in greater depth.

Mark

Well I'm Mark. I have one daughter who's five. I graduated in 1988. It's pretty hard to remember about how I got into social work. I think it was certainly an interest and I thought I would try and see whether I liked it with some options to transfer into other areas if I didn't, but certainly from the start I really liked it

Joanna - And what did you think a social work career would give you? What were you looking for?

Mark - I think I was looking for something that gave me some variety. I certainly didn't want a career where I would be purely office based and writing. Although I thought that was one of my skills I didn't think I wanted to do that, to sit writing, and I was interested in working with people and I was interested in counselling.

I asked Mark to be involved in the research as I regard him as a very experienced social worker who has worked in a range of areas including juvenile justice, hospital and school social work, mental health (direct practice, community education and policy) and child protection (direct practice and management). During the interview Mark and I had an interesting discussion about the boundary issues that confront male social workers in particular and the dangers of stereotyping gender issues in practice.

Clinton

I'm a 26-year-old male social worker. I think one of a new generation of male social workers that are coming through, that it's sort of socially acceptable to be a caring bloke or to have an understanding of social justice issues that exist in society. I come from a background of, my Mum's of Aboriginal descent, my Dad's white Australian, predominantly a Scottish background.

I grew up in the Western suburbs of Brisbane in a predominantly Housing Commission estate. My parents divorced when I was eight years

of age so I spent the majority of my childhood with my mother, which had I suppose interesting affects on my perception of what life was about. Mum was a single Mum, three kids, I've got a brother and a sister, on the pension and so basically we spent a lot of time in poverty, but at the time we didn't realise we were poor because there were people worse off than us. One of the beauties in my Mum is she's not materialistic so as long as we had food, and although sometimes we didn't, we had some really good values that my Mum's got. She's probably a big reason why I went into social work.

Clinton's interview took place approximately 18 months after I had spoken to the other Indigenous participants. Following his arrival to Canberra, Clinton made contact with me after hearing about the research from one of his friends (Alf). While Clinton's experience of social work had not been as extensive as that of his peers, his insights into the development of his Indigenous identity, of being a social work student and understanding ongoing obligations to his community are all valuable.

Elizabeth

I'm a social worker, currently working in a policy job with our professional association. I've been in that position for almost three years. And prior to that I worked in a range of practice settings. I studied social work at Sydney University from 1976 to 79. Then I went back to Uni and did an Arts Degree majoring in Islamic Studies and History because I just – well I really didn't quite know what I wanted to do I suppose in terms of career. I was really not confident about doing the casework-counselling sort of stuff. I didn't feel I had enough life experience because I went straight from school into university. When I graduated I was only 20.

I really went into social work thinking that that would be the best degree to help me change the world. When I graduated it was very much a contracting field and there was much more in the way of casework type of jobs available rather than the community development, social change sort of stuff. And I certainly didn't feel I had the skills to do that type of work so it took a while, it took another five years before I actually took up a clearly social work position, and that was at a Hospital working in Orthopaedics and Emergency. So from that time on I did a whole range of different sort of casework, management, also some community development work and teaching.

I have known Elizabeth for some time through her policy work and teaching experiences. I chose to interview Elizabeth because I regard her as a very experienced social worker who was also educated at an earlier time than

the other participants, hence potentially being influenced by a different range of social work ideas. Elizabeth's extensive experiences as a social worker, including overseas positions, have given Elizabeth a wealth of knowledge about practice issues and she has a keen interest in ethical debates and professional standards. One of the discussions that took place during the interview was a consideration of how class issues impact on professional practice, in particular in the construction of professional identity and boundaries. During the interview a number of paradoxes about boundaries also emerged as Elizabeth spoke about her professional expectations and her diverse practice experiences. Elizabeth is in her mid 40's and describes herself as being Anglo-Australian. She is a single parent of two teenage children.

My interview with Elizabeth was the last research interview that I chose to conduct for this inquiry. The following tables summarise the participants' characteristics.

3.2 Summary of participant characteristics

Table 1 – Demographic Profile

Participant's name in alphabetical order	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Parenting Status	Country of Birth	Cultural Identity
Alf	Male	Mid 20's	Single	Nil	Australia	Torres Strait Islander
Bindi	Female	Early 30's	Single	Nil	Australia	Aboriginal
Clinton	Male	Mid 20's	Married	Nil	Australia	Aboriginal
Edith	Female	Early 50's	Married	Parent	El Salvador	El Salvadorian
Elizabeth	Female	Mid 40's	Separated	Parent	Australia	Australian
Emma	Female	Early 30's	Married	Parent	Australia	Australian
Jenny	Female	Early 30's	Married	Parent	China	Chinese
Jess	Female	Mid 40's	Separated	Parent	Australia	Aboriginal
John	Male	Late 40's	Married	Parent	Australia	Australian
Julwul	Female	Early 40's	Married	Parent	Australia	Aboriginal
Mark	Male	Late 40's	Married	Parent	Australia	Australia
Noonee	Female	Mid 40's	Married	Parent	Phillipines	Filipino
Scott	Male	Late 30's	Married	Nil	Australia	Australia
Sue	Female	Early 40's	Separated	Parent	Australia	Aboriginal
Zhara	Female	Early 40's	Separated	Parent	Middle Eastern country	Muslim

Table 2 – Professional Experience

Person's name in alphabetical order	Location of social work setting	Years of social work experience	Contexts of practice	Types of Practice
Alf	Australia	2-5 years	Adolescent and adult mental health, juvenile justice, Indigenous health policy	Counselling, community development, policy development.
Bindi	Australia	2-5 years	Child and adolescent mental health, youth work	Counselling, group work, community development.
Clinton	Australia	2-5 years	Adolescent and adult mental health, juvenile justice, Indigenous health policy	Counselling, community development, policy development.
Edith	El Salvador and Australia	10-20 years	Migrant and refugee support, hospital social work, income security	Counselling, groupwork, community development
Elizabeth	Australia	10-15 years	Hospital social work, overseas aid work, school social work, adolescent mental health, social policy	Counselling, groupwork, community development, policy development
Emma	Australia	5-10 years	Child protection	Counselling and groupwork
Jenny	Australia	2-5 years	Migrant aged care, hospital social work	Counselling
Jess	Australia	2-5 years	Child protection, family support	Counselling and community development
John	Australia	5-10 years	Drug and Alcohol	Counselling, groupwork, community development, policy development, staff supervision

Table 2 – Professional Experience cont'd

Person's name in alphabetical order	Location of social work setting	Years of social work experience	Contexts of practice	Types of Practice
Julwul	Australia	2-5 years	Child protection, family support, Indigenous health policy	Counselling, community development, policy development
Mark	Australia	10-15 years	Child protection, juvenile justice, hospital social work, child, adolescent and adult mental health	Counselling, groupwork, community development, policy development, staff supervision
Noonee	Australia	10-15 years	Income security, hospital social work, rehabilitation and disability support	Counselling, groupwork and community development
Scott	Australia	2-5 years	Child protection, community health, community arts	Counselling, groupwork and community development
Sue	Australia	2-5 years	Income support, Indigenous student support	Counselling and community development
Zhara	The Middle East	5-10 years	Child protection, migrant and refugee support, adult mental health	Counselling, groupwork and community development

3.3 Conclusion

The decision to cease data collection was based on my assessment that I had reached the point of data saturation. That is, while each participant presented a unique story of social work practice a range of themes began to emerge. My analysis of the data reveals a rich array of stories that identify that the construction of personal and professional boundaries is influenced

Introducing the research participants

by a range of contextual, cultural, gendered, structural and relational factors. The presentation of this analysis is the focus of the following chapters (Chapters 4-7).

4 The practice context and boundaries

4.1 Introduction

I think that working in an Aboriginal community, it's really hard work. It's a lot of effort and takes a lot of commitment and I was getting burnt out because you're fighting on two fronts. You're fighting the system and you're fighting the community. What happens is you've got your boundaries in the sense of who your employer is. You work within a structure and you provide a service. Your professional boundaries, and being a social worker mean that you think holistically. I'm very, I suppose, altruistic and social justice inclined, so I have my personal and professional values and then I've also got the expectations and values and my responsibilities to the Aboriginal community. Juvenile justice was the hardest area because you have these personal relationships with a person and their family and then you have to go and breach somebody for not doing the right thing. It's a really hard call because you don't want to lose that relationship you have with that family, but you have to do the job as well because you get paid to do it. So sometimes there are a lot of ethical issues and it's really difficult. (Clinton)

One of the influential factors in the construction of personal and professional boundaries that has emerged in the research is the context in which practice is located. All of the research participants identify different aspects of the practice context that play a role in shaping the relationship between their personal and professional self. Clinton's story, for example, powerfully encapsulates some of the tensions experienced by many Indigenous social workers as they construct their personal and professional

boundaries. The complex and often competing expectations arising from the practice context mean that Indigenous social workers are often torn between their needs and obligations to the community and the agency in which they work.

The central argument that will be developed in this chapter is that while a range of contextual factors influences the construction of personal and professional boundaries, these influences are variable and are informed by the worker's cultural identity. The Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) participants appear to be strongly influenced by the complex cultural (social and familial relationships) that they have with the communities within which they practice. In contrast, the Anglo and Celtic-Australian workers appear to be more influenced in their practice by both the connections that they make with individuals (see Chapters 5, 6 & 7) and by the size and nature of the geographical and agency context in which they are located. These aspects of their practice environment appear to be the formative cultural influences that impact on their use of self in practice. These dimensions are interdependent and variable and form a continuum of influence that creates boundaries, which are socially constructed and relationally and culturally informed. In this research, the term 'practice context' refers to the community with whom the participants engage, the size and nature of their geographical location (urban or rural), the organisation in which they are employed and the supervision that they receive.

The chapter will begin with discussion of the cultural, familial and social connections, which are particularly influential in the practice of Indigenous and CALD workers. This includes exploring the pressures and opportunities that arise when research participants work with communities in which they share cultural, familial, and social connections. The influences that emerge from the size of the practice context are then explored, with particular focus on how this impacts on the practice of Anglo and Celtic-Australian workers who share cultural connections with the individuals with whom they are co-located in rural and/or small urban communities. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the agency context and the ways in which organisational expectations and supervisory responses inform the practice of all of the research participants, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds.

4.2 The influence of the community on practice

Both the Indigenous and CALD participants share the experience of being connected to their communities in range of different ways. The nature of the community connections experienced by the CALD workers is variable and includes not only a shared cultural identity (Edith, Jenny, Zhara and Noonee) but also the mutual experiences of being a refugee or migrant (Edith, Zhara and Noonee). Each level of connection evokes a range of responses with CALD workers actively engaging their cultural self alongside their professional identity.

For the Indigenous social workers this connection takes on the form of kinship ties (Alf, Julwul and Sue) and obligations that come from being identified as an Indigenous person (Bindi and Clinton). These social and familial connections variously influence the practice of Indigenous social workers, including the encouragement to study social work and the intensity of the helping process. All of these influences impact on the use of self and the construction of personal and professional boundaries.

The Indigenous community's involvement in the development of social work careers

Joanna – I thought that I should start the interview by asking you what led you to become a social worker?

Bindi – I didn't have anything else at that time and a lot of people pushed me in that direction.

Joanna – Do you mean family or friends?

Bindi – Friends, community mostly and it sort of lead that way, and I wanted to work with adolescents and I knew that. It found me I did not find it.

Joanna – When you mention the community who are you talking about?

Bindi – At the time it was the Aboriginal people that were in my life. So I guess they were the people who were most influential and were really pushing it.

Joanna - The community sound like your advisors or friends?

Bindi - They can be.

Joanna – Is that something unusual in Aboriginal culture?

Bindi – No, it is not unusual at all. I think a lot of people if they are around will get influenced, a lot of people don't. But I think a lot of people get asked to do things or supported or encouraged to do things.

The involvement of Bindi's community in her decision to become a social worker is a clear example of the role that the Indigenous communities often play in the lives of individuals. Bindi regarded key members of her community as spiritual advisors and mentors with whom she had a reciprocal relationship. They encouraged her to study while in turn she supported and directed others in the community to take on different areas of responsibility. Julwul tells a similar story of community involvement in her decision to study social work and complete her degree. Since graduating the elders have also provided guidance as to where she should practice:

*Our community, our tribe is still very strong, our elders still play a major role in our lives and I was actually asked by the elders to come and do the work that I'm doing because they recognise that you can only bring about so much change from the ground. You need people in policy and so that's why they asked me to come down to Canberra. The other thing was that they realised that my daughter Jessica wanted to do medicine and we don't have any family or support here so she would need family.
(Julwul)*

The guidance of her elders supported Julwul to move her family from Darwin to Canberra. Their concern for the needs of Julwul's family demonstrates the importance of valuing not only the individual but also their family and community. Maintaining these connections is regarded as pivotal for the well-being of Indigenous people. Other Indigenous participants cited being motivated by experiences of oppression, of being a social work client and the need to 'give back to the community' (Alf and Sue) as influential in their decision to study social work. These factors reflect issues of class and professional identity and will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 6.

The high level of community involvement in shaping many social work careers includes supporting Indigenous students throughout their studies. This support is primarily undertaken by Indigenous student centres located

at Universities and is regarded by many of the Indigenous participants as being an important point of cultural contact and guidance. In particular, Jess spoke of the need to seek refuge at the Indigenous student centre after attending a lecture that was given by a 'white' expert on Indigenous culture:

She was talking about what Indigenous people say and do. It did not make sense to me, I did not recognise any of the information I was hearing and yet it seemed like this is what Indigenous people were about. I thought this is really interesting, this is defining who I am but yet I don't recognise it so does that mean that I am a lie or that my whole life is a lie? It threw me into an identity crisis and by that time I had linked in with the centre so I went across and debriefed with one of the student counsellors. Going to this space and feeling that my identity was supported, that was really important for me. (Jess)

Jess student experiences are shared by other Indigenous graduates and represent a strong theme in the writings of Indigenous graduates (Behrendt, 1996; Bin-Sallik, 2000). In this excerpt a former student recalls how the support that she received from both the Indigenous support centre and her community outside the University ensured that she completed her studies. "There were times when the racism got the better of me and I wanted to leave, but these people gave me all the love and support I needed to stay the distance. This is what being Aboriginal means to me" (Bin-Sallik, 2000, p. 185).

The process of becoming an Indigenous social worker is inextricably linked with the process of maintaining an Indigenous identity. This is reinforced not only by the initial motivation, community pressure and encouragement to study social work but also by a desire to return to the community potentially valuable skills and knowledge. It also establishes the pathways in which Indigenous social workers practise. The need to locate cultural reference points throughout their career becomes a defining feature of the Indigenous participants' social work practice (Alf, Bindi, Jess, Julwul and Sue). The process of cultural consultation reinforces the cultural identity of the worker and involves gaining feedback and advice from members of the community such as an elder, as well disseminating professional knowledge amongst the community through individuals and networks. It is a two way process.

This means that being an Indigenous social worker is about maintaining community membership and attending to the obligations that are inherent in that role. The pathway to a social work career for the Indigenous participants also establishes the reality that personal and professional boundaries will always be constructed amidst competing personal, cultural and professional needs. The next section explores how familial and cultural links with the community shape practice responses and boundaries.

Being an Indigenous social worker and engaging with Indigenous communities

The Indigenous workers appear to be more aware than their CALD or Anglo or Celtic Australian colleagues of the historical influences that impact on their engagement with the community. These include the effects of the Stolen Generations on an Indigenous worker's ability to establish kinship ties:

You know from your training that you cannot have a relationship with someone that you are related to. This was really difficult given that in the group of people that I was working with there was a high chance that they were actually related to me in some sense or another. When we work with each other what we first off do is work out what our relationship to each other is so we can work out what our connections and our obligations to each other are. I suppose with the community that's been so disrupted it's not always possible to know who you're related to as first, second, third cousin because of the removals. But also if you didn't work with people you were related to, you wouldn't be able to work within the Indigenous community because everyone's related to someone somehow. So if we were to keep those boundaries as they're set out within social work at this point, then Indigenous people wouldn't be able to work in Indigenous communities because they have a relationship with the very people that they're working with. (Sue)

Sue identified the kinship system as a fundamental influence in Indigenous social work practice. The nature of the kinship system means that when social workers are working with Indigenous communities, in particular, they often work with relatives. The process of establishing who you are related to is not a straightforward one and has been severely disrupted by the policy of the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people from their land. The legacy of the Stolen Generations also impacts on the Indigenous worker's capacity to engage with the community as they confront widespread suspicion of the welfare system. This will be further explored in

Chapter 6 as also an issue of professional identity.

Another important aspect of Sue's story is a recognition that Indigenous social workers need to begin their interaction with any Indigenous person by introducing who they are. This locates the person's family and country and generally establishes familial connections and social status. Julwul explains the introduction process:

There's a different way of doing business in the Aboriginal community ok? When you, as a child protection worker go to someone's door then you would come in as an official and you would say I'm Joanna I'm the social worker from whatever office we received a call and we need to come and investigate can we come in? Well you might not get in the door if it were an Aboriginal family, they're very wary of any official. The difference is that when an Aboriginal person goes to the door they already know that person because they are part of the community and you don't come in and say this is such and such. Before any business is done kind of pleasantries take place. You need to come in and you say how are you? I've been asked to come around and see you. The kinship system that we have tells you how you should treat people, the way you approach people whether they would see me as an aunty, a sister, a grandmother or a grandchild and that is the way that I would respond to them. So if they were the same skin I would talk to them as their sister. (Julwul)

This 'different way of doing business' means not only beginning any new interaction with an introduction of the worker's Indigenous identity, it also requires the Indigenous social worker to participate in self disclosure regarding personal experiences (Alf, Bindi, Clinton, Julwul and Sue):

They will always ask where are you from? Where have you been? How did you get here? Often elder Aboriginal people will ask me what experience have you got in this situation? Have you ever been depressed or anxious? Or have you got children or have you been around children? How long have you been in the community? Tell me about your life or tell me about your family, what is your story? They are trying to get to who I am and what do I know. They want to test me. If I pass that test then I can be appropriate, cultural, respectful and listen to them and then I can work with them. There are a lot of tests for me, a lot of hoops to get through for trust to develop and to test me about how far I am willing to go. Straight away there is distrust if I am going to hide things. (Bindi)

The use of self-disclosure by Indigenous social and welfare workers in the introduction process is well documented in *Murri Way* (Lynn et al., 1998). This initial 'tuning in and sussing-out' is regarded as a two-way process that facilitates engagement and guards the Indigenous person as well as the worker from being fooled. Both parties need to be reassured that each other is genuine in their needs and intentions (Lynn et al., p. 29). Mutual sharing is in fact integral to all stages of the helping process and involves considered and deliberate use of "the worker's own experience of problems and their way of dealing with them" (Lynn et al., p.35). Further consideration of the transferability of personal and professional knowledge in the practice of the Indigenous participants will be given in Chapter 7.

Exploring cultural, familial and social connections with the Indigenous community is therefore a significant feature of culturally appropriate Indigenous social work practice. It is also recognised by the research participants (Alf, Bindi, Clinton, Jess, Julwul and Sue) as potentially problematic. The dominant professional discourse, as reflected in the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) code of ethics, insists on the maintenance of separateness between the personal and professional self, for example not developing friendships with clients or adopting a professional role with family members (AASW, 1999). The personal and professional boundary is regarded by the AASW code of ethics as an important point of separation that is mutually beneficial to the worker, the community and their client. Sharing familial or social connections is seen as antithetical to sound social work practice.

However the experience of the Indigenous research participants demonstrates that their personal and professional selves coexist and converge as a result of kinship ties, cultural and social obligations and the realities of living and working in small communities, leaving workers facing a perennial dilemma. The nature of this dilemma is recognised by writers such as Strom-Gottfried (1999) who argue that more consideration needs to be given to workers who are part of tightly knit ethnic or cultural communities where the roles of helper and those being helped may become blurred.

The nature of this ethical issue is also partly explored by Briskman and Noble (1999) who assert that one of the fundamental failings of universal codes of ethics, such as the AASW code of ethics are that "the notion of an

all-encompassing code of ethics which emphasizes universality, inclusiveness and conventional conceptualisations of community in fact mutes the diverse interests and plurality of voices characteristic of modern pluralist societies” (p. 58). Acknowledging the specific issues confronting the Indigenous community, Butler (1997) argues that the ASSW Code of Ethics stands in stark contrast with the New Zealand social work code of ethics that incorporates a bicultural code acknowledging the status of the Treaty of Waitangi and providing details about such issues such as self-determination, democracy and human rights. Butler urges the Australian professional association to work alongside the Aboriginal community in the development of a Bicultural Code of Practice (p. 58).

However the development of a bicultural code of practice in Australia is problematic, and may not represent the best solution for the complex cultural and contextual issues that potentially undermine the usefulness of the AASW code of ethics (1999). One of the difficulties of adopting a bicultural code is the multicultural nature of Australian society, a society that encompasses many cultures, including a diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait culture. This means that the notion of biculturalism has limited applicability in the Australian context. A possible solution to these ethical issues is developed in the final chapter of the thesis (Chapter 8), where the concept of an ethics of care is presented and explored. The nature of the ethical issues that are raised in this research need to be considered by the broader social work community because they relate to how as a profession we bridge the personal and professional divide.

Being a CALD worker and engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse communities

The CALD participants experience similar levels of complexity in their practice particularly when they work with their ‘own’ communities (Edith, Jenny, Zhara and Noonee). The influence of the practice context means that the participants at some point in their social work careers establish close connections with the communities with whom they share a cultural identity. This involves consulting with the community and responding to perceived needs and expectations. Noonee’s experience of working with a group of ‘Filipino mail order brides’ as a social work student was motivated by a desire to empower her people:

Noonee - *When I was working for my community I spent a lot of emotional and professional time with them. It meant that my whole life was just consumed by that. This happened when I was doing my final placement at Uni. I was doing some research about Filipino women married to Australian men and setting up a group with them. That didn't only mean having dinners and lunches, going to their functions and formal gatherings but also doing the research and forming the group. At the end of that I was totally exhausted because my whole being was taken over. I didn't have any privacy*

Janna – *Why did you feel you needed to become so involved? Can you tell me more about that?*

Noonee - *Because I was very close to the subject. Because I was a Filipino myself I wanted to make sure these women had enough information and resources to be able to help each other. I think it's just this personal motivation that I had to do something. I had to contribute something towards the development of their empowerment. It was just all encompassing. I mean it was fascinating. It was just something that I easily fitted into but something that I also needed to just have some space from and see whether I would be more effective as a person not formally working within my community.*

After that experience I decided that I would maintain a very strong involvement with my community but not professionally as a social worker. I made this decision because I've also got very close ties with a number of people within the community on a personal level and I think it would have become extremely difficult about boundaries in that regard because I have ethical values as well and that would tell me something. For example as a social worker I could potentially get involved in abuse or domestic violence which is a really a taboo subject in our community. To me if I knew somebody on a personal level and I had my professional hat on, making difficult decisions about that person that would be extremely hard. (Noonee)

Noonee's social work practice is shaped not only by the needs of her Filipino community but also by her Filipino identity. Noonee's cultural self propelled her to undertake demanding work that was rewarding, but also compromised her capacity to maintain a clear separation between the personal and professional self. For these reasons, Noonee decided not to continue working with her community as a social worker. She now practises social work in a mainstream disability area and works on an unpaid basis in the area of community art.

Strong parallels can be drawn here between the dilemmas faced by Noonee and those experienced by an Indigenous participant, Clinton, whose story begins this chapter. Both Clinton and Noonee share a similar passion to work with their communities with whom they develop close cultural connections. They also face the same dilemma about the professional need to maintain clear boundaries. This dilemma takes a personal toll on both workers as they confront difficult choices about their practice. The 'personal costs' of being culturally sensitive and professionally sound are explored further in Chapter 7 as examples of the pressure experienced by social workers as they seek to maintain personal and professional boundaries in practice.

Diverse influences arising from the practice context also mean that workers continually modify their practice and reconstruct their boundaries. Zhara's experiences of working with a group of Iraqi women highlights the changes that she needs to make to her practice:

I did run a group for Iraqi women. It was very successful because I tried to accommodate their needs. The women felt that I cared about them because I gave them my home phone number. This was important for reasons of trust as well as practicality. In the Middle East I would not do this. In the Middle East it is important for clients to feel that the boundaries between the worker and the client are clear so that they can respect you. Here it is different and I think I needed to learn this as well. When I came here I have become more courageous in a way. I want to find what is suitable from my own culture, what is suitable here and to be able to adopt what is suitable for the client. (Zhara)

Making the transition from being a Middle Eastern born and educated social worker to becoming an Australian social worker meant that Zhara needed to continually reconstruct her professional and cultural identity. This change process is strongly influenced by contextual pressures and cultural values. Zhara's comments, that she would not do this in the Middle East, suggest that she often felt constrained by her training, as it did not focus enough on developing contextually and relationally informed practice responses. The Western influenced social work education that Zhara received reinforced the need to maintain separateness between herself and her clients. Her desire to respond according to cultural and individual needs and different contextual pressures rather than to professional prescription suggests that Zhara was prepared to make significant changes to her practice.

Edith, an Australian El Salvadorian born and educated social worker, (who undertook further social work training in Australia), encountered similar issues. In Edith's case the needs of the migrants and refugees with whom she engaged provoked practice responses that required Edith to gently reassert with her community her personal and professional boundaries:

It is difficult for people to know that I am not a friend, in terms of I get a salary, that I am being paid to help them, to assist them. In terms of confidentiality and privacy, migrants try and show me how grateful they are of my assistance and want to invite me into their homes to become part of their families. Even though my name is in the phone book my diary is at work. So if they call I tell them that I will call them from work to make an appointment. I don't reject them straight away. This system has worked very well for me and I am very pleased with the way that I have worked with migrants and refugees. (Edith)

Edith is advocating here the importance of considering the needs of migrants and refugees and not judging their inability to keep strict boundaries. She regards her role as partly educational, reinforcing with her community what she regards as appropriate 'help seeking' behaviour. Are these complex relationships and experiences reflected in the social work literature? The next section explores this important question.

The influence of community membership on social work practice: An exploration of the social work literature

The influence of a worker's community membership and cultural identity on the construction of their personal and professional boundaries has received scant attention in the Australian social work literature. Issues relating to cultural identity are primarily located in writing that seeks to explore the nature of cross-cultural social work, as exemplified by the 1998 'special edition' of Australian Social Work (Barnes, 1998; Cariceo, 1998; Nguyen & Bowles, 1998; Rodopoulos, 1998). In her editorial Rodopoulos recognises social work as a culturally determined profession that has traditionally attended to the needs of people from different cultural backgrounds (including Indigenous people) without seeking to be informed by cultural difference. Writing as a worker who is a member of an ethnic community, Rodopoulos encourages 'ethnic and bilingual workers' to rise to the challenge and adopt a role in countering the stereotypical perceptions that often exist about their communities:

To not do so is to perpetuate the perception of mainstream observers of our being foreigners and somehow intriguing, but inferior (particularly if we are women). To not do so is to subvert the dynamic potential of what a culturally diverse society offers. (p. 2)

While Rodopoulos challenges the Australian profession to regard culture as a resource and not as a stigma, she does not conceptualise how this transition is to occur. Placing an emphasis on the role that 'ethnic' workers can play in achieving change may be regarded by some as a refreshing idea but it places the burden on workers who, as the participants of this inquiry have demonstrated, often feel constrained by their cultural identities. Harnessing the dynamic potential of their culturally diverse communities is exactly what both the Indigenous and CALD participants are constantly engaged in. However, in responding creatively to the contextual challenges posed by practising in their 'own' communities, these workers often feel compromised because their personal and professional boundaries need to continually be constructed and reconstructed. This apparent paradox of creativity and tension can be partly understood as a clash of cultures, the culture of their communities versus the professional culture. Further examination of this tension will be undertaken in Chapter 6.

One area of social work literature that offers some useful insights into how a social worker's community membership and cultural identity can make a transformative contribution to social work practice are the writings of the American academic Miehls (2001). He asserts that the development of a social work student's racial identity is an important area of learning. Miehls challenges 'white' students as well as those from diverse backgrounds to critically reflect on their cultural identity as a site of tension and creativity. He conceptualises this process from both a social constructionist and racial identity perspective:

Social constructionists emphasize the social aspects of our ways of knowing and appreciate that the communities and cultures of which we are members determine our ways of seeing the world. Racial group theories describe the transformative process that people of color and whites undergo to achieve racial self-actualization. (para. 17).

An important process that individuals undertake to achieve racial self-actualisation are the links they make with cultural reference groups. These

bonds facilitate the development of the individual's value system and worldview. This resonates powerfully with the experiences of the Indigenous and CALD participants. Their practice is continually reinforced by their community membership with the Anglo and Celtic Australian participants being more likely to respond to individual needs (see Chapters 5, 6 & 7). For example these participants are influenced by such factors as the individual's gender and in the case of female social workers, sharing gendered experiences influences the use of self and the construction of boundaries (see Chapter 5).

Miehls (2001) argues that if social workers achieve a highly developed sense of racial identity they "will be more prepared to experience the multiplicity of selves within themselves and the 'other'" (para.25). Gaining a greater level of insight about how cultural identity is developed lays the foundation for dialogical exchanges to occur with colleagues, communities and clients. Social workers need to continually learn from each other in order to enrich their practice.

While Miehl's (2001) ideas support some of the experiences of the research participants, he does not explore in any depth the actual practice realities that confront these workers and does not specifically discuss the issue of personal and professional boundaries. However by including the need to critically examine whiteness as a key aspect of identity, Miehl challenges all social workers to regard their identity as a core feature of a culturally determined social work practice.

The relative absence of analysis of the contextual and culturally determined nature of the construction of personal and professional boundaries in the social work literature means that the participants' experiences are not broadly conceptualised as practice issues that go to the heart of what it means to be an Australian social worker. Instead, boundary issues are conceptualised as incursions that reflect individual dilemmas requiring professionally authorised solutions. Alf's story challenges these ideas:

I just found the whole boundary thing just very confusing. When they say that's not appropriate boundaries and that wasn't appropriate practice, well it wasn't a matter of that. What are you supposed to do when you've got someone ringing up and it's 2 o'clock in the morning, you know this has happened, you've got a crisis, you're locked up, can you come and help me, what can you do? Well you can't just say no, because

that's what happens, and that would happen anyway if you weren't a social worker. The whole professional thing is very blurry. (Alf)

Alf articulates the uncomfortable reality that in order to meet individual and community needs he transgresses a boundary of acceptable social work practice. A blurring of boundaries reflects a blurring of identities.

The influence of working and living in small communities on the construction of personal and professional boundaries is another contextual dimension that informs the construction of personal and professional boundaries and will be the focus of discussion in the following section.

4.3 Living and working in small communities

A common experience shared by many of the participants (Alf, Bindi, Clinton, Edith, Elizabeth, Mark, Noonee and Scott) is that it is often difficult to maintain clear personal and professional boundaries when working and living in small communities. In this research the term small 'community' refers to a rural or remote location as well as a small urban environment. Mark identifies how his practice has been affected by working both in rural communities and in small urban centres:

I suppose one thing I'm really aware of and it may not be unique to this place, but in a sense this is quite a small community so people do know each other. So it's not uncommon to be working with friends as you move through different areas and to develop friendships. But also with clients, it's common to run into them or see them, which may not be the case in bigger metropolitan centres. I think sometimes that's the initial challenge of working in places like that. It is about how you think through how those interactions external to work will occur. I think in smaller communities it is much harder to keep your different selves separate. (Mark)

Mark regarded working with colleagues who may also be friends as potentially creating some confusion in his role identity. Close geographical proximity also meant that Mark was often running into clients outside work and being prepared for this experience was an important aspect of his practice. Mark believed that it was appropriate to acknowledge his clients on these occasions and to briefly interact with them. Bindi shares Mark's

experience of frequently seeing clients after hours and regards this experience as both an inevitable and natural extension of her practice:

If I went to the shopping mall and saw a client or former client and they did not recognise me I would go up and say hello otherwise it would be quite rude. A lot of my clients still contact me on a three or four monthly basis and tell me how they are going and I think that is a success. They send me postcards or ring me up. I have an email relationship with one of them. The football is also a place where a lot of people come to me, so I have decided next year not to go to the football. (Bindi)

While Bindi identifies informal contact with clients as an extension of her practice she also expresses some tension about not being able to relax 'off the job'. This apparent paradox highlights some of the complexities involved in maintaining clear personal and professional boundaries in small communities. Many participants recognise that living and working in these communities means that it is not possible, or at times even necessary, to establish clear lines of separation between their personal and professional identities, whereas at other times it is essential to be able to enjoy moments of privacy. This further suggests that the construction of personal and professional boundaries is a complex phenomenon that is essentially social and is strongly influenced by a range of individual, relational and cultural dimensions. This influence can be seen in the new ideas about boundaries presented in the final chapter of the thesis (Chapter 8).

Elizabeth's experience of living and working in a small urban community highlights that unpredictable contact with clients can be stressful and compromising:

Having my own kids in high school and there being a lot of overlap between my kids and the kid that I was seeing was difficult at times. Not that my kids were at risk in the way that most of the clients that I saw were, but things like having clients who went to the same school did happen. If I knew that a client was at the same school as one of my kids I would pass the case on to another worker but that could become difficult at times. You could not always be certain that the clients would not change schools and end up in the same class or end up as one of my children's friends. (Elizabeth)

For Elizabeth the reality of working with adolescents, having teenage children and living and working in a small urban community required

constant vigilance. She tried to avoid the development of dual relationships with her clients while also conceding that this may be unavoidable. Elizabeth also reflected on the similarities between her own teenage children's experiences and those of her adolescent clients. This transferability of experiences between the personal and the professional realm, and the way that it impacts on the construction of personal and professional boundaries, will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 7.

Working and living in a small urban community means that refugees and migrants often expect Edith to be constantly available:

I know that wherever you go you are dealing with a client, you meet a client at the market, doesn't matter, whatever. The client is always asking you to do things for them, to expect your advice. I try and not to tell client's what to do. I present them with options and at the same time I'm explaining to them their rights. I always encourage new migrants and refugees to do things by themselves. I take them and show them how to access social security for example or housing. I go with them the first time and show them and then I use the empowering approach. (Edith)

Edith appeared to accept that she was continuously 'on the job' and was prepared to merge her personal and professional identities when the need arose. She regarded this experience as an inevitable consequence of living and working in a small city and being a member of the local refugee community. Edith's responses indicate that she tried to be consistently respectful and empowering in her approach and this involved actively guiding people through various welfare systems and resisting the temptation of telling people what to do.

The discourse about Australian rural social work practice (Brummell, 1985; Kember, 1995; Lonne & Cheers, 2000; Munn, 1990; Puckett & Frederico, 1992) identifies that social work practice in rural, remote and small urban communities is a qualitatively different experience. The issues that influence this diversity are the often-close social, familial and professional relationships that social workers share with their communities. The consequences on practice, stemming from the interplay of these factors, include role confusion, difficulties in maintaining confidentiality and an increased potential of the development of dual relationships (Herlihy & Corey, 1997; Strom-Gottfried, 1999). For example, it is not unusual for a worker to be living next door to their client and this may limit the client's

access to welfare services (Kember). Also well documented are the pressures experienced by workers when they are highly visible in their professional and social roles:

Clients tend to see or hear about you warts and all. Rural social workers are required to be open and frank in their relationships, and to share more of their private self with their clients than is usual in the urban setting (Lonne, 1990, p.32).

Lonne goes on to assert that being highly visible can be an asset and can help generate credibility for the worker and mobilise community support for projects. Working in small communities means that rural practitioners also need to develop good formal and informal networks and be prepared to respond to a wide range of issues without the immediate back up of specialized workers or agencies (Allen-Kelly & Zubrzycki, 2001). While research indicates that low levels of staff retention is a common issue confronting many rural agencies, there is also evidence that "there is a large pool of committed and identified social workers who prefer to live and work in rural communities" (Lonne & Cheers, 2000, p. 27).

This literature generally validates Mark and Elizabeth's experiences of living and working in rural and small urban communities by identifying that the size of the practice context enhances the visibility of the workers, thus creating both practice opportunities and dilemmas. However, as identified by all of the research participants, the development of dual relationships occurs as a result of a range of factors and are not limited to worker-client relationships in small communities (see Chapters 5, 6 & 7). Hence, the construction of personal and professional boundaries is influenced by a range of factors and needs to be explored as a multidimensional phenomenon.

In particular the current Australian rural practice literature does little to validate the experiences of the Indigenous and CALD participants. One of the reasons is that the research on rural practice generally does not focus on the cultural identity of the worker. Rather, it seeks to explore the worker's identity as a rural practitioner sharing a commonality of experiences with their peers based on their practice location. My research, however, broadens knowledge about the practice experiences of rurally located workers by focusing on these workers as people who bring to their

practice a holistic identity. That is, they are social workers whose professional identities are also shaped by their culture, gender and socio economic background. Thus, the geographical context is but one element that informs and shapes their practice.

As documented in earlier sections of the chapter, the Indigenous and CALD participants confront many of the dilemmas facing rural workers because they share with their community a common cultural identity. While the size of the community potentially creates more opportunities for contact with clients, it has only a marginal impact on their practice and certainly does not create qualitatively different practice experiences. The personal and professional boundaries of Indigenous and CALD participants are constructed partly as a response to community membership, which demands from the worker a degree of obligation and reciprocity.

The influences of agency and supervisory policies, practices and relationships are additional contextual dimensions that have been identified by all of the participants as shaping the construction of personal and professional boundaries. The exploration of these experiences will be the focus of the next section of this chapter.

4.4 The agency and supervisory context

Organisational issues

There are a range of agency issues that influence the research participants' construction of personal and professional boundaries. These include organisational expectations and modes of practice that both support and/or impede the ability of the participants to fulfil important practice objectives, such as meeting individual and community needs. As in all areas of this research the range of responses are culturally and relationally determined. Thus it is possible to discern differences between participants in the emphasis that they place upon practices such as home visiting. Some of the worker's decisions regarding the need to conduct home visits are culturally informed (Alf and Clinton), while other workers are more strongly influenced by what they perceive to be the individual needs of their clients (Mark). As a group the Anglo and Celtic Australian participants generally regard home visiting as a practice that often challenges their personal and professional boundaries and potentially compromises their ability to engage

with clients. On the other hand, the Indigenous and CALD participants regard home visiting as an essential feature of a culturally appropriate response to their communities. These different perspectives are illustrated in the following stories:

I think in mental health services there's often a lot of work that has to be done around engagement and some of that's about home visiting and I think that home visiting is probably an area where those personal and professional boundaries can easily blur, so it's really important to try and be clear about why you're there and what's happening. (Mark)

Home visits I found were very important, that's one thing that really put me offside in government agencies they just didn't want people to do home visits. They just expected community people to just come through the doors of agencies, and to sort of go through the same old therapies. I turned around and said that's it's easier to see them in their homes, or meet them halfway, or in a community organisation, that's easier for the person. (Alf)

Both Mark and Alf were clearly stating that home visiting was an important tool of engagement. In Mark's situation the process of conducting home visits needed to be cautiously approached by mental health workers because it could lead to a blurring of boundaries, whereas for Alf this blurring was a necessary part of engagement and not an unfortunate outcome. This perspective is strongly endorsed by the other Indigenous participants (Bindi, Clinton, Dawn, Julwul and Sue) who stress that home visiting also fosters the development of community trust, because it signals to the community that the worker understands the barriers that they experience in accessing welfare services. These barriers are historical and cultural and are well documented in the Murri Way research (Lynn et al., 1998). The barriers to access also include the impact that the worker's professional status and identity has on the relationship between the participants and their communities. This issue will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 6.

Another access issue that was highlighted by the Indigenous and CALD participants was the policy that many agencies have of insisting that clients adhere to appointment schedules:

I believe that the organisation that employs me expects me to work with my clients as if they were white Australians who know that everything

works by appointment times and you must be on time. But with migrants and refugees you have to be patient and take every opportunity to teach them how the system works, that everything works by appointment. Often they do not cancel or just turn up late or at a different time. But if I have an hour for them and they turn up half an hour late I just tell them I'm sorry but today I cannot look at all their issues because I have another client waiting and I also educate the reception staff that if a client arrives outside their appointment time they need to contact me and not just send them away. (Edith)

Edith emphasised here the educative responsibility that she had to both her clients and to her agency. While some of her clients clearly struggled to understand agency procedures, agency expectations were often unrealistic, and demonstrated an unwillingness to accept the diverse needs of clients and communities. Clinton and Sue encountered similar attitudes during their work in mainstream welfare agencies:

I loved the work but I hated the system. I was the first one in my position; it was just a token position. They thought, oh great, we've got an Indigenous social worker to do this job, but they just thought I was going to be some little puppy who did their clinical work and it didn't work out that way because I said, look, the way you've established this position it is not going to benefit the community. They just expected me to do in-house clinical therapeutic work. I told them that if you want me to be a social worker, employ me as one. Yes, it took time to build trust with the community. It was like in the old Murri time, Koori time, black fella time. It wasn't unusual for me to literally have someone just rock up, oh look, I need to see you. All right, come in. You had to do it because you knew the chances of them coming in at an appointment time wasn't going to happen, and that took a lot of time for the staff to understand. It took about six months before everyone sort of got to know me and understand how I worked. They eventually respected the work I did do and the input that I could have. (Clinton)

When I was working in this big bureaucracy they would say yeah we've got you here because you're Indigenous but you're a social worker and we do things by appointment and we do it this way. And so there wasn't any real room for the community to just rock up to the counter. In the Aboriginal community it's like we've got a need now so we address it now and so there's not a lot of understanding of well why can't we see you now. Like the organisation want people there who are Indigenous and make a big hoo ha about employing Indigenous people. But they don't make any room for people to be Indigenous. So what they really want

are employees who just happen to be Indigenous rather than Indigenous employees. (Sue)

Both Clinton and Sue identify a crucial issue. Agencies are often keen to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers in order to facilitate the access of Indigenous people to welfare services, but are not prepared to accept the need to change service policies and procedures that fundamentally impede access. Clinton and Sue also assert that agencies do not recognise that Indigenous workers bring to their practice a strong cultural identity that informs their practice responses and their professional identity. These practice responses often run counter to accepted organisational procedures and this places both the Indigenous worker and their employer under significant pressure. Clinton and Sue's comments reinforce the view that the accepted professional identity of an Australian social worker is one that is based on 'white' values and expectations. This is also an issue of professional identity and will be given particular attention in Chapter 6.

When organisations impede a worker's ability to engage with their community by insisting on strict appointment schedules and agency-based practice rather than community outreach, the agency is imposing the separation of the professional from the personal. Being office-bound means that Clinton and Sue are restricted in their ability to follow through with personally focussed introduction processes, or the development of consultative relationships thus failing to engage effectively with the community.

In Edith's situation, her organisation's adherence to strict appointment schedules signals a lack of understanding of the needs of the refugee and migrant community, and reflects a general inability to fully appreciate her professional practice. Thus the friction between community membership and agency responsibility means that the Indigenous and CALD participants are constantly engaged in the process of constructing and reconstructing their personal and professional boundaries. These experiences further support the notion that these boundaries are both individually socially constructed (see Chapter 8 for a clear exposition of my emerging theory of boundaries).

Jones and May (1999) authors of a popular Australian text on organisational theory and practice, *Working in Human Service Organisations*, argue that social workers employed by welfare organisations are not free agents:

The shape, nature and indeed, existence of their roles is subject to ongoing negotiation in a wide variety of organisational and policy contexts. Workers must struggle to achieve their purposes primarily as participants in societal arrangements, rather than as agents located outside of and separate from these arrangements. (p. 21)

The participants of this research, as highlighted by Mark, Edith, Sue and Clinton's stories, identify that the organisational context is not the only factor that shapes their practice. While agencies fundamentally define the participants' professional roles (such as those of team leader Mark and migrant settlement worker Edith), their stories focus on the intersection of the personal and professional and this indicates that an array of factors inform the nature of their practice. These include the needs of individual clients, the worker's cultural identity and community membership.

Developing an awareness of the culture of the organisation and of the client is regarded by Jones and May (1999) as an important skill, which needs to be mastered if social workers are to facilitate organisational change. Achieving cultural competence requires workers to gain a high level of awareness of the influence of their own culture on their practice, as well as the impact of the organisational and client culture on the practice environment. The emphasis is on the need to increase the worker's ability to relate "to the cultural system of an organisation in a conscious and strategic manner" (Jones & May, p. 243-244). This requires workers to "use their knowledge of culture to achieve personal and professional goals" (Jones & May, p. 244). Jones and May argue that while the agency influences workers' practices they in turn through their actions shape the organisational culture.

This analysis does not, however, reflect the experiences of the Indigenous participants. Sue's comment that organisations want Indigenous workers but are not prepared to accept Indigenous practice, suggests that her organisation was resistant to being influenced by her cultural identity. This appears to be a case of theory not reflecting practice. The aim of achieving cultural competence should be dependent on cultural change being

achieved, not only as a response to the needs of culturally diverse consumers but also in recognition of the influence of the worker's culture on their practice. In this research the ways in which the agency context influences the construction of the worker's personal and professional boundaries highlights the cultural incongruities that are reflected in the participant's experiences of their organisations.

Another central task confronting social workers is to ensure that organisations are responsive to consumer needs:

Helping professionals seek to personalize services by conveying to each client that you count as a person. Bureaucracies are highly depersonalised, emotionally detached systems which view every employee and every client as being a tiny component of a large system. (De Montigny, 1995, p. 47)

Being actively involved in the facilitation of consumer access and participation (Hinson, 1997; Jones & May, 1999) is also reflected in the stories of many of the research participants. The need to facilitate organisational change as a response to consumer needs, is an important objective for Clinton in his work as an Indigenous mental health worker:

I made it very clear to my organisation that my goal was to increase participation and access for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. (Clinton)

Achieving greater access meant that Clinton had to educate his colleagues and supervisor about the needs and expectations of his Aboriginal and Torres Strait clients and his 'ways' of meeting those needs. This was another exercise in bridging what many participants perceive as a yawning gap between agency expectations and procedures, social work responses and community and individual needs.

It is important here to recognise that the research participants are also being affected in their practice by changes to the welfare state. The 'new welfare state' (Considine, 2000; O'Connor, Warburton and Smyth, 2000) as it is variously referred to, represents an ideological shift that "emphasises individual responsibility for self and family, and the abandonment of an explicit commitment by the state to create the conditions for the maximisation of individual and social welfare" (O'Connor et al., 2000, p. 1). This is reflected in labour market and program change that shifts from the

collective provision of welfare services by government to the provision of services on the basis of the contracting out of service needs to private providers (Considine, p. 74). The contract environment acts to routinely destabilise organisations as they shift and adjust their focus in light of changes in the purchasing environment. This means that welfare organisations are invariably undergoing continual restructuring in their funding, administrative and policy structures:

While funding to services shrinks and tighter controls are demanded, the contexts in which services are offered are less amenable to control. Diverse and competing demands mean the fragmentation of service delivery, less democratic participation, and far greater uncertainty and unpredictability. (Fook et al., 2000, p. 1)

The changes in the welfare state have therefore had a major impact on the nature of social and community services and the professional identities and practices of human services workers (Camilleri, 1999). According to Considine (2000), this results in workers having less room to practise an independent ethical commitment to their clients (p. 76). This is one way of conceptualising the difficulties experienced by Clinton, Edith and Sue as they grapple to bridge the distance between agency expectations and community needs.

Another area of influence in the construction of personal and professional boundaries is the relationship between the participant and their supervisor. Exploring these issues will be the focus of the next and final section of this chapter.

Supervisory relationships

All of the research participants shared stories of supervisory experiences, with many receiving fairly regular supervision and others providing staff supervision. Strong and diverse links between supervision and the construction of personal and professional boundaries were identified. These included a perception that being open with supervisors about the variable experiences of the use of self in practice can be easily misunderstood and leave workers feeling vulnerable and unsupported (Emma). Supervisors often need to be educated about how workers continually construct and reconstruct boundaries when working with different cultural communities (Bindi). Working with supervisors who share a common cultural identity

(Dawn) or who come from a refugee or migrant background (Alf) means that a worker's practice is more readily understood and affirmed. Taking a supervisor's perspective, Mark and John encourage their workers to talk about the use of self in practice

Emma's story of being unwilling to share her personal experiences of practice with her supervisor and colleagues resonates strongly with the experiences of other parents who are social workers (Zubrzycki, 1998, 1999):

Emma – I don't talk about my personal stuff in supervision partly because there is so much stuff to talk about, but also the really important private stuff I don't like to bring in the workplace because I feel it would make me too vulnerable. I remember saying to the team, I have just had the first person ask me if I was a parent and I got to say yes. Everyone in the team thought that was hilarious. I would certainly never feel safe to say to my supervisor that something in the interview made me think of my son because I would be frightened that the next step would be - well you always said that you would never come back to this sort of work. We wondered why you came back? But the truth is it isn't hard because there are so many benefits and I feel like I have all the experience and knowledge and now I've got the icing on the cake.

Joanna – Your experiences are so similar to those of other social workers who are parents. In the research that I did in 1998 many social workers also felt that it was not permissible to talk about these sorts of experiences in supervision because they could be easily misunderstood.

Emma – Yes there is a view out there that if you are a good worker you do not allow too much transference to happen.

Emma's experiences of returning to child protection work after the birth of her son were very mixed. On the one hand she felt that her experiences of motherhood would be a great asset to her practice 'the icing on the cake', yet she quickly recognised that it was important that she present as someone who was coping well with her work and was therefore not being overly influenced by her parenting. The paucity of support regarding Emma's use of self in practice was exemplified by the response of her colleagues to her story that she made a self-disclosure during an interview with a mother. These responses often made Emma feel silenced and isolated. She was acutely aware that the whole subject of countertransference in practice was an area that provoked strong

professional responses and she was unwilling to take the risk of being labelled as a vulnerable worker who was unable to maintain professional boundaries.

The literature about supervision (Hawkins & Shohet, 2000; Lewis, 1987) identifies that encouraging workers to share their experiences of the use of self is an important supervisory goal. The aim is generally to monitor whether or not workers are engaging professionally with their clients and maintaining professional objectivity. Lewis argues that a worker's professional growth and development are enhanced when they become more aware of how their self influences their practice. This includes encouraging worker self-awareness in the way that they are developing their boundaries and meeting the needs of their clients. It also requires the supervisor to establish clear boundaries with the worker in order to model appropriate practice.

Mark's experiences of providing supervision to his mental health peers extends the notion of encouraging workers to explore the use of self in practice in order to monitor professional practice:

I think it was really important to talk to my staff about the use of self in practice and to support parents who were workers to share their experiences. I remember we had small peer supervision in the adult team. There was a small group of workers who met and I suppose one of the common themes coming out was really around people feeling physically threatened by some clients and that could be for a range of reasons. I mean some people in that team had seen people who were sex offenders so that could certainly be very challenging as a parent to maintain sort of objectivity. I think it was really important to talk about those things because it would be very difficult not to have some reaction to some of the things that mental health workers have to hear and do. But certainly seeing people who had histories of physical or sexual abuse is as a parent I think very difficult. (Mark)

Mark is expressing a concern for the wellbeing of his mental health workers. As a parent himself, Mark recognised that it was important to acknowledge that the experiences of parenting can make some workers more vulnerable in certain areas of practice. Sharing these experiences provides workers with an opportunity to seek support and understanding from their peers. This is certainly reinforced by the parents who participated in my research (Zubrzycki, 1998, 1999). However, as Emma's story highlights, supervisors

need to do more than recognise areas of vulnerability, they need to affirm workers in their desire to bridge personal and professional experiences in order to develop more creative practice responses. The continual focus on worker fragility places a negative connotation on the use of self in practice. The issue of worker self care and burnout will be further explored in Chapter 7.

The process of educating supervisors about the different ways that Indigenous social workers construct their personal and professional boundaries is an important objective for practitioners such as Bindi:

Bindi - I get really good non-Indigenous social work supervision. It is really structured, you do this with depression, and you do that with anxiety. And I get very poor cultural supervision. I spend most of the time trying to explain to my supervisor what I am doing and why I am doing it.

Joanna – Do you think that there are times when your supervisors do understand your practice?

Bindi – No never culturally. Never. I am often asked not to be Aboriginal. Unless you have been Aboriginal in lots of ways you can't understand it. It is that focus of knowing what someone is going through and the history that led them there. I think my supervisors get really frustrated in me. I have never felt supported by them. I have always been asked not to do things, not to say things, not to take things on.

Bindi's low expectations of her non-Indigenous supervisor are shared by some of the other participants (Dawn, Julwul and Sue). The need to seek support for their practice means that Indigenous workers often gravitate to their community for cultural affirmation and guidance (as discussed in earlier sections of this chapter). Networking with other Indigenous practitioners is also important because it means that these workers no longer have to continually justify their practice. In this excerpt Sue tries to clarify the elements of this difference:

I think it's being with other Aboriginal people and not having to explain or justify your Aboriginality or the way you do things and it is also very much a family feel. Like we can call on each other for support. You can be who you are here you don't have to hide elements of your identity like your cultural identity or your sexuality and it's very much respected. We all know what each other's going through. I don't have to explain to anybody why there are so many deaths because we're all involved with

that. We all have relationships with each other and because we're such a small community we all know who those people are anyway. There's just a general acceptance across the board. (Sue)

Sue shares here another aspect of her identity - her sexuality. Feeling accepted by her peers for being gay means that she can truly be herself at work and this releases in Sue her capacity to be creative and effective.

For Zhara being accepted by her supervisors feels at times like an impossible goal.

In the professional setting here I feel like I am being watched. I wanted to resign because of personal issues in my life a couple of months ago and my boss said no I want you to stay. Which felt good, you know I felt like I got some good feedback. I feel like I have to work twice as hard as the other workers do. In a way I need to be careful about my spelling mistakes and my language, because I am getting comments about this. I think now my language is good. Good feedback can also be patronizing, In general I am getting good support and my colleagues understand things. I have a good professional relationship with my clients. (Zhara)

Zhara's concern that she often finds it necessary to work twice as hard as other workers is shared by a number of participants (Bindi, Edith, Emma, Jenny and Sue) and will be explored in more depth in Chapter 6 as an issue of professional identity. For Zhara being a Middle Eastern born and educated social worker places her in a more vulnerable position and this makes her feel wary about being open with her supervisor.

An important development in the supervisory literature is acknowledgement that the cultural context in which practice occurs not only requires attention to how workers are engaging with individuals and communities from diverse cultures but also demands an exploration of the influence of the worker's cultural identity on their practice. According to Hawkins and Shohet (2000) transcultural supervision requires both the supervisor and the supervisee to reflect on "their own culturally defined behaviour, mind sets, emotional ground and motivational roots" (p. 102), as well as on the cultural biases that are inherent in social work theories, learning processes and practice environments. This includes reflection on the processes that supervisors may adopt in the evaluation of their staff. Thus working is never regarded as a culturally neutral activity and workers will inevitably view the world from their own cultural perspectives (Hawkins & Shohet, p.102).

This model of supervision does appear to have been adopted by some of the participants supervisors. Alf felt supported in his practice because his supervisor was prepared to acknowledge the cultural pressures that he confronted:

I was lucky I had a good social worker who was really supportive. He was an Asian, Chinese man and he was very receptive. He wouldn't sort of overwhelm me with what he thought, being Chinese himself, he'd experienced a lot of racism in Australia. He taught me a lot of good work techniques and gave me a lot of theory and therapy books to read and he worked with me on a lot of cases. He'd never come across an Indigenous social worker and he was really impressed with that I think. We forged a really good bond. I offloaded a lot of stuff on him. Last year was unbelievable there were a lot of deaths and serious problems. (Alf)

Alf and his supervisor were able to form a close working relationship that was based on mutual respect. Alf draws a parallel between his supervisor's experiences of racism and the issues confronted by the Indigenous community. This common link fostered the development of a supervisory relationship in which Alf was able to talk about his struggle to maintain clear and consistent personal and professional boundaries in practice.

Recognising that supervision needed to involve discussion of the ethical nature of boundary conflicts was an important goal for a number of workers and supervisors such as John, who supervised a large team of drug and alcohol workers:

I think supervision is on a number of levels. There's supervision in terms of workload monitoring and then there is supervision that's really about the field and the agency and how you work in it. Supervision also involves discussion about clients and your approach with clients but also there's the personal stuff. Even though we say, OK we've got these boundaries but some people don't have the boundaries too well and we've got to talk about that stuff all the time. I don't think you can get to a point where you say, I've got this sorted out, because you're fooling yourself I mean I've been in situations where I've had to stop and think, hang on, am I getting off the beam here? Am I doing something inappropriate here? Am I disclosing too much of myself because I think this client's deserving or I really like them I think they're a wonderful person, they deserve a break or something? Whereas I wouldn't do that with another client. I still get into those situations where I pull back and think, hang on, what

am I doing here? Am I getting off the beam? I think that happens to all workers at any time. (John)

John's recognition of the vulnerable and ongoing nature of the construction of personal and professional boundaries meant that he provided room in supervision for discussion and sharing of these issues. John readily admits his own experiences of inappropriate self-disclosure focusing not only on the relational nature of these responses but also on the reality that it is not possible for workers to assert that 'they have got it sorted'. The engagement of the self in practice is changeable and variable and this reinforces my view that the process of boundary construction occurs along a continuum. That is the intersection of the personal and the professional self is continually reshaped as workers engage in practice.

Ethical self-reflection is acknowledged in the social work literature (O'Connor et al., 1995) as an important skill in achieving ethical practice and involves "the systematic exploration of how we ought to act in relation to others: what we see as right and wrong action, or the good and bad in life" (p. 217). Critical self-reflection was a core skill that John drew upon to appraise his own practice and he encouraged his supervisees to embark on the same processes as a way of monitoring their practice. However the experiences of John and the other research participants of the use of self in practice challenge O'Connor et al's. notion that ethical self-reflection requires workers to embark on the critical examination of dualisms, such as determining what is right and wrong. The experience of the use of self that is explored in this research highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of the personal and the professional self. Embarking on a process of determining what is right and wrong about the construction of boundaries diminishes these complexities.

The supervisory and practice experiences that are presented in this chapter also demonstrate that while discussion of boundary issues does occur in supervision the focus is generally on the consequences stemming from boundary incursions. The participants' stories broaden this focus by highlighting the need to explore in supervision the multifaceted nature of the construction of boundaries in practice. Further discussion of these issues will continue throughout the thesis.

4.5 Conclusion

The aim of this first data chapter has been to present stories from the research which highlight the range of contextual pressures and opportunities that construct personal and professional boundaries. The diverse experiences of the participants demonstrate that boundary construction is a complex process that varies according to contextual factors such as community membership, cultural identity, geographical size and location and organisational processes. Underpinning these factors are relational, cultural and historical dimensions that form a continuum of influence on the use of self in practice.

An important issue to emerge in this chapter is the varying influences that the context of practice exerts on participants with different cultural identities. The Indigenous and CALD participants are strongly influenced by the social and familial connections that they share with the communities with whom they practice, while the practice of the Anglo and Celtic Australian participants is more likely to be influenced by the size and nature of the practice context as well as agency and supervisory relationships. The construction of their personal and professional boundaries are also informed by the connections that they make with individual clients, with factors such as gender, class and professional identity exerting a strong influence on their use of self (see Chapters 5, 6 & 7).

The aim of the next two data chapters is to further strengthen this argument by exploring how gender (Chapter 5) and class and professional identity (Chapter 6) inform the engagement of the self in practice. The purpose is to develop a theory that reflects the complex nature of personal and professional boundaries as intersections of knowledge, experience and identity.

5 Gendered boundaries

5.1 Introduction

I think gender is an incredibly important part of any sort of relationship with another person, whether it's personal or professional. And you know it's no surprise that Australian social workers are 80% female although recently there's been quite a shift. I think it's more like 65% are female. So that'll be interesting to see what sort of impact that has longer term on how the profession is viewed. But, in terms of gender in my work and my boundaries, research shows that women tend to have a higher understanding of boundary issues than men. (Elizabeth)

Elizabeth's views about the influence of gender on her practice and her construction of boundaries suggest that gender plays a significant role in her use of self. Elizabeth identified a number of dimensions of gender as influential in social work, namely the relational and the professional. Gender impacts on all relationships, whether personal or professional, and in the professional realm it is possible to discern different expectations of men and women in practice. These expectations partly define the social work profession as predominantly female and therefore largely involved with the professionalisation of female traits such as the provision of care and support. Elizabeth identifies men as increasing their influence in social work but also as more vulnerable to boundary conflicts and incursions.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how gender influences the construction of personal and professional boundaries. The research

participants identify a range of different ways in which their gender and the gender of their clients inform their use of self in practice. Two distinct aspects of gender emerge as dominant - the professional and cultural constructions of gender. The professional construction incorporates gendered expectations of male and female social workers that emanate from gendered notions of caring and different agency practices and expectations of male and female workers (Mark, John, Emma, Noonee and Scott).

Underpinning the professional construction of gender is a relational dimension that influences the worker client relationship. That is, the research participants identify that they respond differently to different clients and the gender of the client is but one factor that informs their practice. It is important to note throughout this and subsequent chapters that the term 'worker client relationship' refers to a range of social work practices with individuals, families, groups and communities (see Participant Table 2, Chapter 3).

The second dimension that will be explored is the cultural construction of gender. A number of the Indigenous and CALD participants recognise that their practice is informed by cultural expectations of how male and female workers relate to the men and women who are seeking their assistance. These culturally determined gendered expectations require workers such as Alf, Bindi and Sue to think carefully about who they are working with and how they negotiate these relationships. This challenges the workers to reconstruct their personal and professional boundaries in order to allow for both a merging and a separation of identities.

The argument that I wish to present is that both the professional and cultural constructions of gender present mixed messages to the research participants about the construction of boundaries. Professional expectations signal to the research participants that they need to work with men and women in a consistent and professionally informed manner, that requires the personal and professional self to be clearly separated by a boundary that is recognizable and purposeful (Herlihy & Corey, 1997). Yet the social work literature also identifies that the worker's gender can influence how the worker engages the self, with a powerful message that male social workers are particularly 'at risk' of experiencing boundary incursions as a result of forming dual relationships with their clients, that is relationships

that go beyond the client-worker relationship such as friendships or/and business partnerships (Reamer, 2001; Strom-Gottfried, 1999). This places male workers in an often-precarious position and exposes a paradox that masculinity means increased professional status as well as professional vulnerability.

The cultural constructions of gender mean that Indigenous and CALD workers often confront complex and competing issues. The need to be culturally sensitive to gender issues means that workers are aware of the need to make careful decisions about who they work with, yet the sheer demand for their labour requires workers to counter culturally determined gendered expectations and meet individual and community needs as they arise. These workers also confront professional expectations that go against the gendered demands of their communities. This leaves many participants feeling uncertain about how to engage their self in practice. Fundamentally recognising both the professional and cultural dimensions of the self supports my evolving theory of boundaries as socially constructed and relationally and culturally informed.

Another important aspect of these cultural expectations of gendered relations are that all workers, regardless of their ethnic identity, bring culturally determined expectations and responses to their practice. The emphasis in this chapter on the culturally defined experience of the CALD and Indigenous workers highlights areas of cultural differences that are identified and named by the participants. This reinforces our understanding of the cultural differences that exist within the profession.

5.2 Defining gender

Before embarking on an analysis of the data and a critical discussion of the literature, it is important to present the definition of gender that informs this chapter. In this inquiry 'gender' is defined as socially constructed and incorporating three key dimensions:

It is a social relationship that is both independent and autonomous from and at the same time shaped by other social relations such as race and economic status. It is a form of power and affects our theories and practices of justice.

It is a category of thought. That is thinking is both subtly and overtly gender-bound and biased. Every culture constructs ideas about gender, and in turn these ideas help structure and organize all other forms of thinking and practice as well. For example, gender helps construct our ideas about nature and science, the public and the private, and the rational and the irrational.

Gender is a central constituting element in each person's sense of self and in each culture's idea of what it means to be a person. Gender also partly structures how each person experiences and expresses him or her self. (Flax, 1990, p. 25-26)

These dimensions encompass how gender is constituted and experienced. In this way Elizabeth's opening story can be viewed as a commentary on the meaning that gender evokes in her personal and professional life. Gender shapes her personal and professional self and also plays a role in defining the identity of the social work profession as it undergoes a shift in gender balance. Capturing these constructions of gender relations is the aim of this chapter.

5.3 Professional constructions of gender

Men in social work

Well I think that the influence of gender on my boundaries and on my practice is really complex. I think it's different for different people. I think sometimes it's an advantage in that I've had quite a lot of women say to me, "I was really worried when I knew you were a man but now I've realised that it's OK and that there are some men that are different, which is really helpful." I think sometimes it is linked to the idea of legitimacy, which is a really awful thing to say, but I think it's a reality for some people, usually women, see male social workers as somehow more legitimate in terms of being professional which is interesting. (Scott)

Scott is reflecting on the many ways that gender influenced his practice. He regarded his ability to present an alternate construction of masculinity to his female clients as an important strength in his practice because it gave women an opportunity to explore stereotypical thinking and experiences. Scott also recognised that his gender influenced his professional status and was linked to the notion that men carry a greater level of professional legitimacy, especially in the eyes of women seeking social work services. The paradox of Scott playing a role in presenting an alternative view of men

as counsellors and then reflecting on his gender as enhancing his professional status reflects a tension in the construction of masculinity in social work. John reflects on some of these tensions in his work for a drug and alcohol service:

I think about 70% of our clients are male and we get particular issues because a lot of people come along saying, I want to see a male counsellor and well we don't have enough significant male people to provide to especially young guys who are in a situation where it makes a hell of a difference if it is a male person. I think it makes a difference because, I don't want to sound sexist about this, but I think there are a lot of guys that we see who come from single parent families and they haven't had a male person to relate to or if they have it has been a very bad relationship. So we need to provide a kind of mentor process. (John)

John's anxiety about being viewed as sexist in expressing his opinions about the inadequacy of female parenting are similar to Scott's concerns that his link between professional status and gender 'sound awful'. One interpretation of these expressions of concern is that John and Scott were merely sensitive about being interviewed by a woman and they did not want to offend me by expressing sexist views. An extension of this interpretation is the view that John and Scott's concerns reflect the need for male social workers to be aware of discriminating structures in society and of not perpetuating patriarchal hierarchies (Camilleri & Jones, 2001).

Another important aspect of John's story are his experiences of taking on the role of mentor to young men who are requesting assistance from male social workers. This requires John to carefully consider how to work with these young men and this involves reflecting on the use of self in practice. Scott also encounters in his practice young men who are looking for a role model:

I worked with a teenager at one stage a young guy; he'd had a hell of a life. His father had committed suicide, his stepfather was abusive, his mother was basically uncaring and he'd committed some criminal offences and stolen a car. His skills were so limited that he thought that if you eat cornflakes you get your average daily requirements of nutrition because it says so on the side of the box. So I worked really hard with him and realised that, he didn't see me as his father because he didn't have one, he'd never had one in a sense, but he was desperately searching for some sort of replacement, some sort of role model I guess, so I decided to let him take that on. He became incredibly dependent

for a while. I got really worried about it and I thought, oh, I'll just let it go and see what happens. He was demanding of my time, needy when he saw me, he wanted me to make decisions for him and I'd help him through them.

This process went on for probably three years and then one day he just started to assert that he was independent and he could do what he wanted to do. It was almost like he got through the teenage years and I thought, fine this is really interesting process to watch and help him through. He left and got married and set up a family in another capital city and then he started making contact, because I'd sort of kept in contact. It was like he just wanted to say, look how well I'm doing, because he just didn't have anyone else to do that to, so I just let that happen, and it continues to happen every now and then, so he'll contact me once or twice a year by ringing me at home. Yes I think he really needed my intervention and I think it would have been damaging not to. In fact I know it would have been. (Scott)

Working with this vulnerable young man required Scott to extend his identity from one of social worker to role model. For Scott this meant allowing for a degree of 'dependency' to occur, extending contact over a length of time and giving the young man access to his home phone number. All of these responses indicate that this working relationship influenced Scott's construction of personal and professional boundaries. Similar role model experiences are identified by Alf, Bindi and Clinton and will be discussed in the latter part of this chapter as examples of culturally constructed gendered expectations and experiences.

An important aspect of Scott's working relationship with the young man was Scott's recognition that his client was lacking a consistent and stable male role model. In responding to these needs Scott 'cared for' this young man. According to Camilleri and Jones (2001) 'caring for' involves a degree of intimacy between the carer and the cared-for and "requires the professional to recognise, even to make central in theory and practice, the individuality of the person receiving the service" (p. 28-29). Men in social work have traditionally been identified with 'caring about' activities that are regarded as largely intellectual and embedded in discourses of power and control (p. 28). John and Scott's experiences and those of the Indigenous workers (Alf and Clinton) that are documented in the latter part of the chapter are powerful examples of men in social work reconstructing care. These participants are male social workers who are responding to the

individual needs of their clients by developing close working relationships, often in the form of mentor or role model, and in doing so are challenging an assumption embedded in patriarchal society that "caring for someone is a naturally feminine characteristic" (Camilleri & Jones, p. 32).

Emma expresses concern that stereotypical views about male counsellors pervade both the helping profession and the general community:

I think some of the men in our field (child protection) worry that people are suspicious about them. People wonder why these men want to do this sort of work? So there are a few stereotypes that male social workers have to work against. (Emma)

Male social workers who engage in 'caring for' activities such as counselling in child protection, confront an aura of suspicion that identifies them as somehow 'different' (Camilleri & Jones, 2001, p.30). Another consequence of encouraging male social workers to engage in 'caring for' activities is that this practice by its very nature challenges the construction of personal and professional boundaries, thus leaving male social workers vulnerable to accusations of inappropriate boundary incursions. Mark and Emma recognise these issues in their practice:

Our team frequently discusses the issue of male counsellors seeing girls. Is it appropriate? We often talk about whether the male counsellors are worried about potential allegations. A couple of times we've talked about the male counsellors using a room with a one way screen and someone watching because we were worried about a possible allegation. (Emma)

I think one of the issues in high schools for males generally, has been an awareness of how interactions with girls can be perceived. I certainly know that the previous counsellor at one of the high schools moved into another area of social work because he was concerned about that. He was working in isolation in an office seeing young women and although there had not been any allegations made it could easily happen and that could be potentially quite damaging to his career and himself personally. I think there were a series of incidents that made him come these conclusions. It seemed to be about what young women said to him or did in his room. I think that's often an issue for male counsellors. (Mark)

Emma and Mark are concerned that male social workers, especially those in counselling positions, need to be wary about being accused of developing

inappropriate relationships with their clients, particularly women and young girls. This anxiety is well supported by the social work and therapeutic literature, which alerts the profession to men's vulnerability in forming exploitative dual relationships with their clients (Herlihy & Corey, 1997; Reamer, 2001; Strom-Gottfried, 1999). Mark's colleague responded to these pressures by moving from counselling work into the traditional masculine arena of 'caring about' practice. This concern about gendered boundary violations represents a major dilemma for men in social work.

There are a number of important issues that need to be teased out here. The first is that the literature on dual relationships in social work is primarily concerned with the therapeutic context, with scant consideration given to how social workers engage in other areas of practice such as community work. This places the focus squarely on the relationship between the worker and their individual client. In doing so it calls into question judgments by social workers such as Scott about the individual needs of their clients. Kagle and Giebelhausen (1994) assert that practitioner rationalizations such as these cannot adequately counter the risks to the client that are posed by potentially exploitative dual relationships, rendering Scott's concerns that 'it would have been damaging not to' form a close working alliance and care for this young man are regarded as highly questionable.

Secondly, the dual relationship literature makes a powerful and problematic link between the existence of dual relationships and boundary violations (Reamer, 2001). The discourse is one of caution about the danger of lowering professional standards and a concern for the welfare of individual clients who have been exploited and damaged by these encounters (Kagle & Giebelhausen, 1994). These assertions are underpinned by research findings that identify male workers as the main culprits and female clients as the primary victims (Pope, 1988; Strom-Gottfried, 1999).

One of the problems with this body of literature is the paucity of attention given to the inherent duality that permeates a number of worker-client relationships such as those in which male and female workers share a common cultural identity with their clients, or the dual relationships that occur as a result of living and working in small communities. Discussion of these complex cultural and contextually constructed relationships was the

focus of Chapter 4 of the thesis and further examples of these experiences are presented in the latter part of this chapter.

Another dimension of inherent duality is a view that client-worker relationships need to be built on dialogical foundations that minimize power differentials. While further consideration of the links between dialogical practice and the construction of personal and professional boundaries will be given in Chapters 5, 6 & 7, it is important to briefly explore one aspect of this relationship. Drawing on the need to develop greater authenticity and congruence in practice, writers such as Tomm, as cited in Herlihy & Corey (1997) argue that the active maintenance of interpersonal distance "focuses on the power differential and promotes an objectification of the therapeutic relationship" (p.7). Herlihy and Corey concur with Tomm's perspective and make a crucial distinction between duality itself constituting the ethical problem and the worker's personal tendency to exploit clients or misuse power as the problematic issue. Scott recognises this distinction:

I think if I'd had really clear black and white boundaries it would be incredibly difficult to maintain them. Working with just about anybody I don't have a problem, but when I work with pretty young women sometimes I know that I've got to be really careful. By recognising that and by having really clear ideas about what the client's needs are and what type of intervention will benefit them is important. (Scott)

Scott identifies that constructing reliable and predictable boundaries between his personal and professional self is an unachievable yet important goal. Yet Scott also demonstrates that he has insight into areas of vulnerability that require constant reflection and self-monitoring.

The final area of concern regarding the dual relationship and boundary violation literature that warrants critical exploration is the emphasis on the gendered dualism of man as the perpetrator and woman as the victim (Strom-Gottfried, 1999). Scott again offers a different perspective:

Scott - When I was working at a juvenile detention centre one of the female workers ended up going out with one of the male detainees and that was OK.

Joanna - What was OK about it?

Scott - Well, as far as the relationship went I don't think it was OK, but basically the administration thought that was fine. They didn't have a problem with it, which I found very strange because I know that if any of the male workers had gone out with a female detainee all hell would have flown loose, and the same sorts of things happen in child protection with female perpetrators, so there's some strange gender dynamics out there that are fed by different arguments I guess.

The different arguments that Scott is alluding to relate to traditional feminist perspectives, such as those espoused by radical feminists (Eisenstein, 1984; Sauliner, 1996), which conceptualise women as the victims of male oppression. The 'administration's' tacit consent of the dual relationship between the female worker and the detainee can be regarded as perpetuating a discourse that constructs separate rules for workers on the basis of constructed notions of gender. This relationship may in fact be just as potentially exploitative as one that involves a male worker and a female client, but men are under more scrutiny as a result of broadly published studies that problematise their gendered behaviour. Identifying men as potential perpetrators as well as survivors of violence challenges traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity and further complicates men's constructions of personal and professional boundaries.

The final area of personal and professional boundary construction experienced by male social workers that will be explored in this section is the influence of parenting on the use of self:

People will say stuff like, have you got kids, and they'll check out with you, what would you do about this or what do you think about this? I'm always careful about disclosing my own stuff in the sense that it's got to be done in a way that's useful, productive and it's not about pouring out my own problems or even turning it into a situation where I've got an opportunity to rave about my own situation or my own kids or anything else. So I don't have a strict barrier about not disclosing stuff, but I think it's got to be disclosed at the right time and in the right way and maybe there's a lot of stuff that I wouldn't disclose anyway. For instance I was talking the other day with the parents of one of our clients and the mother said to me, do you have children? I said, yes, I've got three, and essentially that's all she wanted to know. She wanted to know whether I understand some of the issues about kids. I mean I didn't say anything more than that. She kind of nodded a bit and thought, OK, he might understand some of this. (John)

John's reflections about the influence of parenting experiences on his practice reveal the careful consideration that precedes any self-disclosure. John stresses the importance of ensuring that his personal experiences are used purposefully and strategically. His personal and professional boundary needs to be both permeable, allowing for useful disclosure to occur, and protective, preventing inappropriate discussion of personal experiences. John identified that being a parent could reassure some of his clients indicating a greater understanding of their issues. John also recognised that his work experiences influenced his parenting role, leading at times to an

enhanced level of understanding of the needs of his own children. These experiences will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 7.

Mark encounters similar experiences in his practice, highlighting that being a parent makes him more aware of the issues confronting families:

One area that just becomes more obvious once you have children are the needs of children whose parents have a mental illness. It was really obvious in some discussions that we had in the mental health crisis team that often the needs of those children is not in people's consciousness. In a clinical discussion the focus on the individual can be very easily justified because of individual illness. Broadening it out to look at what impact that's having on children and young people in the family and relationships generally is really important. I think probably what has sharpened for me since becoming a father is the need to focus on the individual as part of the family. Although I don't think people have to have experienced something to be empathic although I think it can be helpful. (Mark)

Mark's increased awareness of the need to situate the individual within their wider context broadens the focus of Mark's practice. His reluctance to make a direct link between personal experience and increased empathy warrants closer attention and will be explored in Chapter 7. John and Mark's experiences of parenting and practice are shared by the fathers interviewed in previous research (Zubrzycki, 1998, 1999). Their stories further contribute to a growing recognition that the use of self is informed by a multiplicity of factors that are gendered, cultural and contextual. Identifying how women in social work construct their personal and professional boundaries is the focus of the next section.

Women in social work

In the child abuse field I think it is much easier to be a woman because men have perpetrated so much of the violence that we deal with. The old idea that you had to have a female if you were hurt by a man is shifting now. But I think some of our clients are automatically suspicious of men and feel uncomfortable with male workers. I also think that I engage better with women whereas with male clients I assume that I have to take more time to think about where this person is at. I suppose I assume this kind of sisterhood or that women communicate in similar ways. (Emma)

Emma explores a number of different gendered dimensions to her practice. Working in the child protection field, which is dominated by the presence of male perpetrators and female survivors, means that Emma forms a bond with her female clients that is based on a shared gendered identity. Emma acknowledges that even though there has been some shift in professional practice about the need to primarily develop working relationships on the basis of gender, it is nevertheless easier for her to engage with women. She identifies two foundations upon which these alliances are formed - a common sisterhood and familiar patterns of communication.

Emma describes the boundary implications of this gendered alliance as varied and relationally informed. She recognises that the nature of her working relationships with female clients are diverse. With some women Emma shares personal experiences and stories while with others her professional persona is more rigid. Thus her personal and professional boundary is constructed along a continuum that reflects personal responses and professional judgments. For Emma the experiences of mothering are one of the key influences in the construction of a more permeable boundary:

When I came back to work after having my son one of the first things that I looked forward to and noticed was that I felt more confident with parents. I looked forward to them asking me if I had children and I found myself dropping in a hint that I understand because I am a mother. I had so many years of clients feeling disappointed, that I didn't really understand. So the first thing for me was I am a mother now, I've got more credibility.

I thought I was a warm empathetic person before and even though I didn't have children I thought I understood. Now I think it's just another

level of understanding that I didn't anticipate. It's more empathetic whereas it was sympathetic before. So when a mum starts talking about the pain of something awful happening to her child I feel it much more deeply I think than I did before. I think the most important thing is that I know how hard it is now. I think I am much more empathetic about just what a struggle it is for most of the people I see to raise children. So I feel a much stronger connection with mothers generally and I think I ask some questions differently.

I sense a relief from my clients once I tell them that I have a child. I know there was one occasion in the early days when I had my son where I told the mother that I was working with that I had a child. I did it because I was so desperate to impress her. But on reflection it was not very useful in that case. So I'm pretty honest with myself about those things but I don't see it as transgressing boundaries I see it as sharing part of my social work identity. (Emma)

Emma's reflections on the changes to her practice since becoming a parent are a powerful story of how the self informs social work. There are many dimensions to these experiences. The first is that Emma can identify which aspects of her practice have changed. She is acutely aware that being a mother enhanced her professional credibility and shaped her professional identity. Emma inferred that her parenting identity was generally welcomed by her clients thus suggesting a link between personal experience and increased professional knowledge, skills and credibility. John's practice experiences, presented earlier, suggest that this link while commonly perceived by helping professions, is complex and problematic. The exploration of the transferability of experiences and knowledge between the personal and professional self is fundamental to the development of theory about the construction of boundaries in social work and will be considered in greater depth in Chapter 7.

Another aspect of Emma's story is that her use of self-disclosure about her mothering experiences and identity were variable and influenced by her ability to be self-reflective and sensitive to her client's needs. Emma's admission that her own 'need to tell' could be misguided, suggests that the process of personal and professional boundary construction occurs along a continuum of permeability. Deeper experiences of empathy with parents meant that Emma asked different questions and attended to her clients needs with more insight and emotion. Further consequences for workers of this stronger level of engagement are explored in Chapter 7.

Sue's experiences of being a mother and a social worker resonate with Emma's practice story:

Sue - I think my experiences of being a parent very much influence my worldview and the way I look at things. When I've been working with people who for example have experienced death I suppose I'm more aware of how their family situation impacts on the family and their kids. And within the community the fact that I have kids makes me a lot more accepted and people will bring their kids to me.

Joanna - So do parents have a higher status on the Aboriginal community?

Sue - Yes particularly mothers, they are very highly thought of.

Sue recognised that her capacity to understand the issues confronting families had been enhanced by her parenting experiences thus suggesting that she was working from an increased knowledge base, a broader 'world view'. An added dimension of Sue's experience was the increased status that her identity as a mother evoked in the Aboriginal community. The role that cultural expectations play in the practice of male and female social workers will be explored in the final section of this chapter.

Elizabeth's practice experiences highlight yet another aspect of the influence of parenting on the use of self in social work:

I can certainly think of times with children that I have been working with, when I have wanted to pick them up and cuddle them and that's, I mean I don't act on that but that to me indicates the need to talk about it in supervision. Very often those situations have been similar to those experienced by my own children and this has just sparked something in me. I think would be confusing for my clients if I acted on that sort of impulse. (Elizabeth)

In this story Elizabeth constructed a stronger personal and professional boundary in order to protect the children that she was working with from inappropriate physical contact. Elizabeth recognised that her parenting experiences made her more vulnerable at times and her ability to be self-reflective facilitated her capacity to seek support and supervision.

Emma, Sue and Elizabeth's experiences strongly resonate with the stories that I gathered in my research on parenting and practice (Zubrzycki, 1998,

1999). One of the key themes that emerged was that the practice of mothers who are social workers is influenced by their personal experiences of parenting and their personal and professional boundaries are constructed to allow for both permeability and separation of the self to occur.

The influence of personal experiences of caring in the practice of women in social work has been recognised historically as a core dimension of the 'femaleness' of the profession (Brown, 1986; Camilleri, 1996). The social work profession arose out of the efforts of women to transfer the caretaking and nurturing functions that are defined as woman's functions from the personal sphere to the broader social arena (Walton, as cited in Brown, p. 223). Camilleri and Jones (2001) argue that the professional identity of female social workers is linked to their identities as partners, mothers and daughters, with woman primarily occupying roles that require them to undertake 'caring for' activities (p. 28). The practice stories presented in this chapter both support and extend the notion that caring in social work is inherently gendered.

Men and women share the experience of constructing gendered boundaries in their practice. John and Mark's stories about their practice being influenced by their fathering, and Scott's role model experiences, challenge the gendered dualisms of care that permeate the social work profession. The self is continually in process and is constructed through dialogical exchanges that have gendered, relational and contextual dimensions. This has implications in the way that the social work profession conceptualises the relationship between the self, caring, gender and the process of boundary construction. Examination of this relationship will be the focus of Chapter 7.

Another dimension of the gendered construction of boundaries that has been identified in the participant stories is the capacity for female social workers to engage more readily with their female clients 'sharing a common sisterhood and familiar patterns of communication' (Emma). A focus on commonality of experiences was a central feature of early feminist social work literature (Dominelli & McLeod, 1989; Marchant & Wearing, 1986; Nice, 1988; Sims, 1994; White, 1995). The writings of female social workers such as Sims stressed the links between personal experience and an increased empathy with women, "The woman worker is continually aware that she shares a feminine biology and psychology with her woman clients,

and cannot avoid exploring the desire for motherhood, continuity and family life which women express" (p. 26). The need to recognise shared experiences was a fundamental foundation upon which to practice, "The commonalities of our lives as women creates a rich source for practice which affirms rather than denies women's relationships with each other" (Statham, as cited in Nice, p. 70).

A totalizing definition of women's identity and experience has been challenged by post-modern and post-structural feminists who stress the need to embrace multiplicity and diversity:

The experience of being a woman can create an illusionary unity, for it is not the experience of being woman, but the meanings attached to gender, class, race and age at various historical moments that it is important to grasp. (Lewis, 1996, p. 27)

Recognising the socially constructed nature of gender challenges the legitimacy of a singular hegemonic category of identity and experience. The content of women's experience needs to be disassembled, allowing for more critical appraisal and acceptance of diversity. Black women have been particularly active in this area. While rejecting the highly problematic notion of a common sisterhood, they have nevertheless explored the category of 'experience' as a privileged site from which to speak and constitute their identity (Lewis, p. 24-26). These issues will be considered in greater depth in the second section of this chapter and in Chapters 6 & 7.

The concept of totalizing experiences also minimizes recognition that inherent mutuality masks power differentials that underpin the worker-client relationship (White, 1995). Exploring these structural constraints will be a key theme in Chapter 6. A further influence on women's experience and identity is the context in which practice is located, with many social workers' identities contingent upon the expectations imposed by their statutory roles. These issues were the focus of discussion in Chapter 4. Feminist social work practice also means more than just working with women, and women need to work with men in order to challenge gendered behavior and values. Noonee concurs with this perspective:

I had a period in my life where I just worked with women. I was running an infertility support group and I was running my yoga groups and things like that and, it made me very narrow. In some ways I became intolerant of men. After a while I felt, I'm not that sort of person, so I went back to more generic sort of work where I could work with children, with all sorts of people, with men, women, and actually most of my caseload now is men. (Noonee)

Noonee strives to work across many areas of practice. Asserting the need to broaden practice experiences does not diminish the relational dimension that informs a gendered use of self as exemplified by Emma, Sue and Elizabeth. Their stories are not examples of workers essentialising women's experiences, rather these practitioners are extending our understanding of how the professional self continually evolves and responds to relational needs and experiences that are contextual and gendered. Another potent example of this process of construction is the influence of gendered cultural expectations on the use of self. The next section presents participant stories that demonstrate this process.

Cultural constructions of gender

Exploring the influence of culturally determined gender expectations on the construction of personal and professional boundaries is the focus of the final section of this chapter. The experiences of the research participants demonstrate that cultural expectations require both permeability between the personal and the professional self and a need to reinforce separation and clarity of identity. The paucity of professionally trained Indigenous workers places pressures on some participants to counter cultural requirements and form working relationships with clients with whom they share a cultural but not a gendered identity. In these situations clarity of boundaries in order to ensure confidentiality facilitates the development of trust and rapport. Cultural pressures and needs also require Indigenous participants such as Alf, Bindi and Clinton to adopt a gendered role model relationship with some of their clients and this entails constructing a more permeable boundary that facilitates the sharing of personal stories and experiences.

Culturally determined gender expectations also send mixed messages to CALD workers about their need to engage the personal and professional self. Adopting a role model identity requires boundaries to be permeable

allowing for experiences such as parenting to be shared. A lack of cultural acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships reinforces for some participants (Zhara and Jenny) the need to clearly separate their personal and professional identities in order to ensure that their cultural values do not permeate practice responses.

Recognising the culturally determined nature of gendered relations in the Indigenous community is an important feature of Sue's practice:

In the Aboriginal community there are issues that males and females can't speak to each other about. That was a difficulty for some of the clients I was seeing. If the problem wasn't something that was men's business well then I could work with them on the issue but once it became something of that nature, then I was of no use to them. There was no man around to pick up those issues. So for that particular group of men they had nowhere to go. (Sue)

Many of the gendered problems that Sue was dealing with in her practice included issues of abuse experienced by men and women that required the assistance of workers with whom the person shared both a cultural and gendered identity. It is widely recognised in the Indigenous community that differences in gender and age can highlight gaps in power, status, authority and knowledge (Lynne et al., 1998). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community should be regarded as the focal point for the negotiation of suitable gender relations:

The community is the reference point, they're the point at which everyone determines what's going to happen and how through consultation. It's through them that a range of understandings about gender and age issues within different communities from rural to urban perspectives comes into play. (Julwul)

Recognising the existence of generational gendered power relations in Indigenous communities is an important area of cultural knowledge that needs to be applied in practice. All of the Indigenous participants gave examples of working jointly with community members to restore age and gender balance, identifying as particularly significant the need to be sensitive when working with community elders.

The reality of low life expectancy in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities placed pressure on many Indigenous participants to act as role

models particularly on the basis of gender:

Indigenous life expectancy is so low. The way it pans out is that in your own community you won't have anybody left, my own family now there's no men left over the age of 40. Usually the oldest you get in Aboriginal communities is early to late sixties, to sort of look up to I think. In the area that I was working in I was the only male counsellor. (Alf)

Alf identified socio-demographic factors as exerting various influences in his practice and he accepted the need to develop a role model identity for some of the young men that he was working with. The establishment of mutual interests and experiences characterized Alf's practice with these young men:

When I work with some of these young guys if I'm trying to illustrate a point, I'll say, I've had to go through this myself, or I can see that this has happened in my own family. It can just vary from case to case. I always try and work on more their own issues...but if I can see it helping them out well I may sort of bring up my own experiences. (Alf)

Blending personal experiences with professional skills and knowledge gives Alf a strong foundation upon which to develop a 'good' role model relationship. Sharing experiences of racism and abuse between an Indigenous client and their Aboriginal worker can be both powerful and risky given the historical positioning of the social work profession within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community (Gilbert, 2001). These experiences will be the subject of further exploration in Chapter 6.

The variable and relational nature of Alf's use of self-disclosure is an important feature of his practice. This contrasts with the need to proceed cautiously and sensitively with the women that Alf was working with, especially if their problems involved experiences of sexual abuse:

Where I was working I ended up seeing a lot of the females as well, with sexual abuse issues, and that worked out well, but that just shouldn't have been happening, it was just burning me out too much me seeing a lot of the women as well as a lot of the men. It works out better when you can practice properly and have the male for the men's issues and the women's counsellor for the women's issues, but a lot of time there's not a lot of people to go around anyway. A lot of people sometimes women, also wouldn't want to see another woman because of things like confidentiality, I think it can just depend on the case usually. Being a

counsellor it was important to tell them that nothing sort of leaves the four walls and anything they tell you will be kept in confidence. There's a thing they call the Murril Grapevine, which means that everybody knows everything that happens so it's always good to enforce confidentiality. (Alf)

Alf's experiences working with Indigenous women who had experienced abuse suggest a paradoxical quandary. On the one hand he feels good about his practice in this area, yet not being culturally appropriate places him under great pressure 'burning him out too much'. Further exploration of this paradox will be featured at the end of the chapter. The need to maintain cultural integrity when working with gender issues also required Bindi to make careful decisions about disclosing to male supervisors her clients' experiences of sexual abuse:

The girls would not feel comfortable knowing that he was giving supervision. They would feel very shamed and very embarrassed so I could not talk with male supervisors about specific issues such as sexuality and sexual assault. (Bindi)

Bindi's capacity to make use of her supervisory relationship was constrained by the needs and responses of the young women that she was working with. This further contributed to her requirement to receive culturally appropriate supervision that was identified in Chapter 4. The implications of these findings for supervision will be further explored in the final chapter (Chapter 8).

Working sensitively with young Indigenous men and women who have experienced abuse requires participants such as Alf and Bindi to apply their cultural knowledge of gender issues in the development of professional responses that are culturally sensitive and competent. These practice responses are regarded as frequently problematic because they represent tensions between cultural awareness and professional responsibility. Cultural knowledge, in the form of hegemonic prescriptions as identified by Sue and Julwul, dictate a specifically gendered response to sexual abuse. Yet, according to Alf and Bindi, resource issues and a professional duty of care inform in many cases the development of the worker-client relationship. The intersection of the personal and the professional becomes a site of culturally contested and constructed meanings and identities

within which the participants develop boundaries along a continuum of relationally informed practice.

Another dimension of culturally gendered identity that influences the construction of personal and professional boundaries is the work that the CALD participants do both outside and inside their communities. Zhara's experiences of working with non-Muslim women provides an interesting example of how cultural stereotyping facilitates her capacity to engage with women experiencing abuse:

Zhara – I do not have evidence, but I think some ladies feel more comfortable talking about abusive relationships with me.

Joanna – That is interesting, why do you think that is?

Zhara – Because they expect women in my culture to be submissive so they feel comfortable talking about these issues without being judged. Because sometimes they have been to another counsellor and their experience was not good they were judged by them when they started talking to them about their experiences with their husbands.

Joanna – So what do you think is the difference?

Zhara – I think I respect that they are the experts and I help them recognize strength in themselves and to be able to discover how to prioritise their lives.

Zhara appears to be complicit with the view that she is regarded by non-Muslim women as submissive, an identity that stands in opposition to the values of empowerment that underpin her intervention. Zhara's work with Muslim women is developed on very different foundations. Her experiences of working with a group of Iraqi women who regarded her as a woman to 'look up to' are in stark contrast to Zhara's work with non-Muslim women, who regarded her as potentially less judgmental than her Anglo-Australian colleagues. Sharing a cultural identity as well as experiences of migration and parenting merge with her professional identity to produce role model relationships:

Zhara - In the group that I ran for Iraqi women it was important to offer them practical help rather than counselling. So I started to provide them with activities and there would be opportunities for them to talk to me. This may be totally different than running a group for white middle class

women. These women needed to learn something, how to sew or make ceramic or something like that. They loved it. They would be doing something like sewing and on the other hand they would be talking about their experiences in Iraq about torture and about coming to Australia and it would be really wonderful. 2 – 3 hours would go by very quickly. The group became more and more popular. I moved to another job and I could not continue it and also because of the pressure that I could not get what I wanted or the resources that I wanted. I was using my own car, I needed a bus because as the group became more popular I was picking everyone up, which was really difficult.

Joanna – When you were working with those women were you relating to them in a specific way?

Zhara – Yes. They were more able to talk about their experience. They trusted me even their husbands trusted me. They looked at me like a role model. I was driving and they asked me about this, I wasn't forcing things on them, until they were ready. Like one day I took them to a coffee shop. It was something they were not used to. But they felt comfortable with me to do that, and they were talking to me and trusting me. The idea was that they trusted me enough to try something new with me.

Joanna – Did you talk to them about your experiences as a mother? Did that influence your practice?

Zhara - Yes because some of them were not yet mothers they were newly married so they looked at me in different ways. Some of them asked me about how I had experienced coming to Australia about some parenting issues like the dilemmas of raising children in different cultures. Some women talked to me as a mother, others talked to me as an educated woman. One of the ladies called me the other day and said that she missed the group. No one is organizing it again.

Zhara's culturally gendered status as a mother and professional women contributed to her standing as a role model who was willing to share aspects of her personal experiences as a key modality in her social work intervention. Zhara's personal and professional boundaries did not merely define the social distance between Zhara and the Iraqi women, but represented racialized experiences and expectations.

One area of practice that impacted on the permeability of both Zhara and Jenny's personal and professional boundaries was their work with the gay and lesbian community. Both workers found it difficult to accept the

dominant culture's relatively permissive views regarding homosexual relationships:

In the Middle East we are mainly monocultural so that was a big difference for me. Also some values like dealing with gay and lesbian people. In the Middle East when we are dealing with people who are gay they are coming to us to get advice and support in overcoming this, to get rid of it. They are considered a problem. Here these people want to get support to continue living this way. So that was very difficult for me it was contradicting a bit with my values. I had to think about how I was going to deal with this as a professional. I think well I do not have to believe in it, like a Doctor, you don't have to agree or believe in everything, but you can deal with it in a professional and neutral way. I had to work hard and to think about. I could not find where to go to get support about these issues. I had to do it on my own. (Zhara)

Jenny - Working in the homosexual community that is a big issues for me, although my social work training tells me I should respect each individual as to who they are. I can respect them but it does not mean that I feel comfortable working with them on a daily basis.

Joanna – Is that a cultural or a personal issue?

Jenny – Both I guess. I guess before I came here from China, I had heard about the term homosexual but I do not know what it is because I'd never seen it.

Zhara and Jenny's discussions about the homosexual community are examples of the dimensions of culture, gender and sexuality intersecting to create a boundary that ensures that both workers present themselves as 'neutral professionals'. The positioning of Zhara and Jenny's cultural values as oppositional to dominant societal and professional values is recognised by both workers as potentially problematic and limiting their capacity to fulfil their professional responsibilities.

5.4 Exploring gendered and culturally constructed boundaries

The discursive constructions of gender that are experienced by the CALD participants parallel those presented by the Indigenous workers. Both groups of social workers are constructing personal and professional

boundaries that are gendered and racialized. The self in practice is variously located and constructed relationally and professionally with the key modality of experience informing the meanings attached to relationships and interventions.

One of the central dilemmas highlighted previously, was the paradox of having to be culturally sensitive and competent, and yet feeling a need to respond from a professional frame of reference. One way of conceptualising these gendered experiences is to explore how the concepts of cultural sensitivity and cultural competence are challenged by structural constraints. Bessarab (2000) defines cultural sensitivity as "the acquisition of knowledge of a particular culture's values, attitudes and beliefs as well as practices. Cultural competence refers to the ability and skill level of workers to apply their cultural sensitivity in practice" (p. 83).

However, the application of cultural knowledge is also mediated by the notion of cultural experiences and identity. This means that being culturally sensitive and competent requires a careful positioning of the self. Zhara's work with her Iraqi women's group is a useful example of an active use of the cultural and gendered self. While the work of Alf and Bindi highlights that the intertwining of the cultural and gendered self and the professional self is often fraught, with structural issues such as the availability of suitable qualified workers and resources constraining culturally sensitive and competent practice. The process of boundary construction reflects these tensions.

Bourdieu, as cited in Aymer (2002) develops the concept of habitus to understand the issues confronting black social workers. Habitus is "a sense of ones place in society which emerges through the process of social differentiation" (Bourdieu, p. 17). The process of transition from black person to black professional:

So the initial entry of black people into social work or mental health professions that has happened over the last 20 years or so, represents a breach of the boundaries between one habitus and another, and that in itself has been quite a difficult journey to make. (Bourdieu, p. 17)

Reflecting on the process of 'becoming a social worker' was the focus of Chapter 4, with the stories presented in this chapter building knowledge of

the complex and powerful meanings of these experiences. The process of breaching boundaries is frequently experienced by Indigenous participants and reflects a concern about where to place their personal experience. Which side of the boundary should personal and culturally informed and gendered experiences be located? While these questions will be considered in greater depth in Chapter 7, it is important here to explore the gendered meanings that are elucidated by the participants' practice stories.

Lewis' (1996) study of black social workers in England explores the positioning of personal 'experience' in practice. The themes are strikingly similar to those of the Indigenous and CALD workers that are presented throughout this thesis. Influenced by poststructural feminist theory, Lewis asserts that the "foundational element in the constitution of the community of black woman was experience. Experience was seen as giving rise to an internal strength, an ability to empathize with clients, a methodical and unhesitant approach to the work" (p. 44). The black social workers identified their experiences of oppression as particularly influential in understanding their practice (see Chapter 6 for further consideration of these issues).

The central argument presented by Lewis (1996) is that 'experience' needs to be regarded as an understanding and a form of knowledge. The complex production of experience incorporates gender, race and class as core dimensions:

Rather than taking its ontological status for granted, experience needs to be situated in wider configurations of social, cultural, economic and political relations if the specificities of certain constellations of experience are to be evacuated. Only through such a situational reading can the subjectivities and identities produced by experience be understood and analysed. (Lewis, p. 49)

Exploring how these subjectivities and identities interact and construct personal and professional boundaries underpins my analysis of the participants' stories. The structural emphasis in reaching an understanding of the positioning of experience in practice is highly significant and contributes to an understanding that personal and professional boundaries are socially constructed. Analysing the different structural dimensions in this process becomes a core feature in developing a theory of boundaries

that reflects both the contemporary context of practice and the culturally gendered diverse experiences of workers.

5.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore how gender becomes a central constituting element in all facets of the practice experiences presented by the male and female research participants. Understanding the diversity of gendered experiences has been a core feature of the analysis.

The complex dimensions of gender that have been identified in this chapter suggest that the construction of personal and professional boundaries occurs at an intersection of the self that is continually in process. The contested and structurally informed and determined nature of these processes emerges with greater clarity in the next chapter as I explore the dimensions of class and professional identity and the role of each in boundary construction.

6 Class, professional identity and the construction of personal and professional boundaries

6.1 Introduction

I find it easier to relate to people from lower class backgrounds and poverty situations. I do not know if that is because of my upbringing and the experience of my Indigenous roles and class background. But sometimes I find that, and I am making a judgement call here, from my experiences working with non-Indigenous social workers it is hard for them to connect at that level because they see themselves as - I am a social worker now. I have a degree and I am up here now. (Jess)

Sharing with people experiences of poverty, class and Indigenous culture are all structural dimensions that shaped Jess's social work identity and practice. These dimensions counter the distance created by professionalism that elevates workers to 'higher' positions than their clients, reinforcing a more rigid personal and professional boundary, and leading to difficulties in engagement.

The purpose of this final data chapter is to explore how the structural dimensions of class and professional identity inform the construction of personal and professional boundaries in social work. Building on the previous data chapters that identified context (Chapter 4) and gender (Chapter 5) as powerful factors in determining the use of self in practice, analysis and interpretation of the participants' experiences will provide the chapter's focus and structure.

The key argument that will be presented is that the influence of class and professional identity on the use of self in practice indicates that the personal and professional boundary is socially constructed and structurally determined. The complex role that structural dimensions play in practice challenges the professional discourse that focuses on boundary construction as an individual social worker's action and responsibility. The process of developing a professional identity requires participants to separate their professional persona from their personal identity, both are class- based and culturally defined.

The participant's experiences highlight that boundary construction is based on modernist ideals about the need to maintain the dichotomous identities of the personal and the professional and as such fails to reflect the complex interplay of forces that shape professional identity. The struggle to construct clear boundaries creates tensions for participants as they strive to maintain professional standards.

I will begin this chapter with definitions of key concepts: class and class-consciousness, identity and professional identity.

6.2 Defining class and class consciousness

One definition of class, refers to social class as "groups in the hierarchy which have similar social characteristics such as income, wealth and educational achievement. This definition is based on the belief that people can be grouped together because they share a number of valued attributes" (Earle & Fopp, 1999, pp. 130-133).

For the purposes of this research, it is important to broaden this definition of class to include a constructionist perspective. This involves encompassing the social, contextual, historical and cultural constructions of class and the meanings that individuals attribute to their own or perceived class identity. Illustrating the strengths of adopting a constructionist perspective Walkowitz (1999) argues that:

When we speak of the middle class, social analysts need to clarify to whom they refer and what they think the category means to their historical actors.

Moreover, because the definitions of middle class shift and are contested, it is necessary to examine the languages of class with historic specificity. (p. 21)

Identifying middle class in particular, as situated in a contested "in between space" (Walkowitz, p.6) suggests that class is, "Not like a marble with hard, well-formed boundaries; rather it has fuzzy permeable, and changing boundaries" (p. 6). These permeable and inconsistent boundaries of class are reflected, for example, in the historical struggle by social workers about whether or not they occupy the territory of the middle class.

Writers such as Mullaly (1997), Walkowitz and De Montigny (1995) argue that membership to a profession such as social work is a middle class attribute. Being middle class however, is not comfortably accepted by all members of the social work profession, as exemplified by some of the participants' stories (Jess, Alf, Clinton and Emma) that are presented in this chapter. The increase in social distance, which accompanies a middle class persona, is regarded as exacerbating the power differential between the social worker and their client, in particular clients who are marginalised and oppressed within society (De Montigny). In addition, the ambiguity, fragility and marginality of social worker's class position can be identified in the "constant battle that takes place over practical efforts to define 'standards' and demands by those with the most agency experience and education to limit entry to the professional association" (Walkowitz, p. 7).

Adopting a constructionist perspective on class highlights the historical and cultural construction of class. This is particularly useful when interpreting the stories of the Indigenous participants. The reactions of their communities to the perceived middle class status of the participants are historically situated and reflect tensions about the alienating potential of education and an elevated social status.

Membership to a particular class also means the development of class-consciousness. Reflecting on the transition from working class to middle class identity during his professional education, De Montigny (1995), asserts that the development of class consciousness and class transition is both a personal experience and an experience embedded in a set of social and historical relations and struggles. Jess struggle in the opening quote to reconcile the idea that social work education means increased class and

social status suggests that class-consciousness needs to be explored as another constituting element of the self.

6.3 Defining identity

"Identity is people's source of meaning and experience" (Castells, 1999, p. 6). According to Castells an individual carries a number of identities at any one time. This plurality of identities is a source of stress as it often results in contradictions "in both self-presentation and social action" (p. 6). Recognising "the contradictions inherent in identities is important in allowing us to see and appreciate the complexity of people's everyday lived experience" (Fook, 2002, p. 76).

The process of understanding the formation, presentation and complexity of identity requires us to distinguish between the concepts of identity and role. Roles such as those of parent, social worker, neighbour, and community leader are defined by norms that are established and structured through social institutions and organisations (Castells, 1999, p. 6-7). The influence of role on the individual's behaviour and lived experience is variable and according to Castells is dependent on "negotiations and arrangements between individuals and these institutions and organisations" (p. 7). Whereas "identities are sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through a process of individuation" (Castells, p.7).

Castells (1999) goes on to make the important point that institutionalised social roles can become a source of identity when the individual internalises the role and constructs meaning from this internalisation (p. 7). In other words the social worker, according to Castell's theory of identity, takes on their work role as part of their individual identity when they develop a sense of agency in their practice. In this thesis examples of this transition are presented in the second half of the chapter. Elliott (2001) concurs with the strong influence that agency has in shaping identity, "Perhaps one of the most obvious ways in which we think about ourselves as identities or selves concerns our level of perceived agency, the degree of active involvement we have in shaping personal and cultural experience" (p. 2).

Bauman's analysis, of the modern self, (as cited in Elliott, 2001) recognises that an urge for mastery is necessary in order to facilitate the emergence

of an 'ideal' self. However this search for self-mastery is "self-defeating, illusory and fictitious" (p. 145). Rather the postmodern self is characterised by an avoidance of fixed identity and is "identity set adrift, lacking in solidity, continuity and structure" (Bauman, as cited in Elliott, p. 145). The process of understanding this form of identity requires consideration of the context in which identity is constructed. Postmodern identities change in relation to context and over time. According to Elliott:

Modern and postmodern forms of the self are better seen as simultaneous ways of living in contemporary culture. Constructing a self today is about managing some blending of these different ways of living; a kind of intermixing, and its dislocation, of modern and postmodern states of mind. (p. 150)

I concur with Elliott's discussion and regard the presentation and analysis of identity throughout this thesis as powerful examples of the merging of both forms of identity, the modern and postmodern. The participants provide many examples of the need to search for mastery in their practice, with the construction of distinct personal and professional boundaries often representing certainty. This is one expression of the modern self in action. The postmodern self emerges when a participant's identity is in a state of constant change and is regarded as multiple and contradictory. Perceived collisions of identity between the cultural self and the professional self suggest that identity is continually being constructed as a response to contextual demands, pressures and opportunities. Defining professional identity is the next step in exploring the nature of these conceptual struggles.

6.4 Defining professional identity

Leonard (1997) asserts, "Belonging to a profession means having a licence to practise, being the privileged bearer of expert knowledge, and being able to make statements and render judgements within a specific disciplinary discourse" (p. 97). In particular, a social work professional identity is linked with being a graduate of a 'legitimate' education and training institution and possessing recognisable social work knowledge, values and skills.

Adopting a postmodern and critical perspective of identity includes the notion that a professional identity is in a state of constant change and is multiple, contextual, relational and contradictory. A professional identity is

not only being continually socially constructed but is also being shaped by individuals in relation to their context. This resonates strongly with the experiences of Jenny and Zhara as they struggle to gain full acceptance from the professional community while at the same time developing strong working relationships with their clients.

One manifestation of the struggle to achieve professional status is the ability to successfully separate religious, racial and ethnic identity from professional identity (Walkowitz, 1999, p.65). This is strongly challenged by the Indigenous and CALD participants such as Jess, who consciously presents herself as an Indigenous woman first and a social worker second. Discussion of these issues will be presented in the latter part of the chapter.

Mullaly (1997) asserts that being a professional is also linked to the development of an identity that is underpinned by a rise in social status:

First a professional develops her or his capacities and gains recognition by obtaining a university education and through subsequent professional advancement with an accompanying rise in status. Secondly, professionals have considerable work autonomy relative to non-professionals and usually have some authority over others, whether subordinate workers or clients. Thirdly, the privileges of the professional extend beyond the workplace to a whole way of life or culture that has respectability associated with it. (p. 148-149)

Exploring the influence of professional status on how the participants construct their personal and professional boundaries reveals the tensions that are experienced by some participants (Emma, Mark and Noonee) as they seek to counter the social distance that is created by the power and authority associated with professionalism. Being a social worker provides opportunities for participants to develop dialogical helping relationships, but also acts as a barrier to the holistic use of self by creating distance and reinforcing boundary impermeability.

The links between professional identity and class have already been considered and need to be briefly re-emphasised and extended. A social work identity is equated with both membership of the middle class and with whiteness. According to Walkowitz (1999), "The meaning of whiteness shaped social work ... and social work has always been involved in class tension in the relationship between the served and the server" (p. 17). Both

aspects of professional identity are explored in this chapter, beginning with a discussion of how the sharing of class based experiences impacts on the use of self and the construction of personal and professional boundaries.

6.5 Sharing class based experiences

Boundaries are fair enough if you are lucky enough to be in a situation where nothing from your work can encroach on your personal life, but a lot of people come from disadvantaged backgrounds, whether they're Indigenous or not. So, it's your community, you're living in it, you're with your family all the time and if those issues are within your community, within your family, well the boundaries can be very blurry indeed. (Alf)

Coming from a disadvantaged background raised fundamental dilemmas for Alf in the construction of distinctive personal and professional boundaries. Living and working in close proximity with his family and community compounded Alf's concerns about the need to maintain a degree of separation between his work commitments and his family responsibilities. There is significant overlap here with class-based issues impacting on practice and the contextual influences that were explored in Chapter 4. Being a member of an Indigenous community and the social work profession created tensions for Alf that are contextually defined and reinforced by shared experiences of disadvantage, leaving the intersection between the personal and the professional a blurry domain of competing interests and commitments.

Experiencing personal hardship can also create opportunities for participants such as Clinton to connect with non-Indigenous clients who are from disadvantaged backgrounds:

I can remember interviewing or trying to work with someone who was very poor and all they're worried about is how they're going to get money to feed their kids. So behavioral management isn't going to be big on their agenda when they're worried about money. So I'd absorb that theory and sort of put it in my context, which was, I was from a single mother family and I really identify as that. I said to the client, look, my Mum's a single Mum. I mean I've always sort of made this similarity between people from low socio economic areas that sort of have the same issues, access and those issues that Aboriginal people have. These are class issues. I mean not always defined, but you do find that you

apply that experience to maybe a poor single Mum with three kids, but then again none of that sometimes works. (Clinton)

Clinton is actively blending theory with practice by applying his experiences of being raised in a poor single parent family to his social work interventions. While these insights give him a greater capacity to both identify with single mothers and develop more appropriate practice responses, Clinton also concedes that this is not a formula that creates certainty. This is an important admission and reinforces the postmodern critical perspective (Allan, Pease & Briskman, 2003; Fook, 2000, 2002; Healy, 2000; Ife, 1999; Pease & Fook, 1999), which recognises that uncertainty pervades the practice of social work. Having the capacity to deal creatively with uncertainty and not become immobilised by it is an important goal for all workers. This requires workers such as Clinton to acquire the skills of critical self-reflectivity in order to facilitate an understanding of how knowledge is developed and linked with practice. In doing so workers may find that:

Through deconstructing this knowledge, and unearthing multiple constructions, they are able further to develop (reconstruct) their own practice in inclusive, artistic and intuitive ways which are responsive to the changing (uncertain, unpredictable and fragmented) contexts in which they work; and in ways which can challenge existing power relations and structures. (Fook, 2002, p.41)

Clinton's responses to non-Indigenous single mothers can be regarded as both intuitive and informed by a knowledge base that is constructed around his personal experiences. Importantly he makes these links visible to the client by revealing to her that his own mother was single and that he had also experienced poverty and hardship. In this way Clinton is using self-disclosure to transcend both his cultural and professional identity and boundaries. He challenges existing power relations and structures by narrowing the social distance created by the middle class persona that accompanies a professional identity. Healy (2000) argues that sharing experiences of class and disadvantage does not however fully counter the power differential imposed by professional identity, "Even though workers may experience specific forms of oppression, such as those associated with gender, race, (dis)ability or sexuality, this does not erase the oppressor status conferred by their professional identity" (pp. 72-73). These issues will be explored in greater depth in the second half of the chapter.

By recognising a sense of connectedness with refugee people, Sue tries to counter the alienating experience of being an Indigenous social worker:

I think the thing about being an Indigenous social worker is that I bring into that professional part of my life my Indiginity and with that I bring in my experience. So I think it gives me a different way of looking at the world and experiencing it. It's also a very lonely place to be. So it's special in one way but in another way it's very isolating and lonely because half the time you don't feel like you're speaking the same language as other people. Or that what you're saying is not what they're hearing, so that makes it quite hard. But the other side of that too is when working with clients it gives you an understanding of the issues that they're going through and it allows you to see connections around structural stuff.

I actually feel a lot of connections with refugee people in this country because I think those people, while their experience is different to Indigenous people, I think what they suffer in this country comes from the same place. Refugee people are also dispossessed from their land. Refugee people come here and we pick 'em up and we lock 'em up for a very very long time and they're denied any rights. And it's basically the same way I feel Indigenous people are treated. A lot of people are locked up. But even those that aren't locked up it feels like you're at war all the time and that your rights are being subjugated by somebody else's rights.
(Sue)

The positioning of Sue's Indigenous identity, knowledge and experience alongside her professional persona brings to life the features of critical practice that were previously identified by Fook (2002). Drawing parallels between the oppression experienced by refugees and the subjugation of Indigenous people facilitated Sue's understanding of her identity and position in society. Sue actively deconstructed her personal knowledge and applied her experiences of racism and disadvantage to her work with refugees, thus broadening her capacity to practise social work. Yet her experiences as a social worker often feel very isolated and isolating, suggesting that the skills of reflection were undermined by Sue's sense of dislocation from the profession. This dislocation is structurally determined and underpinned by the different meanings that Sue brings to her professional identity.

The structurally based difficulties experienced by Indigenous participants such as Sue, Alf and Clinton are shared by black American and British social workers. In his analysis of the development of social work in America,

Walkowitz (1999) argues that American social work was shaped by a pervading sense of whiteness and, "When people of colour entered the field, they did so with contested meanings of middle classness and professionalism" (p. 17). Prevatt-Goldstein (2002) presents numerous examples of how these contested meanings are experienced by black social workers.

In order to counter marginalisation of their skills and knowledge, many workers argue the need for professional recognition of their abilities in order "to utilize the particular skills that they have gained from a conscious engagement with their life experiences" (Prevatt-Goldstein, p. 772). Lewis (1996) extends the role that lived experience plays in practice by suggesting that experiences of racism and disadvantage are privileged by black social workers. Adopting this analysis to the experiences of the Indigenous participants presented in this chapter broadens significantly an understanding of how discursively the self can be positioned in practice.

Analysing these experiences in greater depth will be the focus of the final section of this chapter. The next section explores the experience of feeling distant with clients as a result of different class identity.

Class difference creates distance

I'm certain that there are women who look at me as being terribly middle class. I know that to be true. I can just feel it in my bones. I have had very angry women who haven't connected with me. Women who have said things like, how would you feel if we took your kids off you? You know that you are going to have bad karma for the rest of your life because of what you have done to me. (Emma)

Emma was expressing an intuitive perception that her middle class persona was visible to clients and was therefore potentially problematic. Emma linked her client's anger to her own class identity and her lack of personal experience of child abuse and removal. In turn, Emma's clients equated their identity and experience as compounding the power differential and social distance between themselves and Emma. By challenging Emma to recognise the pain of child removal, these women were seeking to confront her with differences in their life experiences. This class based and experience-based animosity created tension between Emma and her clients thus compromising her capacity to practise effectively.

Mark recognised the potential for these situations to arise in his practice and as a supervisor encouraged his workers to critically reflect on their use of self:

I think social work helped me to think about how it is for clients to see a white Anglo male and about how it was coming to a place and seeking help. Well I suppose it's around power dynamics so some of it's about sort of processing that, but it's also about getting workers to think about their own background or their own self and how that impacts on other people. Certainly in both the adult team and the crisis team we often saw people who were unemployed or on disability pensions living in really difficult situations, so it's important, there's a whole range of issues I think around engagement and respect. (Mark)

According to Mark, recognising that both the personal experience and meaning of class identity, as well as the professional persona of the worker, shaped the use of self and was an important area of learning and reflection for all social workers. Class-consciousness becomes an important factor because personal constructions of class are not transcended by the development of a professional identity. However, Mullaly (1997) asserts that identifying class issues in practice clashes with the ideology of professionalism that, "Blinds social workers to issues of class, particularly their own class position and class function" (p. 197). Recognising the pervasive influence of this ideology, De Montigny (1995) argues that social workers need to develop an analysis of the impact of class in practice and this "requires that we begin with our own experiences" (p. 14).

Mark sought to engender in his workers a belief that discursive identities and experiences permeated social work. This was particularly evident in his interest in how the help-seeking process was experienced and perceived by both clients and workers. By highlighting that the inherent power differential between worker and client was exacerbated by his own identity as a white Anglo male, Mark recognised that his personal identity was potentially problematic for clients from disadvantaged backgrounds. In doing so Mark is also extending the influence that gender exerts on practice, as elucidated in Chapter 5. Linking gender, whiteness and class as elements of the self reinforces the view that a complex interplay of factors shape the personal and professional self, and that the construction of boundaries needs to be explored through multiple lenses.

Mark equated an increase in the quality of social work and an enhancement of skills with the need for workers to develop insight about how their self influences practice. Fook (1999) conceptualises reflectivity as, 'A type of responsibility, an ability to recognise personal influence and to develop a sense of agency in a situation' (p. 199). Developing a sense of agency involves integrating analysis with action and personal experience with political awareness (Fook, p. 199). This process enhances the capacity for workers to develop an awareness of how class based differences can impede a worker's ability to engage and respect clients.

The next section of this chapter will explore the pervasive influence of professional identity on the use of self in practice and on the construction of personal and professional boundaries.

6.6 Professional identity and boundaries

The boundaries of common humanity

Joanna – What sorts of judgments do you make about self-disclosure?

Emma – It's really tricky isn't it? I make them on a client-by-client basis. So obviously there are the clients that we feel it is quite appropriate and there are the ones where you have a strong sense that the person is trying to change roles with you. So the first judgment that I make is, is this genuine curiosity and interest as opposed to the person wanting to switch roles?

I feel that is appropriate to share some stuff because this person has shared so much stuff with you and has been so vulnerable. I make a judgment on whether I think it is going to help the client feel more relaxed with me, that in some way I am in tune with them and that I'm prepared to accept that their curiosity is appropriate and that I'm human.

Joanna – So in that case would you see it as transgressing some sort of boundary?

Emma – No actually I don't. I think if it is done well, but that is the question isn't it? I think if you are aware of what you are doing and why. There's certainly professionals who I have worked with who I think have transgressed boundaries by going into too much detail and so I think about it. I'm always asking myself, why did I do that, did I need to do that?

But I do not see it as transgressing boundaries. On the contrary I see it as part of my social work identity. The whole idea that we could be the clients, that I am not a separate person from the client because I'm the professional. That I'm human just like the client and if I expect the client to sit in the chair and divulge so much of themselves that the least I can do is say yes when they ask me do I have children. It's not a lot for them to be asking. I think it is perfectly in their rights to ask that question and I would challenge the idea that they aren't.

A number of paradoxes are evident in Emma's story, suggesting that the process of engaging the self in practice is fraught with possibilities and tensions. Emma was careful and reflective about self-disclosing to clients and maintained a high level of self-awareness in order to ensure that the self was engaged sensitively and appropriately. Fook (2002) regards critical self-reflection as the process in which we are "subjugating our practice to a more critical gaze, at the same time allowing us to integrate theory and practice in creative and complex ways" (p. 39).

While Emma considered issues such as the purpose and extent of the disclosure as a crucial aspect of her decision-making, she regarded the process of sharing a common identity and humanity with people as a defining feature of her social work professional identity. Emma equated being aware of her client's vulnerability and position of relative powerlessness as potentially being lessened by her willingness to share with her clients' common aspects of her identity, such as her parenting status. Thus the personal and professional boundary was not merely an arbitrary point of separation but a crucial intersection in which Emma defined what it meant to be a social worker.

Linking worker self-disclosure with the attainment of a common humanity and identifying both as client rights, suggests that the principles of dialogical practice have informed Emma's professional identity. The development of dialogical praxis (Allan et al., 2003; Ife, 2001) is underpinned by workers actively sharing with clients their experience and expertise. In this process professional knowledge is not privileged over life experience:

Ultimately social work leads to action, taken by the worker and client working in partnership, each having benefited from each other's experience and wisdom. True, the worker and client will often have different roles in that action-there

are some things that the client can do and worker cannot and vice versa-but they will be acting as part of a joint undertaking arising out of their shared wisdom and dialogue and each can have her/his humanity enhanced as a consequence. (Ife, p. 153)

The paradox of recognising the need to share a common humanity and Emma's comment that she made decisions about self-disclosure on an individual basis, suggests that relational dimensions also informed Emma's practice. Emma's decisions to self-disclose were influenced by a perception of her client's needs and impeded by a concern about their motives. This suggests that the need to share a common humanity with individuals was undermined by clients who do not respect Emma's professional identity and status.

One potential explanation for this tension lies in the context of Emma's practice, child protection, which places statutory pressures on workers to assert their roles as agents of control, thus compounding the distance between worker and client (De Montigny, 1995; Hugman, 1991; Sheppard, 2000). Sheppard, reflecting on these contextual pressures, recognised that sharing her personal experiences with clients, while frequently viewed as constituting unprofessional practice, facilitated "more emphasis on the conveying of genuineness and empathy" (p. 46). De Montigny addresses these tensions, "The professional self is a fractured self exchanged for a salary, and once exchanged it finds itself a participant in production guided and directed commands, forms of order, relevances, and discourses that transcend the spheres of immediate experience" (p. 14).

Emma recognised the need to experience a shared humanity with her clients as a defining feature of her professional identity, yet competing contextual and relational pressures meant that these professional ideals could not always be achieved. These experiences further suggest that the construction of personal and professional boundaries occurs along a continuum of permeability. This continuum is partly defined by the practice context and by competing professional discourses which suggest that "leaving the personal out is often construed as the route to professional status" (Huntington, 1998, p. 12) and that the practice of social work requires "both worker and client to engage in praxis" (Ife, 2001, pp. 151-152). Emma's paradoxical experiences are located at the intersection of these conflicting ideals.

Boundaries, professional identity and partnerships

Noonee's experiences of developing a dialogue and partnership with her clients resonate strongly with Emma's focus on countering the distance created by professional status:

Joanna - Is it clear where the boundary is for you in terms of the personal and professional?

Noonee - Generally speaking yes. I feel for my clients. That's probably part of the issue. That's why I have to be a bit careful about my boundaries because I could run faster than they do at times and take them with me. Oh, I feel sadness, I feel excitement for them, and I feel their desolation at times. I feel stuck like they do at times and I feel their disappointment if they are disappointed about something.

From time to time, I use the self occasionally, because I don't want to be the sort of really separate person. I mean I sleep during the weekends. I don't think about work much on the weekends and that's good. That's very good. But I do, yes, when I'm there. I think one of the things is just being there with them at that time and as much as possible being in their experience when they're experiencing it, and not just sitting back and thinking, I'm the professional and you're the client. I can't really do it that way.

I don't say that I don't have separation as a professional. I think I have a very strong identity as a social work professional. It's just that I won't push it to my clients that I'm the professional, you tell me your problems. No, it isn't that. It's more like from the beginning I make it clear that we have to work together.

So I feel that my clients should have ownership of what they're doing. I mean there is always a time when you just feel that you don't want to be there. With difficult clients it's a bit tricky and not all clients obviously match with your personality. So, I think for clients that I tend to have more empathy with and those that I feel warm to, but there are clients that that's not the case all the time, so maybe I'm more formal with clients in that regard than other clients. It's just the way things are. I don't think I could be anything else.

Noonee equated her strong professional identity with the development of empathic and respectful working partnerships. Her personal and professional boundary was permeable, allowing Noonee to build emotional bonds with individuals with whom she could relate to. The level of permeability was influenced by Noonee's capacity to empathise with

people, recognising that more formal relationships were developed with individuals whom she perceived as difficult clients. Noonee's comment that she drew distinctive boundaries between home and work, suggests that self-care is facilitated by a degree of separation between the personal and the professional self. These issues will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 7.

Noonee's practice was characterised by the development of dialogical relationships with the individuals with whom she worked. This is evident in Noonee's comments that she tried to resist separation between herself and her client, and that a joint sense of ownership of the issues being worked on was central. Allan (2003) identifies a number of studies of welfare consumers which reveal the significance that an egalitarian relationship can have for those with whom social workers have contact:

For the women service-users in the study, an equal relationship meant being treated on the same level and not being looked down on. Someone with time to listen, who showed a willingness to help, who was friendly, who was understanding and acted human were also important factors. (p. 65)

Allan does not explore the consequences of the development of egalitarian relationships on the worker's use of self. This illustrates the paucity of attention that has been given to this area of practice and professional identity. While the importance of developing dialogical relationships is now rarely contested in the social work literature, recognition of how workers experience these practice expectations remains relatively unexplored. The purpose of this research is to build knowledge about these issues. The next section of the chapter identifies how boundaries between the personal and professional self create certainty in practice.

Boundaries provide certainty and reinforce professionalism

Developing more formal relationships with clients characterises Elizabeth's practice:

Elizabeth - Clients really only want to know you as a professional. It's hard to articulate this, but I think in terms of the power differentials – I mean clearly the worker has more power and more authority and I know in social work we're not very comfortable with taking on the expert

mantle. But, to an extent clients are expecting that from us and that gives them some confidence.

For a worker to present themselves as really just the same as the client, just as angst ridden and, you know, full of problems in their own lives, that's not going to make the client feel confident I don't believe. You know, you end up with the client trying to counsel the worker perhaps

Joanna – Where does that understanding come from?

Elizabeth - Well, some of it comes from experience, of, you know, at times disclosing personal information to a client and observing the impact that that has, whether it's helpful or not. Reflecting on why you would disclose personal stuff to a client, I think there's a real danger in it being about meeting your own needs rather than meeting the client's needs. Talking about it in supervision, talking about it with colleagues, in group supervision situations. I think it's a really fundamental question in social work, but in all helping sorts of professions, you know, how you do draw a line between your professional self and your private self, personal self.

Elizabeth identified a relationship between worker self-disclosure, being an expert, creating certainty and increased client confidence. Elizabeth's clear assertion that workers possess greater power and authority than their clients, suggests that the use of self is linked with the maintenance of hierarchies that characterise professional relationships. Nevertheless, she conceded that while being an expert may cause some workers anxiety, clients do equate professional identity with expertise. Elizabeth regarded the need to be aware of how individuals respond to self-disclosure, and engaging the self in practice as fundamental issues that require supervision and critical self-reflection. Whilst often contested, she recognised that the boundary between the personal and the professional needed to be distinctive.

Elizabeth also equated self-disclosure with the sharing of negative experiences with clients, which suggests that if workers choose to self-disclose they need to focus on strengths rather than areas of weakness and uncertainty. De Montigny (1995) reflects on the veracity of this professional discourse by identifying that the compartmentalisation of the self characterises his practice, "Being a professional demanded a synthetically smooth self not racked by the pains of doubt, anxiety, and self-betrayal. It

required a managed self and a polished self that lived inside an ordinary life” (p. 13).

The recognition by Elizabeth that power permeates professional relationships and is manifested by expertise has been carefully examined in the social work literature (Healy, 2000; Leonard, 1997; Mullaly, 1997; Pease, 2002). A common thread is the critical appraisal of Foucault’s understanding of power which is generally regarded as providing a useful analysis of the different ways in which power is experienced and exercised.

What makes power hold good, what makes power accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. (Foucault as cited in Rabinow, 1984, p.61)

Viewed from this perspective, power is pervasive and is constituted in knowledge and conveyed through professional discourse. Social workers access power through a number of sources, including their middle class status, the statutory authority that is conferred upon them as agents of the welfare state and their professional status “even though social workers do not always have access to statutory authority they remain powerful because of their professional identity” (Healy, p. 72). While countering the impact of the power differential between workers and clients is an important goal of a critical social work practice, it is generally conceded that power differences cannot be totally eradicated.

Adopting this conceptualisation of power, Elizabeth’s comments about the clear relationship between power and professional identity are indisputable. Yet the links between power and the construction of personal and professional boundaries are less clearly defined and, as highlighted throughout this thesis, are the subject of competing discourses. These discourses regard the boundary as both countering the power differential as well as potentially reinforcing it. Critically examining the ideology of professionalism provides some insights about the nature of these seemingly divergent ideals.

A critical perspective recognises that the ideology of professionalism represents a belief system that is underpinned by the need to develop hierarchical relationships between workers and service users. This

reinforces the worker's need to maintain expertise and control (Healy, 2000; Mullaly, 1997) Reinforcing these processes and relationships is a dualism between the professional self of the worker, which encompasses a discernable knowledge and value base, and the lived experience of the client. "Professionalism emphasizes technical aspects of helping such as impartiality, emotional neutrality and apolitical service" (Mullaly, p.197). According to Healy critical practice theory advocates the diminution of this distinction between workers and service users with the adoption of two key strategies, which have implications for the construction of personal and professional boundaries.

The first strategy involves workers rejecting the markings of status and authority that differentiate workers from their clients, with the aim of reducing social distance. This includes paying attention to professional jargon, using self-disclosure, personal empathy and conducting home visits etc (Healy, 2000; Mullaly, 1997). The second strategy builds on the ideas of dialogical praxis that were presented earlier in the chapter, and includes mutual learning between worker and client and sharing of knowledge, skills and tasks in all stages of the helping process. While elements of both strategies can be identified in the practice stories of Clinton, Sue, Emma and Noonee, each participant highlights the tensions that they experience as they address the social distance created by professionalism by constructing semi-permeable boundaries. De Montigny (1995) conceptualises such tensions as reflecting one of the most problematic characteristics of the social work profession:

Indeed social work practice is always Janus-faced, that is, on the one side it arises as actual social workers, living, breathing and situated activities, and on the other, it must articulate extra-local forms of authority and discursively organized power. The struggle for social workers is not won by a retreat and denial of themselves, but by engagement, explication and efforts towards transformation. (p. xvi)

Taking De Montigny's analysis further, the intersection of the personal and the professional self represents a site of competing ideals and practice responses. It is a tussle between modernist notions of professionalism, that yearn for certainty and distinctive personal and professional boundaries, and a critical postmodern perspective that encourages the dismantling of dualisms, the development of dialogical praxis and the engagement of a

more holistic self. These tensions are clearly exemplified by the practice experiences of the Indigenous participants as they seek acceptance both from their cultural and professional communities. The next section of the chapter presents their stories.

Juggling identities and boundaries

Social workers do have quite a bad name within the Aboriginal community and mainly around the removal of children. But the Indigenous community has also tried to get Indigenous people to become social workers. Once you're in the system, people get very frightened of you because now you have this white education and you are a social worker and so you are a potential threat to the removal of people's children from them. The community also gets worried about people going off and getting educated that they may lose that person from their community or that they somehow change. (Sue)

People have a bad view of social workers, being involved in the past removals, especially with the welfare. Well once you work with people they can usually tell straight away that you're not part of that although some people don't, but I'm always confident that I can prove myself as a good worker. (Alf)

Sue and Alf's experiences of encountering resistance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are powerful examples of how the personal and professional self is historically situated and constructed by the structural dimensions of race and oppression. There were deep suspicions within Alf and Sue's communities regarding the educational process and the acquisition of professional status. The dual objectives of gaining a degree and joining the ranks of the helping profession, created both uncertainty within the community and recognition that the potential benefits that may be gained by community members acquiring additional skills and knowledge may be eroded by the development of a professional identity (refer to Chapter 7 for a further discussion of social work knowledge).

These tensions reflected a concern that the acquisition of 'white knowledge' will undermine Indigenous ways of knowing, as well as a perception that the rise in social status that accompanies a professional identity will alienate the individual from the community by creating an unreachable social and cultural void. Alf's comment that he could prove himself to be a good worker despite being unable to gain the acceptance of all community members, is a stark example of how developing practice

responses that are contextually, historically and culturally sensitive may be undermined by the acquisition of a social work identity. Despite these uncertainties Alf remains fundamentally optimistic about his practice:

Being professionally trained, or just having common sense, you can always put that boundaries up, a lot of things overlap, and you obviously don't do some things, like you won't take too many kids on, out of your personal times, but like if it comes up, it comes up and you have to deal with it. (Alf)

Alf claims that the existence of boundaries needs to be mediated by the daily realities of the practice context. Reaching a balance between contextual and cultural pressures and personal and professional needs is normalized as a daily challenge. He regards the process of constructing personal and professional boundaries as one of the powerful symbols of the professional culture. While the professional discourse, as represented by the code of ethics (AASW, 1999) regards decisions about the use of self as individually determined (Pehrson, 2002), the issues confronting Alf and Sue are historically, culturally and socially constructed. Their decisions about the use of self in practice reflect a capacity to understand the complex nature of the issues that potentially impede their ability to win the trust of their communities. This is exemplified by the introduction process, one of the first actions that Indigenous workers undertake in order to develop trust, rapport and acceptance. This process is characterised by the exploration of familial and social connections and the mutual sharing and "sussing out" of problems and issues, examples of which were given in Chapter 4 (Lynn, 2001; Lynn et al., 1998).

Jess extended this initial process further to include the ability at any time to stop, listen and yarn:

Sometimes I am willing to put the business of the day aside and just have a yarn with someone and in that yarning information comes through about what I am there for. Whereas a white social worker will sit down and come straight to the point. It is more about their levels, I am social worker, or senior social worker rather than I am Jim Brown. (Jess)

Jess was adamant that her Indigenous self dominated her professional identity. This was represented by Jess's practice with Aboriginal families. An important aspect of her work was Jess's understanding of family and kinship

networks and relationships and her ability to establish rapport with families by presenting herself as an Aboriginal person who has acquired additional social work knowledge. These practice responses raise ontological and epistemological questions about the development of meaning and knowledge, which will be further explored in Chapter 7. They are also associated with the problems of modernity, in particular the construction of professional identities as linear and one-dimensional. According to Lynn (2001):

Modernity and the rules of science and professionalism ensured the invisibility of subordinate claims of truth and almost erased the indigenous stories from the landscape of social welfare. Some of the basic rules included a unified subject, the establishment of moral and political choices through science, a single objective world from which can be developed universal categories of experience, representation and explanation. (pp. 904-905)

While Sue, Alf and Jess actively resist the development of a unified professional identity, the dual identity of Aboriginal person and social worker is complex and often tenuous. Lewis (1996) argues that black social workers identify their core self as more enduring because it has been shaped by racism. They regard the self that is constituted through their occupation as more temporary because professional status is invisible in most situations and contexts (pp. 36-37).

In the participants' stories claims about the visibility of professional status are paradoxical, with the historical legacy of welfare professionals weighing heavily on Sue and Alf's consciousness and making visible their links with their professional identity. However, invisibility of professional status can be discerned in Jess's story, as she consciously embarks on an engagement process that is underpinned by her Indigenous identity. Jess also explored the visibility of her identities in other ways:

I never feel not accepted in social work, but it is a different type of acceptance. I don't even know how to articulate that. It's just different and I am not sure how, but it's constantly like you have to negotiate yourself. On another level its like sometimes your Indigenous identity is invisible. What does it mean to be Aboriginal and not fit the stereotype? I don't look Aboriginal, so therefore I don't stand out in the crowd so therefore my Indigenous identity is more invisible than other Indigenous people but then it is invisible in a different way. It is invisible because it is not visible. For Indigenous people who are black skinned they are

invisible not because they are invisible but because of who they are. Does that make sense? (Jess)

Jess was making here a complex distinction between the need to assert her Indigenous identity in the professional and in her Indigenous community. She felt actively marginalised as an Indigenous worker and was also aware that she could be overlooked as being Indigenous by her peers because of her light skin colour. Jess experienced both the invisibility of being different and the invisibility of racism and oppression. This multifaceted presentation of identity highlights that the self is in process and continually being constructed by individuals in relation to their context. The next section of the chapter explores the tensions experienced by the CALD participants as they negotiate their professional identities.

Professional identity, the self and the struggle to be achieve recognition

When I am working with other ethnic non English speaking background groups and especially first generation migrants, I relate to them very well, and I feel that I can talk to them about what I feel. Yes I usually talk about my own experience a lot, but then if it's ethnic groups with European English background I tend not to talk about my experience because it is too remote. The boundary is clearer it is almost, stop talking about myself and work very hard to try and understand them.

I would like to sit down and talk with other social workers and learn from them. What does this non-English speaking background mean in my work? If I could sit down and talk to someone and ask them how they work out their boundaries, their cultural and professional identities, I could learn from their experiences. (Jenny)

Jenny was struggling here to understand the meaning of her cultural identity in her practice. She identified her work with Asian migrants, especially first generation migrants, as being informed by her family's personal experiences of migration from China. These experiences, however, did not translate well to her work with English speaking clients. While Jenny's boundary between her personal and professional self was clearer with these clients, she was not as confident about her practice. This suggests that distinctive personal and professional boundaries do not always engender feelings of confidence and certainty. Rather, they reflect a distancing of cultural experiences in practice. Jenny's experiences with her

English-speaking clients also reinforce a view that the processes of boundary construction are variable, relational and culturally determined.

Jenny sought to establish a dialogue with other social workers, in an effort to gain direction, share experiences and reconcile the role that her cultural self plays in practice. Jenny's need to gain the advice of other workers, suggests that knowledge about boundary issues and the use of self in practice is partly individually based, residing in the stories of workers who are willing to share openly with others their experiences.

Gaining recognition as a worker who can manage in mainstream settings was an important objective for Zhara:

Joanna – Tell me about why were you so determined to work in mainstream organisations?

Zhara – First of all I feel that because I wear the veil, dress differently and have an accent, I was accepted as a Jordanian social worker who could only work in multicultural settings.

Joanna – That's what you were seen to be good at?

Zhara – Yes, not good enough to work with people from mainstream white middle class backgrounds. Like a hierarchy. No it is not right I wanted to prove to myself and to others that as a social worker I can deal with everyone. Like a Doctor who has the skills to work with everyone. As a social worker you need to be able to deal with different cultures and issues. I wanted to be able to work with anyone.

I now work with white Australians. It is a very good experience for me. I enjoy so much working with mainstream organisations. It is also a rewarding experience because I think the client at first when I come from the office, the look on their face is a bit shocked, what does this mean? After a while they became OK. I am not forcing any values on them. I am just trying to help them to get what they want. I get good feedback from clients. Recently I had 2 experiences, one experience with a lady who before she met me called my manager and said, look I want a white worker and another lady who after she met me asked me about my qualifications, before starting the counselling, of course I told her and the counselling session went very well. I really enjoy the clients and we have a very good professional relationship.

Zhara's determination to be accepted by the professional community as a worker who was good enough to work with 'white' Australians reflects an attitude of ethnocentrism that permeates the professional culture. Mullaly (1997) recognises the existence of these attitudes, "The power and respectability that accompany the privileged status of being a professional also involve racist and sexist dynamics. People of colour and women who are professionals must prove their respectability again and again" (p. 149).

Zhara regarded the challenge of being able to engage with 'white middle class Australians' as constant yet rewarding. The initial cautious responses of Zhara's clients are understood as an inevitable aspect of her practice. Zhara's overriding concern was to demonstrate to her clients and colleagues that she had an ability to establish sound professional relationships. Achieving these goals without compromising her cultural beliefs signified success and acceptance by the professional culture.

Jenny and Zhara's stories highlight the social positioning of their cultural identity within the profession. Tsang (2001) defines Bordieu's concept of social positioning as referring to, "The discursive practice of assigning individuals to particular positions in relation to others. These assigned positions are associated with particular power and conditions" (p. 240). One example of the social positioning of ethnic identity as inferior and associated with social disadvantage is the disproportionate representation in social work of people from different ethnic backgrounds as clients as opposed to workers.

When a 'non-white' person does become a member of the profession their social positioning reinforces yet again their marginalised status. "Within the context of social work the restricted access of ethnic minority groups to professional status and the tendency to assign ethnic minority members to work with clients from similar ethnic backgrounds perpetuates the marginalisation of this population" (Tsang, 2001, p. 242). The assumption that ethnic categories have stable meanings is regarded as also indicative of the ethnocentric nature of the dominant discourse (Tsang).

Adopting this perspective, Zhara's determination to be accepted as a mainstream social worker reflects a struggle to position her identity within the parameters of a professional culture that is deeply embedded within the dominant culture. The concomitant rise in status that the professional role

of mainstream worker provides for Zhara symbolises her move from the margins to the centre.

6.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the focus of this third and final data chapter has been on the exploration of participant stories that identify class and professional identity as dimensions that influence the construction of personal and professional boundaries and the use of self in practice. The data analysis has revealed that class and professional identity merge with other dimensions such as gender, context and culture in the process of boundary construction.

A number of key themes can be discerned from the exploration of these processes and experiences. One of the most enduring is that a worker's professional identity overrides their individual class identity. Being a social worker means being a member of the middle class, a position that sits awkwardly with a number of participants whose aim is to develop dialogical relationships with their clients. Constructing more permeable personal and professional boundaries becomes one expression of this goal.

The participants' experiences highlight the discursive nature of professional identity, with competing discourses about the holistic engagement of the self, compounding the uncertainty of practice. Tensions arise between different aspects of identity in particular cultural identity, with competing cultural and professional expectations challenging the participants to confront the multiple and contradictory nature of the self in practice. The data analysis also identifies that while the inherent power differentials between the worker and client are partly diminished by the development of dialogical praxis, the rise in social status and the acquisition of a 'white' knowledge base, that accompanies the development of a professional identity, is met with historically and racially based suspicions in Indigenous communities.

A social work professional identity is widely recognised by the participants as linked with an expectation that they develop distinctive personal and professional boundaries. Clear and strong boundaries bring a degree of certainty to practice and are equated with the need to develop distance from clients. The intersection between the personal and the professional

becomes a site of contested practice responses and meanings about the influence of professional identity on the use of self in practice.

These experiences strongly reinforce a view that the individual social worker cannot totally control their use of self in practice. The shaping of the intersection of the personal and the professional, by structural dimensions, means that all aspects of social work are socially constructed. Exploring the meanings inherent in these processes reveals an aspect of practice that has traditionally been hidden by an individually based discourse.

The next two chapters (7 & 8) of the thesis focus on the development of a theory of personal and professional boundaries that captures the central elements of this data analysis.

7 Knowledge creation and application across personal and professional boundaries

7.1 Introduction

In the alcohol and drug field I've had clients say, "Do you use"? And the next response is, "Well how can you possibly understand what I'm going through"? Unfortunately, in this sort of situation a lot of people think that if you've used the drug then maybe you understand it better which is not necessarily the case at all. I mean maybe you get more acceptance but then again it doesn't necessarily give you that. As a worker you've got to work this out. I mean in some ways it can lower your credibility as well and I always say to people, well look, if you've got cancer, would you want to find a doctor who had cancer and only be treated by a doctor who had cancer? The point about this is that I've got some skills, knowledge and expertise and I can use them, but you're going to do all the work so whether or not I've used heroin probably doesn't matter too much and I can't try and understand where you're at. If I haven't experienced these things I'm not going to try it. I mean I can give you some empathy and get to know you, ask you more about where you're at to find out about that and appreciate it and understand it, but I will never know exactly and maybe that doesn't matter. (John)

I see my social work degree as something that helped me work with my own people. I do not see it as taking precedent over my Aboriginal knowledge. My social work knowledge is complemented by my Aboriginal knowledge and processes. Together they form a nice little partnership. That influences me a lot when working with families. So in terms of theory I never throw them away I just keep them inside my

little bag. You never know when you might need to pull them out and have a look at them and say well this might be interesting in this way and I can use a bit of this and a bit of that. (Jess)

At a glance John and Jess present conflicting perspectives about the process of knowledge construction, the nature of professional knowledge and the existence of a hierarchy of knowledge in social work. On closer examination a commonality of perspectives can be discerned. Both John and Jess are concerned with the process of developing with their clients shared understandings in practice. The purpose of this chapter is to consider these core epistemological questions by exploring the relationships between knowledge creation, application and transferability and the construction of personal and professional boundaries in social work.

The key argument is that personal or lived experience strongly influences knowledge creation and application in social work. These influences are variable and dependant on the individual and collective meanings that personal experiences evoke in each participant. A crucial feature is the transferability of experience and knowledge that occurs both from the personal to the professional self and from the professional back to the personal. Both aspects of the self are affected by participation in practice, with the process of personal/professional boundary construction reflecting an exchange of ideas, values and meanings. As such the boundary is constructed as permeable, in order to facilitate the development and exchange of what is regarded as useful and important knowledge and skills, and as more rigid to protect the worker from the perceived intrusions of difficult experiences.

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part (Part A) focuses on the presentation and interpretation of data, in order to elucidate the complex personal and professional dimensions that influence the epistemological underpinnings of practice. The second part (Part B) builds on this analysis to explore in greater depth how social work knowledge is conceptualised and why the intersection of the personal and the professional is a site of contested meanings and practices. A unique feature of the second section is the consolidation of links to key themes arising from the data analysis presented in the proceeding chapters (4, 5 & 6). This secondary level of data analysis facilitates the development of knowledge about the relationship between boundary construction and the epistemological

foundations of social work. In this way the chapter makes the crucial transition between data analysis, and the presentation, in the next and final chapter (Chapter 8), of new ideas about boundaries.

7.2 Defining social work knowledge

The social work profession, like other professions, seeks adaptable, flexible, reflective and thinking professionals who not only have knowledge of processes, procedures and systems but are able to function in working environments that are subject to constant change and fluidity (Aymer & Okitikpi, 2000, p. 73).

The need to identify, develop and apply a discernable knowledge base to practice is a core feature of the social work profession. But what is meant by social work knowledge? Debates abound within the social work literature (Eraut, 1985, 1994; Fook, 2002; Goldstein, 1990; Ife, 1997; Imre, 1984; Parton, 2003; Rein & White, 1981) about the nature of social work knowledge, its philosophical base and its role in practice. According to Sheppard, Newstead, Di Caccavo and Ryan (2000) the persistence of this debate is partly due to continuing disagreements about the significance of knowledge for social work and a lack of evidence about the use of such knowledge by the profession. Scourfield (2002) adds that discussion about knowledge in social work needs to take place on several different levels:

As well as consideration of what social workers should know, and what the ethics and politics of social work should be, we need research of all kinds about how social workers actually apply social work knowledge and values in real-life practice (p. 1).

One of the purposes of my research is to contribute to an understanding of the processes of knowledge development, application and transferability in social work by focusing on the self and the intersection of the personal and the professional. Analysis of the participant stories has the potential to demonstrate the complex processes that contribute to the production of knowledge in practice, in particular the relationships between knowing and the development of meaning.

7.3 Defining lived experience

Morley and Ife (2002) suggest that:

Lived experience is different for everyone - it does not conform to ideas of how it should be and certainly does not follow on from how we want it to be; it is sporadic, unpredictable and painful as well as joyous, fulfilling and wondrous. (p. 70)

Such a definition strongly supports the diverse experiences of the participants presented in this research. If lived experience is the accumulation of past as well as present experiences that shape all aspects of our lives, then elements of unpredictability and variability must be a core feature. The self, the holistic identity of the person, their values, personality, characteristics and style is the medium through which these experiences are carried into all aspects of an individual's life.

An emerging theme in this research is that the self and lived experience are both pivotal in how participants experience their practice. The areas of difference are located at the boundary of the self, where key directions regarding the use of self and the application of lived experience are constructed. The purpose of the first section is to explore the role that personal experience plays in the construction of knowledge.

Part A

7.4 The relationships between self and knowledge

Defining the role that personal experience plays in the development of knowledge in social work is fraught with complexities and traverses competing discourses about the relationships between self and knowledge. The prevalence of these discourses in the practice of social workers can be discerned in the analysis of participant stories that will form the basis of the following section.

Knowledge as a product

John's assertion that he does not need to experience heroin addiction in order to understand or work with his clients, suggests that the process of knowing is separate from the self and that knowledge is a product rather

than an experience. Knowledge as product refers to "a set of information or formal knowledge written down and used in practice" (Sheppard et al., 2000, p. 466). This perspective is located in a positivist paradigm, which asserts the supremacy of the technical-rational dimension of knowledge development (Ife, 1997; Parton, 2003). This paradigm has dominated models of professional practice and is characterized by assertions of the primacy of a discernable and rigorous knowledge base. "Professional practice is conceived as deriving its rigour from the use of describable, testable, replicable techniques derived from scientific research and which is based on knowledge which is objective, cumulative and convergent"(Parton, p. 2).

According to John, his professional credibility was based on the knowledge, skills and expertise that he brought to practice, rather than on life experiences. This reinforces a view that the positivist paradigm can facilitate the development of strength and confidence in practice and that professional knowledge has more status than lived experience. However, John's understandings of social work knowledge are also predicated on a relational dimension. His identification of the role that empathy played in the development of understanding of the client's experiences suggests that the use of empathic skills are intentional and purposeful in the development of a shared understanding (Ming Tsang, 1998). In this way John was making an important distinction between the marginal role that personal experience plays in his practice, the importance of gaining credibility through the application of expert knowledge and the need to form a strong working relationship with his clients.

Mark also recognises that a range of perspectives about knowledge existed within his practice in child and adolescent mental health:

When I was working in child and adolescent mental health some people said that we should develop our interventions and apply them in practice on people. The other extreme were the workers who were very reflective with clients about their own experiences. We did see a large number of parents and children for what I suppose we termed general child guidance type issues, so some workers did a lot of normalising around tantrums or behaviour problems. (Mark)

Mark identified two competing perspectives of knowledge creation and application in practice. One approach involved workers developing and applying interventions on their clients, the other identifying knowledge

development as a process that involved worker self-reflection on personal experience in order to normalise clients' concerns. The second perspective suggests that the process of knowing is tacit and implicit and develops from dialogue with people about their situation, reinforcing the view that uniqueness and uncertainty permeate practice (Parton, 2003).

Mark's comment that these perspectives represent two extremes, suggests the existence of a discourse that reinforces epistemological dualisms in practice, "One emphasizes the prescriptions and learning from practice, with little value placed on academic learning, while the other is more concerned about questions of theory, validity and evidence" (Sheppard et al., 2000, p. 466). The added dimension in this debate is the role of the self, in particular the status of personal experience as knowledge for practice, an issue explored in the next section.

Lived experience as knowledge

I think at the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMS) there was often an issue about credibility if as a worker you didn't have your own children. I don't think it was explicit but I'm sure it was there which was interesting because I think at CAMS at the time probably, I don't know, in a team of twelve, probably half the team didn't have children. I suppose sometimes that was challenging too because I wondered at times how effective, although I don't think people have to have experienced something to be empathic, I think it can be helpful. I think there are certainly contacts I've had with some people in those sectors where I would say it's not so helpful because perhaps there's not some distance or there's not some processing or they continue to be very tied to the issue and somewhat narrow perhaps. (Mark)

Mark shared John's concerns about the relative benefits to workers of their lived experiences. Being a parent in the area of child and adolescent mental health may contribute to the development of empathy with other parents, but could also be problematic leading to a lack of objectivity, especially if workers did not possess reflective skills.

Healy (2000) extends Mark's critique of the benefits of life experiences as a source of social work knowledge, by arguing that the identification of 'lived knowledge' as an unquestionable site of truth can lead to practices that are non-dialogical, "Just as professional knowledge has served to subjugate other non-professional knowledge, to merely shift the site of truth to lived

experience can be to ignore the complexities of this lived knowledge” (Healy, p. 89). The possibility for oversimplification exists when one aspect of personal experience can be assumed as more influential than another. In Mark’s practice context the obvious link between being a parent and developing empathy with other parents may lead to a decreased awareness of the potency of other experiences and identities that can inform practice such as gender, class background and age.

The wisdom that is equated with age resonated with Elizabeth as one aspect of her experience that was often regarded by clients as sorely lacking:

I think there are some young people who are naturally deeper in their experience or understanding of other people. I don’t think I was one of those. I think it’s taken a long time for me to develop. When I graduated I was still a pretty superficial type of person in many ways. And I think also working with clients, clients tend to – not all clients, but a lot, have more confidence in somebody that they see as being older and having had life experience. (Elizabeth)

Elizabeth concurs with the perspective of many of her clients that professional training and knowledge is enhanced by life experience and that older workers do have a deeper understanding of people. The links between age, experience and professionalism have also been identified in research by Fook et al. (2000) on the experiences of social work students and graduates. A recurring theme amongst younger social work students in particular was that “they could not have been credible to older more life-experienced clients. In contrast, older students tended to draw on their age and experience to support their sense of professional confidence” (Fook et al., p. 159). This suggests that age can be used as a tool in practice to enhance worker and client confidence. However what is less clear is whether worker self-disclosure about these ‘deeper life experiences’ further enhances the status and credibility of age as lived experience. Elizabeth shares her perspective on this issue:

Well I don’t think, in general, it’s really appropriate to talk about your own family stuff with clients. Occasionally it can be, but really I think the client is there to have their own needs met, their own problems solved and to hear about the worker’s own situation, I just don’t think that’s terribly helpful. More helpful is to maybe use that information that you have and what you know about other families in terms of saying to the client well, you know, from my experience I’ve come across other

situations like yours, as a normalising thing. And it could be from your own family that you're saying that. But to say well my grandmother did this, I think that's crossing a boundary between a professional relationship and a friendship type of relationship. The client doesn't need to know about the worker as a whole person. They're really only wanting to know you as a professional. (Elizabeth)

Here Elizabeth is making an important distinction between the increased status, credibility and knowledge that accompanies life experience and the need to maintain clear personal and professional boundaries in practice. Sharing personal experiences with clients blurs the boundaries of professional identity and interferes with the development of a useful working relationship. The suggestion that clients do not need or want to know the client as a 'whole' person indicates a preference for the compartmentalising of identities in practice. In order to achieve this objective, Elizabeth constructs her personal and professional boundary as permeable, allowing for elements of personal experience such as age to inform her knowledge and practice and rigid in order to reinforce her dual identities. In contrast, Scott asserts that it is not possible to compartmentalise the personal from the professional:

I think boundaries are really, really important, but I don't think they're understood very well. I think the tendency from talking to other people is to say, OK, I've got my personal world, and I think we're really good as human beings at this, splitting things into parts. I've got this part out here somewhere and that's my social work world and in that social work world I have this boundary bit that I've read about and is theoretical. I think that people, when they're confronted with reality, instead of becoming part of the social work world, let alone part of the theoretical sort of arena, it becomes personal. Suddenly it's, oh my God, what do I do now, and that's the problem. Whereas I think that, in a sense, that there is no difference between the professional and the personal world because we use ourselves, although we need to be clear about how we do that. (Scott)

Scott presents the view that, because the self is an integral tool in practice it is not desirable to construct rigid boundaries. The key for Scott is how workers engage the self, with critical self-reflection being a core skill. Workers need to develop insight into how the personal interacts with the professional. Further consideration of the role of self-reflection in the process of knowledge creation will be given in the latter part of the chapter.

The presentation of competing perspectives of the self, knowledge and boundaries in this section reflects a recurring theme throughout the thesis. The question of what constitutes legitimate knowledge and whose knowledge is privileged remains contested. The aim of the second part of the chapter is to revisit some of these themes and to consider the implications of these divergent views. The next section explores the relationship between Indigenous and professional knowledge.

Indigenous dimensions of knowledge

Jess's assertion, at the beginning of the chapter that her social work knowledge was complemented by her Aboriginal knowledge suggests that a dynamic relationship exists between Jess's personal experiences of Indigeneity and her role as a social work professional. By identifying cultural processes as central to her practice, Jess was confirming the role that the self plays in the process of knowledge development and application. Developing a dialogue with people created opportunities for Jess to choose appropriate elements of social work knowledge from 'inside her little bag' and develop complementary and creative practice responses. Julwul presents a similar perspective of knowledge development:

The area that I grew up in was very traditional and very cultural. Aboriginal knowledge and education is more important, I think in some instances, than qualifications. So it's the joining of the two that has played a major role in why I do social work. There is a great need in our community and I could see that the skills that social workers had were things that could be used if it wasn't used with the background and everything that came from white society, only if it was used with everything that came with Aboriginal society. Does that make sense? For example I worked with the child protection team for a while and Aboriginal children often are born with a bruise on the base of the spine, and a lot of the non-Aboriginal social workers would be called to look at this child from a point of view of this child has been abused because it has these bruises on its back. But because I come from that culture I knew that it was a very common thing and it wasn't the child being abused it was just natural. (Julwul)

The blending of Julwul's Aboriginal knowledge with 'white social work knowledge and skills' enhanced her reputation within her community, assisted her understanding of the issues confronting her people and provided a necessary adjunct to Julwul's capacity to make decisions in key practice contexts such as child protection. Julwul's experiences

demonstrate that “the value orientation, ideologies and worldview of social workers predispose their choice of certain theories with consistent ideologies” (Ming Tsang, 1998, p. 173).

Julwul’s concern that the dominant values and norms of ‘white culture’ were reflected in social work knowledge implies that the processes of social construction play an important role in the development of knowledge and skills for practice. Ife (1997) recognises that the relationship between values and knowledge in social work highlights that knowledge is socially and linguistically constructed, “To attempt to separate knowledge and values is to deny the value basis of all knowledge, and reduce social work to a potentially value-free technical activity” (p. 139).

The risks to Indigenous social workers of locating Indigenous knowledge alongside knowledge gained from social work training were discussed in Chapter 6. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are generally suspicious of the education process because it is regarded as privileging ‘white’ knowledge over local constructions of meaning and experience. In responding to these historically and culturally based concerns, participants such as Alf, Sue, Julwul and Jess, make careful judgments about their use of knowledge in practice. Asserting a stronger view, Bindi suggests that social work would be enhanced by the integration of Indigenous values and knowledge:

I think social work needs an Indigenous bit. It needs almost to have a cultural exchange because I think it would be better if all social workers could think of things more the way Indigenous people do. (Bindi)

Lynn (2001) concurs with Bindi’s suggestion and argues that social work practitioners could benefit greatly from learning about how Indigenous workers help their own people. “Helping styles of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social welfare workers bring with them a different epistemology, understanding and practices which stand as a site of resistance to the rationality of science and arrogant professionalism” (Lynn, p. 909). These lessons should not be regarded as only being appropriate for work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but rather the knowledge, values and practices of Indigenous workers need to inform all aspects of social work:

Lessons exist in the role of the worker, the use of self in the helping context, the importance of spirituality, the use of an holistic as opposed to instrumental focus and in aspects of the helping process such as the necessity of being friendly and informal (Lynn, p. 910).

Sue's story encapsulates some of the key elements of the Indigenous practice:

I think that's really important for clients to know that the person that they're speaking to or that they're telling some of the most intimate parts of their life to actually is someone that has connection with those experiences of their life and is someone that is not really that much different to themselves you know the real difference is they are sitting on the other side of the desk to what they are. I think that makes a big difference. (Sue)

Sue's emphasis on social work practice being a helping process that is underpinned by a common humanity is strikingly similar to Emma's perspective presented in Chapter 6. Emma regarded the process of sharing a common identity and humanity with people as a defining feature of her professional identity. This commonality of perspectives suggests that both divergent and complementary perspectives about the self permeate the profession. While the experiences of the Indigenous participants often appear to be isolated, strong elements of similarity with other participants can be discerned. Further analysis of these issues will be presented in the latter part of this and the final chapter (Chapter 8). The next section presents a number of examples of the transferability of knowledge and skills from the professional to the personal.

The transferability of knowledge from the professional to the personal

The process of being influenced by practice experiences has been conceptualised in the psychoanalytic literature as transference. In particular the worker who is influenced by their practice is identified as experiencing countertransference (Compton & Galaway, 1994; Hepworth et al., 1997; Shulman, 1992; Trevithick, 2000). This discourse is fundamentally cautionary and primarily concerned with protecting both workers and clients from harmful experiences. The participant stories presented here offer another insight into the potential influences of practice. While some experiences may be perceived as harmful (to be explored in the next

section), many are helpful and educative. The key theme here is that transference is a complex rather than a linear process. It involves the transfer of knowledge, skills and experience from the worker to the client and vice versa. This is a core feature of a socially constructed profession. Emma reflects on these issues:

I am a mother now. I have more credibility. That is the first thing that I noticed, the second I guess was a much more heart-felt connection with parents – more aware on an emotional level of what it means to be a parent. I also found myself thinking more about my own child in relation to other people's children so when they gave examples of their own children's behaviour, I would always have my own child to reflect back on and think that's right that is what 2 year olds do. Whereas before I knew intellectually what children were supposed to do, I now know from experience.

So I have a fantastic education on a very practical level. When I have to discipline my child I really feel confident that I know what the experts say. I feel like I am finally getting to try out all of the things that I learnt in my training. I feel very, very privileged that I've learnt so much about children emotionally as well as behaviorally. I feel like I have had the education that most parents complain that they do not have before they have children. (Emma)

Emma's dual identities of social worker and mother brought discernable strengths to her practice and her parenting, enriching both contexts. She acknowledged these strengths as including; increased credibility, a stronger sense of connection and empathy with clients and the ability to develop broader more experientially based knowledge that could be applied both at work and at home. A central feature of Emma's experience was recognition that a process of transferability of knowledge and skills existed between the professional and the personal sphere, a core theme in other research undertaken with social work parents (Zubrzycki, 1998; 1999). The application of professional knowledge to the personal context, was recognised by Sheppard (2000) as one way that as a 'new' mother, she and her partner dealt with their daughter's intransigent sleeping problems, "While we tried to respond as affectionate parents, we also tried to draw upon our professional knowledge and literature to help deal with this issue" (p. 38).

Zhara provides a further example of the usefulness of sharing work-based knowledge with her children:

Joanna –Do you share what you do at work with your family?

Zhara – No, not about individuals because of confidentiality. But what I share is in general terms like in terms of drug taking. I share with my kids how easy it is to access drugs here and how taking them affects you.

Joanna – What sort of response do you get?

Zhara - My kids take the moral of the story, they say they will not try drugs.

Zhara, while reinforcing the importance of maintaining confidentiality, was prepared to share with her children some of her practice experiences. She was primarily focused on the need to alert her children to the perils of drug taking, particularly given that her family was not totally familiar with the Australian context. Being a social worker and having frequent contact with people who are experiencing major problems, also challenged a number of participants to think about the quality of their parenting. John reflects on his experiences:

I think sometimes it actually is useful being a social worker because I keep thinking, how would I do this if this was one of my kids? How would I talk to them? And it makes me think about this all the time. At one stage there I was thinking, well I probably communicate more with my clients than I do with my family. I think it's the old situation where you get home and you just want to go, click, bring on the junk TV. I just want to sort of get away from all this. I don't want to be involved in all the issues and everything else that's going on, which I think is a hard thing between your personal life and your professional life. I also get told by my kids to pull my head in sometimes, like, don't do that counselling shit with me. (John)

John's story highlights a number of paradoxes. The insights about social problems that John developed in practice meant that tuning into his own family's issues often felt like an extension of his work. While his experiences challenged him to consider his family's needs and the importance of maintaining communication at home, John also sought distance from the pressures of work. However he found it difficult to 'switch off'. Working with clients who had drug and alcohol problems provoked John to consider

how he would respond if his own teenage children experienced similar difficulties. When John tried to engage his children, their responses were at times dismissive. Jess encounters similar reactions:

When I graduated my son was getting into high school. Being a social worker helped me to make more sense of what was happening at home with my relationships with the children and look at doing things in a different way. So the kids now say to me. Stop trying to social work me. All my friends say that you are trying to social work us. I say to my kids well have any of your friends ever had anything to do with social workers? No, then how do they know that I am social working you? Because sometimes I am being who I am, if I was not a social worker what would they say about me then? So sometimes the way they make meaning of the way I react at home is to say that I am social working them. (Jess)

Social work knowledge helped Jess to develop greater insight into her family situation. The responses of her children suggest that they recognised the transferability of her knowledge, and responded accordingly, resenting at times their mother's interventions. However for Jess the blending of social work knowledge with her parenting identity meant that it was impossible for her to compartmentalise her experiences or her identities, which suggests that she positioned both as equally significant and influential.

One possible explanation for the transferability and co-location of knowledge, meaning and identity that can be discerned particularly from Emma, John and Jess's experiences, is that social work and parenting both share an ethic of care (Camilleri, 1996; Hugman, 2003; Parton, 2003). While the notion of care has traditionally been gendered and embedded within feminist discourse, the experiences of participants in this research, presented here and in previous chapters (see Chapter 5), suggests that the construction of care is complex and multidimensional. An area that in particular requires further analysis is the link between care, knowledge, the self and the construction of boundaries. Attention to these issues will be given in the final chapter (Chapter 8).

Another powerful example of the process of transferability is Zhara's recognition that her spirituality is a central influence of her social work practice:

I consider work like a spiritual experience like worship. Going to work I gain money but I also benefit spiritually, in a way that I would not gain

if I did not work. I know my boundaries. I know that as a professional I will not be solving their problems. I know that I have professional boundaries but I have a spiritual life and if I am good to others someone will be good to me. I don't think my spiritual needs contradict with my relationship with my clients, it's my journey and this has a positive impact on my job because I want to do my best. (Zhara)

Zhara conceptualised the transferability of social work experiences from the professional to the personal and vice versa as an integral part of her spiritual commitment to her work. Her construction of boundaries is an interesting element in this process. Zhara recognised that her spiritual journey, while having a positive influence on her practice, was essentially personal. Her personal and professional boundaries reinforced the need to ensure that her practice remained professional and focused on meeting the needs of the individuals, groups and communities with whom she worked. In this way Zhara equated distinct boundaries with professionalism and good practice.

Elizabeth offers another example of the application of professional knowledge to the personal context:

On the question about what from my work might have influenced my personal life. Very clearly there has been a lot of influence that way. You know one of the reasons for separating from my husband was the knowledge that if I was working as a social worker with me as a client disclosing the stuff that was happening at home, I would have been challenging them about why they would remain in that situation given the risk to the kids. Probably as a worker I would have felt a responsibility to notify about that. So that was very fundamental in our separation. (Elizabeth)

Elizabeth is clearly linking her decision to separate from her partner with the knowledge and experiences gained from practice. This example of the process of transferability suggests that in these circumstances Elizabeth constructed her personal and professional boundaries as permeable, in order to gain personal strength from her social work knowledge and experiences. It is important to note that Elizabeth has in previous sections of the thesis expressed strong views about the use of self and the construction of clear boundaries in practice, suggesting the need to separate the personal from the professional (Chapter 6). Yet here she is supporting the notion that boundaries need to be permeable, allowing for

the positive transfer of knowledge and skills from the professional to the personal context. Her confronting experiences of separation challenged Elizabeth to reflect on the meaning of her practice experiences and to draw upon them as a resource. This further suggests that the process of boundary construction is variable, reflecting a continuum of purpose and meaning.

A further implication that can be drawn from Emma, Zhara, John, Jess and Elizabeth's experiences is that boundary permeability is also partly influenced by the direction in which the flow of experiences, knowledge and skills occurs. Movement of these dimensions from the professional to the personal context appears to be experienced as acceptable by participants, as well as stressful and intrusive. These issues are explored in the next and final section of Part A.

The personal costs of transferability

You can't sit down with people every day and talk about all sorts of problems and issues and then walk off at five o'clock. I mean I've thought lots of times, gee I'd like to go back to jobs where you just walk in and go ding, ding, ding or shuffle something around or whatever and then you walk out at five o'clock and that's the end of it. Because you don't walk out at five o'clock and not keep thinking about things. It just doesn't happen. And you wake up at night and you might be lying there thinking about all sorts of stuff and you're thinking about all the issues of clients and people and everything else and you can't get away from it. I mean, and that's one of the issues about supervision and about professional boundaries. I mean the boundaries have got to be there, but you can't stop what's happening in your head. I think we change as well. I mean as social workers you change over a period of time and also your feelings, emotions and everything else. (John)

John's experiences of 'taking work home' suggest that discernable boundaries and regular supervision did not guarantee that the transferability of experiences remained unobtrusive, reinforcing the complexities involved in compartmentalising work and professional life. By reflecting upon the influence of personal change on practice experiences, John highlights that the interaction between the personal and the professional is constantly in process. Emma concurs with this perspective:

Well I'd done this work for years and when people say to me. How do you cope? I'd say fine. I thought I'm made for this type of work. It has no

effect on me. As soon as I became pregnant it all came crashing down. I felt the pain of every child, it was just magnified a hundredfold. (Emma)

For Emma the transition to motherhood brought with it a stronger sense of emotional vulnerability. While feeling 'the pain of every child' in a child protection agency took at times an emotional toll on Emma, her commitment to her work remained strong. Defining the boundaries of commitment is according to Jones and May (1999) a difficult issue for occupations such as social work which are underpinned by a helping or altruistic ethos, "Workers need to be able to find a workable balance between their commitments to work, friends, family and themselves" (p. 293). According to Elizabeth achieving such a balance is facilitated by the construction of strong personal and professional boundaries:

Boundaries are not just protective in terms of possible legal stuff, but I mean the stuff that we work with, so much of it is really very difficult. I mean hearing amazing stories from people about suffering and abuse and violence and deprivation. I think it's quite easy to be swamped by that. So, yes, that personal survival stuff is very important. I know myself – I would never give a client my home phone number because I need to know that there's times of the day that I am just free of that work life. And for the client as well to allow them to think that you're the most able person in the world to provide them with support I don't think that's very helpful. Part of working with clients is around facilitating their widening of their resource networks. (Elizabeth)

Personal and professional survival and the achievement of client empowerment were important goals for Elizabeth. Her way of achieving these objectives was to maintain clear boundaries in order to ensure that she could retreat to the relative privacy of her home. Boundaries also prevented the development of dependency in clients, by encouraging individuals and communities to develop and work with a broad network of people and agencies.

These mutual benefits are challenged by other participants and expressed through competing discourses of the self and boundaries that have emerged throughout the thesis. This suggests that both the purpose and process of boundary construction is variously understood and enacted. The presence of these convergent experiences is not inherently problematic; rather it suggests that social work is indeed a socially constructed profession

influenced by a complex interplay of contextual, cultural and structural dimensions. The implications of this diversity of perspectives on the processes of knowledge creation and application will be explored in the next part of this chapter.

Part B

7.5 Boundaries, the self and ways of knowing

The act of knowing is an extremely complex endeavour: not only do human beings know different things, bringing different values, beliefs and perceptions to what they know and how they know it, but the act of knowing and what is known are irredeemably fused. (Oakley, 2000, p. 292)

Oakley's fusion of the act of knowing and the acquisition of knowledge represents for many participants a core epistemological struggle. The tension between the legitimacy of lived experience over professional knowledge is played out at the boundary between the personal and the professional self. This is reflected in a number of participant stories that have been presented throughout the thesis. For example, in this chapter, Jess, Sue, Scott and Emma resist making a distinction between knowledge creation and application. Knowing is regarded as a blending of personal, cultural and professional experience, developed in dialogue with the individuals with whom they engage. Whereas for John and Elizabeth, knowing in practice primarily reflects the acquisition of professional knowledge, reflected in the compartmentalising of identities in practice.

The purpose here is to bring together key themes from each data chapter about the relationships between personal and professional boundaries, the processes of knowing and the use of self. Exploring boundary construction demonstrates that knowing is transferable between personal and professional contexts and that the self is interdependent and in process. By drawing links between the influences of dimensions, such as gender, class, professional identity and context, a number of important issues will be identified regarding the emerging theory of boundaries. These will be presented in the next and final chapter.

We are what we know

According to Fook (2002), "Knowing is an integral part of being, so it is important to understand how what we know affects how we act and practice" (p. 33). A strong theme to emerge from a number of participant stories is that the process of knowledge creation is inextricably linked with a confluence of identities between the personal and the professional self.

For participants such as Alf, Clinton, Bindi, Julwul, Jess, Sue, Emma, Noonee, Jenny and Edith the identity of social worker converges with their socio-economic status and their personal identities; woman, man, Indigenous person, migrant, refugee and parent. The extent to which these identities overlap is variable, dependant on the meanings that individuals ascribe to their identities and reflected in the process of personal and professional boundary construction. For these participants, the boundary is constructed along a continuum of permeability that is influenced by many factors, including relational, contextual and structural dimensions.

The influence of lived experience is extensive and pervades the development of knowledge in practice. This is highlighted in the way that the Indigenous participants engage in practice. Julwul, for example (Chapter 4), described knowledge of the kinship system as fundamental to the way that an Indigenous social worker approaches people and identifies who they need to work with. Julwul gained this knowledge from a number of sources, including her own family, as well as by participating in constant dialogue with the people and communities with whom she worked. The need to use self-disclosure as part of the introduction process complements the knowledge-experience-self relationship by actively demonstrating that the self is an integral part of her practice.

Similarly, participants such as Emma, Sue and Jess regarded their parenting identity as important and influential, reinforced the links between the transition to parenthood and the development of a stronger knowledge base from which to practice. A number of Emma's stories, for example, highlight the influence of her mothering on her work in the child protection system. In Chapter 4, Emma recounts the need to be cautious about sharing her lived experiences in supervision. While being a parent brought additional knowledge to her practice, Emma also sensed that her colleagues and her supervisor might not accept the status and the applicability of her lived

experience. In Chapter 5 Emma reflects on the increased credibility that she gained from her clients, especially other mothers when she disclosed to them her mothering role. Sharing these insights with her clients through self-disclosure was one way that Emma could actively use her 'new' knowledge in practice. Here the relationship between personal roles, professional identity, knowledge and the need to construct permeable boundaries is reinforced.

Combining her Indigenous identity with her mothering experiences underpinned Sue's practice. In Chapter 5 Sue reflected on the different 'worldview' that she brought to her work with families, a perspective that was shaped by her personal experiences and one that increased her credibility with clients. This suggests that the knowledge that Sue used in practice was transparent to the people that she worked with, partly discerned by self-disclosure but also reflected in the process of applicability. In other words Sue did not always need to overtly talk about her experiences of Indigeneity or parenting to create links between her personal and professional knowledge. Her 'different worldview' was reflected in her ability to engage in a dialogical process with the individuals and communities with whom she worked as illustrated in her story located in Chapter 6.

Class-based experiences of privilege as well as poverty and oppression are another important identity that has been transferred to practice by participants such as Elizabeth, Emma, Jess, Mark, Sue, Alf and Clinton. For example, Clinton's identity as an Indigenous man who has experienced poverty and oppression converges with his social work identity. In Chapter 6 Clinton reflected on his work with non-Indigenous clients as being enriched by shared experiences of disadvantage. While this lived experience did not always lead to 'predictable practice outcomes' Clinton nevertheless regarded his capacity to practice as greatly enhanced by active engagement of the self. Clinton's ability to discern not only what aspects of the self are influential, but also how the process of co-location of knowledge informs his social work interventions, highlights that the processes of critical self-reflection play a distinct role in the blending of personal experience with professional knowledge. The convergence of lived experience, the self and knowing are explored in more depth in the next section.

Lived experience and the art of knowing

Debates about the status of lived experience as professional knowledge are explored in a range of literature concerned with professional education (Eraut, 1994; Fook, 2002; Fook et al., 2000; Healy, 2000). A central concern is the questioning not only of whose knowledge is legitimate, how this knowledge is developed but also the need to identify the legitimacy of different types of knowledge. While aspects of the debate have already been discussed in the first section of this chapter, it is important to consider this issue in more depth. The primary purpose here is to explore how a focus on boundary construction creates new insights on these fundamental epistemological questions.

According to Eraut (1994):

All people acquire knowledge through experiences, the purposes of which have little covert connection with learning...Such knowledge covers people and situations encountered, communications received and events and activities experienced through participation or observation...impressions gained from experience contribute to professional action in ways that are only partially understood. (p. 104)

The process of exploring the participants' experiences broadens this partial understanding. Each story illustrates how lived experience is applied in practice, with degrees of influence being a pervasive theme. The knowledge that is developed in practice, and transferred from the personal, is broadly constructed as well as experientially and structurally determined. For example, when Bindi engages with an individual, her culture, gender, social class and experiences merge with her professional identity and knowledge to create a dialogue that is aimed at achieving mutual understandings. The extent to which Bindi can relate to the individual is also predicated on their responses and reactions, thus highlighting the relational dimension.

Along with degrees of influence, another pervasive theme that has emerged from the analysis of participant stories is the issue of credibility. Does lived experience enhance credibility in practice? The implication here is that if lived experience is recognised by colleagues and clients as a source of legitimate knowledge then the status and credibility of lived experiences is strengthened. Divergent views regarding this issue permeate the thesis, as reflected in John's and Jess's stories at the beginning of this chapter.

Issues about the credibility of lived experience can also be found in Chapter 4, highlighting that the context of practice is influential in the development, status and application of lived experience in practice. For example, Noonee's intense involvement with the Filipino community was underpinned by a personal desire to make a positive contribution to the lives of her people (Chapter 4). Within her community Noonee's lived experience carried a high status, especially when these experiences converged with her professional knowledge and skills. In contrast Jenny's struggle in Chapter 6 to achieve credibility in practice by demonstrating a capacity to engage with clients from an 'English European background', required her to apply her professional knowledge and to sideline her personal experience. This meant that Jenny constructed more distinctive boundaries in order to compartmentalise her identities.

Eraut (1994) reinforces the importance of critically understanding these processes. He suggests that aspiring professionals do possess a significant amount of knowledge and impressions from their personal experiences as a result of growing up for example in a particular culture. They will also continue to develop knowledge experientially throughout their practice from interactions with others "but they will need to be more aware of how they operate and to be able to supplement such knowledge with more deliberately gathered information" (Eraut, p. 106). Thus the key to both the status and application of lived experience in practice is the possession of the skill of self-reflection. Consideration of these issues is the focus of the next section.

Self-reflection as a way of knowing and creating dialogue

A recurring theme throughout the thesis has been an emphasis on participants engaging in the processes of critical self-reflection as a way of developing insight into the use of self. Being self-reflective is regarded by participants, such as Scott (Chapter 7), Clinton (Chapter 7), Mark (Chapter 6), John (Chapter 4), Elizabeth (Chapter 6) and Emma (Chapter 6) as a necessary skill, which enhances the potential for knowledge developed from lived experience to be applied in practice. Engaging in the process of critical self-reflection also safeguards participants from the unethical use of self and the inappropriate application of knowledge.

Being self-reflective encourages the development of shared understandings. By participating in a dialogue with individuals and communities, participants such as Sue (Chapter 6), Emma (Chapter 5), Noonee (Chapter 6) and Scott (Chapter 5), engage in a dialogical process of knowledge creation. The individual's experiences converge with the worker's knowledge to develop a shared perspective. This is an inclusive process that resists the privileging of the participant's knowledge over the client's experience. Freire's (1972) definition of dialogue further reinforces the links between critical self-reflection and dialogical processes:

Dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world that is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person depositing ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be consumed by the participants in discussion ... It is an act of creation. (p. 61-62)

Engaging in a dialogue with clients requires workers to demonstrate humility in the creation and acquisition of knowledge. This process is demonstrated when participants engage in a judicious use of self-disclosure in their practice. For example, Sue (Chapter 7) asserts that clients had the right to hear about her experiences, thus supporting her view that sharing underpins the development of trust and rapport. This means that the skills of critical self-reflection facilitate a holistic use of self.

The role of the self in the development of 'effective relationships' is reinforced by de Oliveira (2000), who was inspired by Freire in his work with Brazilian street children. "The process of developing a strong bond increasingly demands personal availability on the part of the educator: For the educator to be significant in the children's lives, the children must become a significant part of his or her life as well" (de Oliveira, p. 95). de Oliveira goes on to identify the principle of reciprocity as one that underpins this working relationship. The worker, by actively engaging the self in praxis, needs to be open to transformation, "an open-ended existential adventure" (de Oliveira, p. 96). This resonates strongly with the processes of transferability that were discussed earlier in the chapter. Here participants openly shared how the knowledge and experiences of practice have had an impact on their personal contexts. These stories further contribute to the view that the boundary of the self acts as an intersection of knowledge and praxis.

The concept of transferability also underpinned the practice of 'expert social workers' in the study by Fook et al. (2000) of social work graduates involving "the reinterpretation of meaning in new contexts, rather than the imposition of one truth across contexts" (p. 191). Understood in these terms, meaning and knowledge are created inductively from new experiences and converge with prior thinking in a process that is referred to as contextual theory development.

As illustrated in Emma's story (Chapter 6), another important theme to emerge is that being self-reflective facilitates the development of a 'common humanity' with clients. This involved Emma developing with her client a mutually respectful relationship underpinned by the shared and inductive development of knowledge and meaning. According to Rees (1994), "Inherent in humanity are the values of community, of caring and sharing, of partnership and interdependence" (p. 158). Clients regard these as the characteristics of 'good social work' because they reflect a valuing of acceptance, relationship and engagement, "accept me, understand me and talk to me" (Parton, 2003, p. 3). Darlington and Bland's (1999) study of mental health consumers and workers supports this perspective, "Both the workers and the clients stressed the importance of human qualities ... for workers it was about being human while clients described the importance of the workers being genuine" (p. 22).

In other words 'knowing how' as opposed to 'knowing that' IS valued by both clients as well as participants in this research. These processes are facilitated by the skill of critical self-reflection and are constructed at the boundary of the personal and the professional. It is here that participants negotiate the development of collaborative and dialogical partnerships with their clients. The lack of certainty associated with these processes leads some participants to regard knowledge creation and application as distant from the self, thus requiring distinctive boundaries. The purpose of the next section is to explore these themes.

Professional knowledge, power and certainty

"A central project in all forms of knowledge is knowing in order to predict and thus gain control in an uncertain universe" (Oakley, 2000, p. 292). One of the dominant models of professional practice is the application of research-based knowledge to practice (Parton, 2003). A relationship between the achievement of certainty, the construction of distinctive

boundaries between the personal and the professional self, the application of professional knowledge in practice and a decrease in the status of lived experience are the final theme about knowledge to emerge from the participants' stories.

Elizabeth's practice story in Chapter 6 reflects the importance of these links. A strong professional identity, the articulation of professional expertise and an increase in client confidence were for Elizabeth the hallmarks of good practice. Her story reflects awareness of the relationship between professional knowledge and increased power. Foucault, as cited in Alvesson and Skoldberg (2001) focuses attention on the power in rather than of knowledge. While knowledge is at the base of the exercise of power, power also produces knowledge:

Different forms of knowledge are in the service of power, and they function in a disciplinary way, among other things by establishing normality and deviation...Not only repressive knowledge but to a large extent even helping and progressive knowledge is linked to power and functions in a disciplinary way. (Alvesson & Skoldberg, p. 227)

The disciplinary and normalising functions of professional knowledge are represented in Edith's story in Chapter 4. Here Edith demonstrates the importance of reinforcing her professional identity and knowledge base in her work with refugees. The need to establish normality by educating refugees about the Australian welfare system was for Edith a crucial goal. Edith achieved this aim by 'not telling clients what to do' but by presenting them with options. In this example, technical or professional knowledge was not used in opposition to other forms of knowledge, particularly lived experience, but rather it was identified as a key resource.

Contextual pressures from organisations to achieve outcomes also influence the hierarchical positioning of technical knowledge, reinforcing the construction of more rigid boundaries in practice. Hough (2003) identifies some of these pressures:

The workers' sense of responsibility for clients and concerns for the qualitative aspects of their work (for its content and meaning) are continually eroded in a work-world of time-and-motion studies, evaluation research, quantitative

measures of client contact, case-load management techniques, priority scaling, workload formulae, review forms and practice manuals. (pp. 217-218)

Edith (Chapter 4), Clinton (Chapter 4) and Sue (Chapter 4) all recognised that organisational pressures lead to the positioning of technical knowledge as more significant in their practice than lived experience. This was particularly demonstrated in their organisations' reluctance to allow the participants to spend time with their communities in order to avoid the development of dual relationships. The organisations favoured workers developing more formal relationships with their clients and this meant insisting that clients adhere to appointment schedules. This practice was counter to the lived experiences of participants such as Bindi, Clinton and Alf, who knew that the insistence on 'in-house therapeutic work' would further alienate the community from the agency and establish barriers in their capacity to gain the trust and rapport of individuals.

Clinton's reluctance to prioritise his professional knowledge over his lived experience as well as his recognition that contextual pressures in his practice acted as potential barriers, concurs with the responses of the 'more skilled' workers in the Fook et al. (2000) study:

The more skilled group was able to articulate and maintain an awareness of and commitment to, broader values, which transcended those of the workday world. Sometimes this was manifested as a client-based focus, sometimes in direct opposition to organisational interests, and sometimes it manifested as an ability to see beyond the client to the broader political issues that might have been at stake. (p. 172)

As noted earlier in this and previous chapters (Chapter 4) the participants of my research regard the process of knowledge creation and application as contextually determined and socially constructed. For some workers organisational pressures to construct distinct boundaries between knowledge and experience concur with their values and practice objectives, creating a degree of certainty, delineating power relations and reinforcing professional identity. For others contextual pressures are resisted in order that a confluence of identities, knowledge and identities can inform practice.

7.6 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to explore in greater depth the relationships between boundary construction, the self and the creation and application of knowledge in practice. Recognition that lived experience underpins the development of knowledge is clearly evident in a range of participant stories. The process of transferability is a key feature of this relationship. This involves the flow of knowledge, values and experiences between the personal and the professional self. Exploration of these experiences indicates that many of the participants are actively engaging with their clients in dialogical practice that seeks to also facilitate the flow of knowledge from the client to the worker. This not only means that the worker's professional knowledge base is informed by the client's experiences but it also suggests that the worker's personal self is shaped by practice.

Another important aim in this chapter has been to undertake further analysis of participant stories and to consolidate links to key themes arising from the preceding data chapters. This secondary level of analysis has identified that knowledge creation and application are a constant issue for many participants. Their level of engagement of the self, the compartmentalizing of identities, the development of working relationships with clients, the skills of critical self-reflection and the use of self-disclosure are all linked to the processes of knowing in practice.

Finally the chapter represents a transition from data analysis to the development of new ideas. The exploration of the core area of knowledge in practice creates an appropriate springboard for the articulation of new ideas about boundaries, the focus of the next and final chapter in this thesis.

8 The development of new understandings of the self and boundaries: My conclusion

8.1 Introduction

While reflexive inquiry is much to be prized, in the end it is insufficient. It is one thing to explore and ponder, and quite another to generate alternatives. Such inquiry brings us to the border of new frontiers, but how are we to cross over and with what resources? (Gergen, 2001, p. 113)

Identifying the implications of my research for social work education, supervision, management and practice will be the focus of this final chapter. The research findings challenge a number of implicit assumptions in contemporary social work discourse about the relationship between the self and practice. The development of new ideas about personal and professional boundaries creates opportunities for different understandings of the self to emerge. Conceptualising these ideas within an ethics of care strengthens the potential for the integration of this area of knowledge into practice. Before embarking on consideration of these issues I will briefly revisit the research question, aims, structure and process in order to identify how the original research objectives were achieved.

8.2 Revisiting the research question, purpose and structure

The central research question posed at the beginning of the thesis was how do Australian social workers construct personal and professional boundaries

in practice? The experiences of a diverse group of fifteen social workers have been explored, with particular attention given to the meaning and knowledge that these workers develop in and from their practice. This exploration focused on how the socially constructed self is shaped by interactions with individuals, groups and communities. A number of aspects of the self have been considered, including professional identity, personal identity, cultural identity and role, socio economic status and gender.

The purpose of embarking on this area of research was to highlight the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the self in practice. An exploration of the construction of boundaries between the personal and professional self throws into sharp relief a number of issues. These include the interdependence between the personal and the professional identity of the worker, the construction of meaning and knowledge, as well as the contextual and relational influences on practice.

The need to explore these processes and relationships was predicated on a concern that while the self is generally recognised as shaping practice, there has been a paucity of attention given to what lived experiences help constitute the self. Social work practice is broadly defined as a socially constructed profession, yet the self and the personal and professional boundary are regarded as individually constructed and defined. This discourse neglects the influence of contextual, relational and structural dimensions of the self, thus denying the possibilities of practice being continually informed by a myriad of experiences. Researching the intersection of the personal and the professional provides opportunities for new constructions of the self and practice to emerge.

The extent to which these goals have been realised can be discerned from examination of a broad range of themes that have emerged from each participants story. The process of posing the research question to each individual facilitated the presentation of diverse experiences that reflect a strong engagement of the self in practice. A summary of the data chapters (4, 5, 6 & 7) highlights the essence of these practice experiences. Before embarking on a presentation of the key findings, it is important to revisit the first three chapters of the thesis, which established the research context.

Reviewing Chapters 1, 2 & 3

The purpose of **Chapter 1** was: to outline the personal and professional influences that led to the development of the research question, to establish the research context by undertaking a critical appraisal of the current conceptualisations of boundaries and the self in social work, to present the inductive and socially constructed definitions of the core research concepts and to outline the thesis structure.

Chapter 2 focused on the research structure and process. The decision to develop a blended approach was based on the research aims. The constituent elements of this 'blend' included the epistemological underpinnings of social constructionism and the theoretical perspectives of critical theory and postmodern feminism. These perspectives offered the potential to conceptualise the self as structurally determined and socially constructed. In particular critical theory focused on the need to explore the historical context, including the power imbalances and vested interests that pervade professional practice. This resonated with the Indigenous research participants, whose stories needed to be interpreted in their historical and social context.

The adoption of critical theory facilitated the development of reflexive research processes and the interpretative analysis of data. The attention given to the influences of context (cultural, community and organizational) and subjectivity meant that as the researcher I was constantly challenged to consider the interrelationships of a number of dimensions throughout the interpretive process.

Postmodern feminism complemented and extended the influence of critical theory on the research process. It was important to adopt a diverse conceptualisation of gender in a research project conducted with five male and ten female participants located in a largely female dominated profession. Recognising the social construction of gender meant that the cultural influences on gendered relations and expectations were also identified. The blending of both theoretical perspectives underpinned the inherently partial nature of social research. This means that any new understandings of social work, the self and boundaries that have emerged should always be regarded as in process and never the complete and only story.

The methodological scaffolding consisted of a qualitative research process including; the development of a participatory research partnership, the adoption of snowball and theoretical sampling processes, the interview as dialogue, the deductive and inductive interpretation of the data and a recognition of ethical issues. The development of a collaborative research partnership with Bindi, one of the Indigenous participants, underscored the emancipatory potential of the research.

The deductive and inductive interpretation of the data occurred on a continuous and cyclical process over a 2-year period, with data analysis based on an exploration of patterns, tensions and paradoxes. A range of ethical issues were identified. Questions that arose from the collaborative nature of the inquiry included ownership of the data, the maintenance of confidentiality (given that some data was jointly analysed) and issues of anonymity, with some participants choosing not to adopt a pseudonym. Another area requiring consideration was the potential for the revelation, during the interview process, of unethical boundary behaviour. Fortunately no stories of that nature were presented.

Chapter 3 of the thesis was devoted to the introduction of the research participants. The structure of the chapter included the presentation of an excerpt from each participant's story revealing how each social worker chose to introduce themselves. Their characteristics (gender, cultural identity, age, duration and location of practice experience) were summarised in two tables presented at the end of the chapter.

The next section presents the key themes that arose from the data analysis.

8.3 Identifying key themes arising from the data analysis

Reviewing Chapters 4, 5, 6 & 7

The structure of the four data chapters parallels the emergence of a number of core and interrelated themes arising from the data analysis, context (Chapter 4), gender (Chapter 5), class and professional identity (Chapter 6) and the creation and transferability of knowledge across boundaries (Chapter 7). A reappraisal of each chapter will be presented in order to elucidate the key features of each dimension. This analysis will form the

basis of the presentation, in the second half of the chapter, of a new theory of personal and professional boundaries as well as the implications of the research findings for social work.

In the first data chapter, **Chapter 4**, different dimensions of context (cultural, geographical and organizational) were explored in order to identify the relationships between context, the use of self and the construction of personal and professional boundaries. The presenting argument suggested that a range of contextual factors influence the construction of boundaries. These dimensions are variable and form a continuum of influences, which are socially constructed and relationally and culturally informed.

Influences arising from the cultural context were complex and multidimensional, and were strongly identified in the practice of Indigenous and CALD participants. These influences included familial and social connections as well as obligations, challenging the Indigenous and Cultural and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) participants to continually construct and reconstruct their boundaries in practice. Given the emphasis in the professional discourse (as represented by the AASW code of ethics, 1999) for the avoidance of dual relationships and the need to maintain separateness between the personal and the professional self, the ethical repercussions arising from the cultural context were regarded as problematic.

The process of boundary construction, for the Anglo and Celtic Australian participants in particular, was identified as being strongly influenced by the geographical context of practice. However, the variability of responses presented reinforced the pervasive influences of cultural identity, community responsibility and connection, suggesting that geographical proximity was one of many factors informing the use of self in practice.

Organisational and supervisory expectations and influences were also regarded as influential in the use of self and the construction of boundaries. Changes accompanying the restructuring of the Welfare State place pressure on participants to conform to agency guidelines and systems. This compromises the practice of many participants, impeding their ability to respond to client needs and community expectations. Again these issues affected the construction of boundaries, with an emerging tension between

agency requirements for formality and procedure versus the needs of individuals (for example refugees) for flexibility and informality.

The appropriate use of self and the construction of clear boundaries in practice were also recognised by supervisors as important features of practice. A number of paradoxes were highlighted in this section, with some participants privately celebrating a more open use of self, while maintaining silence in supervision fearing retribution and decreased credibility.

Chapter 5 focused on the exploration of gender as a key dimension informing both the use of self in practice and the construction of personal and professional boundaries. A number of different aspects of gender were identified as influential, namely the social, professional and cultural constructions of gender which were all regarded as impacting variously on the practice of the male and female participants.

The issues for the male participants were regarded as particularly problematic as the professional literature is dominated by research findings, which identify male social workers as being more vulnerable to inappropriate boundary incursions. This discourse places pressure on those male participants who respond relationally to the needs of their clients.

For many of the female participants the construction of gender was strongly linked to their caring roles, in particular their identities as mothers. Again a diversity of responses can be discerned from these influences, ranging from a more active engagement of the self in practice leading to boundary permeability, to the recognition that the experiences of motherhood can enhance a participant's sense of vulnerability. In these situations, boundaries are protective and essential in reinforcing the purpose of practice and the professional identity of the worker.

The cultural constructions of gender challenged many participants to carefully position their self in practice. Cultural knowledge in the form of hegemonic prescriptions dictates a specifically gendered response to issues such as sexual abuse. However, the pragmatic responses of workers, often based on a lack of resources, can override culturally appropriate expectations and lead to a decrease in the worker's credibility in the community.

The traditional discourse of social work as a female dominated profession is also challenged by the diversity of gendered experiences presented in the chapter. This suggests that the self is continually in process and constructed through dialogical exchanges that have gendered, relational and contextual dimensions.

The purpose of **Chapter 6** was to consider how the structural dimensions of class and professional identity inform the construction of personal and professional boundaries and the use of self in practice. This facilitated the exploration of factors such as social distance, power and uncertainty, taking the thesis forward into previously unexplored domains. The key argument presented was that structural dimensions play a complex role in practice, further challenging the individually focused discourse on boundary construction.

The competing perspectives presented in Chapter 6 regarding the influence of structural dimensions on the self and boundaries reflect a tension between modernist notions of professionalism that yearn for certainty and a critical postmodern perspective that encourages the dismantling of dualisms, the development of dialogical praxis and the engagement of a more holistic self in practice. Compounding these tensions is the presence of diverse experiences of the self, with the Indigenous and CALD participants positioning more prominently their cultural identities in practice. These experiences highlight not only the pervasive influence of structural dimensions on the construction of the self, but also the existence of a clash of cultural expectations and experiences within the profession.

These ideas were further explored in **Chapter 7**, a chapter that represented a transition from data presentation and analysis to the conceptualisation of an emerging theory of boundaries. A central theme was the relationship between social work knowledge and lived experience, with divergent perspectives identified and explored. These diverse views reflect ideas about the use of self and the construction of personal and professional boundaries in practice, exemplified through an exploration of the process of knowledge transferability.

The transferability of knowledge and skills from the personal to the professional context and vice versa are indicative of a construction of boundaries that are permeable and changeable, situated along a continuum

that is relationally and structurally determined. A number of participants highlighted the need to construct protective boundaries so that stressful aspects of practice would not impact negatively on their personal context. For other participants the achievement of this goal was more complex, given the omnipresence of the self in practice.

The status of lived experience as knowledge was also supported by some participants and questioned by others. Similarly questions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge and whose knowledge is privileged were contested. For some participants these core epistemological questions are highly contextual, with different practice contexts (such as child protection) applying pressure on workers to present a professionally informed knowledge base.

A holistic use of self reflects a commitment by participants to develop shared understanding in practice. This is facilitated by the skills of critical self-reflection and underpinned by a capacity to demonstrate humility in the client-worker relationship. A divergent perspective of the self recognises that a relationship exists between the achievement of certainty, the construction of distinctive boundaries between the personal and the professional self, the application of professional knowledge in practice and a decrease in the status of lived experience.

The presentation of key themes from each data chapter underscores the diversity of stories about the self and boundaries. The key contribution arising from this amalgam of experiences is the development of new understandings of boundaries, one that reflects the diversity of knowledge, meaning and skill that comprises the practice of social work. The presentation of these ideas is the purpose of the next section of this chapter.

8.4 Presenting new understandings of personal and professional boundaries and the self in practice

The aim of this section is to present the key features of these new ideas about boundaries and to reinforce the importance of knowledge creation in social work. Situating these ideas within an ethics of care provides an opportunity for new understandings about the self and boundaries to be creatively applied in practice.

Introduction

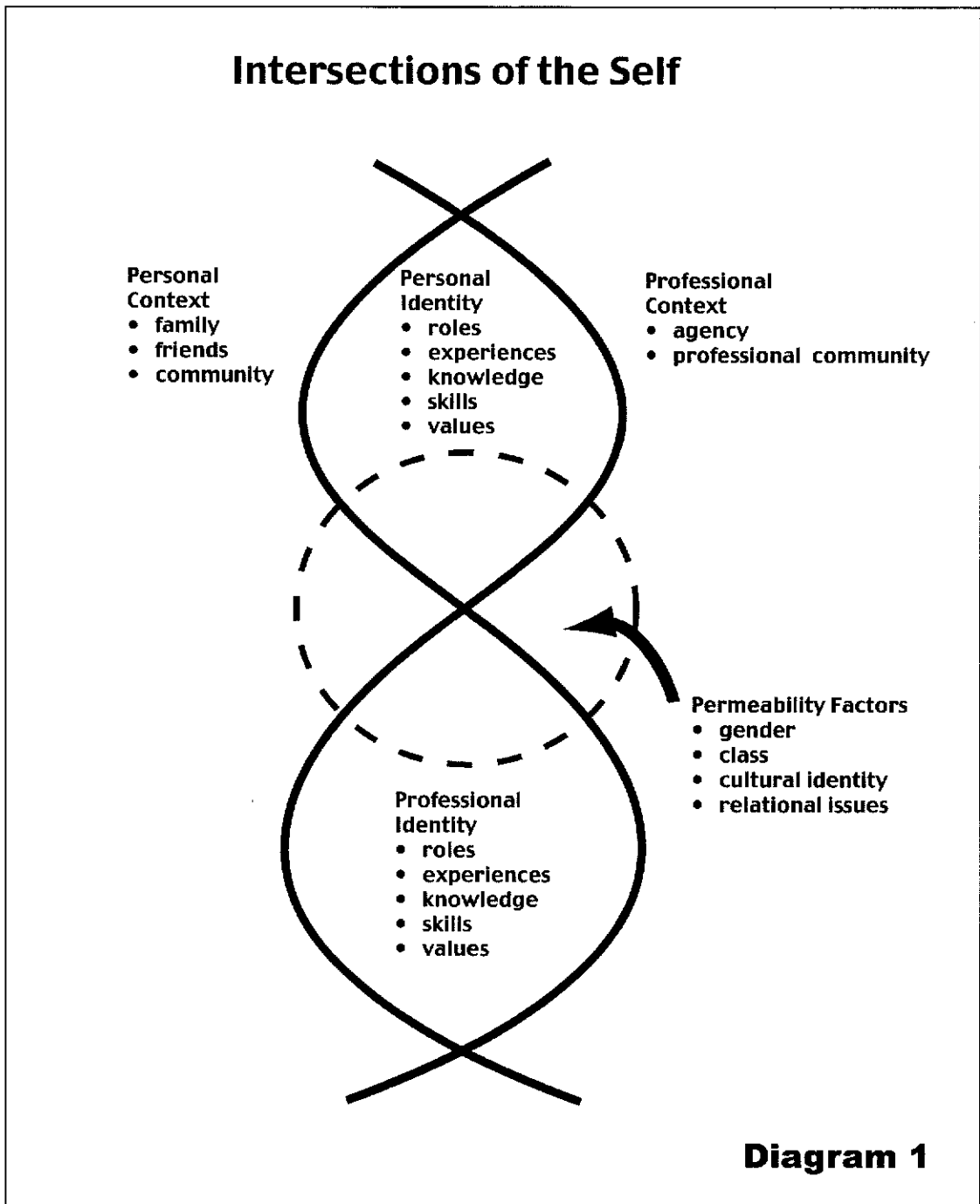
The received wisdom about personal and professional boundaries in social work has been problematic, primarily influenced by professional and ethical discourse and not by the experiences of workers. A focus on the individual responsibility of workers to construct distinct boundaries in practice has been based on a concern that practice must be ethical and accountable. The inherent problems associated with the development of dual relationships, self-disclosure, a lack of adherence to confidentiality, the dangers of exploitation, and the development of client dependence are all regarded as professional danger zones.

The links between the construction of boundaries and a careful and considered positioning of the self are reinforced. While social workers are regarded as bringing to their practice a myriad of life experiences, the status of the self as the carrier of knowledge and skills is contested. The experiences of the participants of this research challenge the dominance of this discourse and the veracity of the claim that distinctive boundaries create certainty and symbolize professionalism.

Boundaries as intersections of knowledge and meaning

A key feature of these new ideas about boundaries is recognition that it is not possible to identify one distinct point of separation between the personal and the professional self. Rather multiple intersections of knowledge and meaning exist between the professional identity of the worker and their personal context (see Diagram 1, p.197). The structure and purpose of these intersections is variable and influenced by a range of socially and relationally constructed dimensions including, the practice context (cultural, geographical and organizational), the personal identity of the worker, (gendered, cultural, structural) and the needs and responses of the client (group and community).

The extent to which the practice context influences a worker's use of self is variable. An important issue here is the nature of the context, with issues such as cultural expectations and obligations, geographical proximity, agency guidelines and supervisory relationships all exerting different pressures on the worker. In turn, the practice responses to these demands are strongly influenced by the nature of the relationship between the worker and the context in which they are located. For some workers, issues



This diagram represents the complex and multi-faceted relationships that exist between the personal and the professional self. It identifies that both aspects of the self reflect an individual's roles, expectations, values, knowledge and skills. These dual identities are located within both the personal (family, friends, community) and the professional (agency, professional community) contexts. These contexts influence the extent to which different aspects of the self emerge in practice.

Permeability between the personal and the professional self is also influenced by the worker's gender, class and cultural identity. Relational issues (individual and community needs, expectations and obligations) inform the degree to which aspects of the personal self influence the professional and vice versa. The variable influences exerted by all of these factors means that the intersection of the personal and the professional is changeable both in permeability and purpose.

such as reciprocity and obligation demand that they position the self prominently, in order to gain trust and achieve credibility with their clients and communities. In these situations, the intersection reflects a dynamic interchange of identities, knowledge and meaning, with the skill of critical self-reflection facilitating the development of dialogical relationships.

An active presence of the socially constructed self can also be discerned when, for example, agency pressures and close geographical proximity demand a compartmentalisation of identities and the development of more hierarchical worker-client relationships. In this situation, the intersection represents a site of competing demands, in which the worker positions the self strategically. The purpose of the worker-client relationship and the role of the worker are important factors in the development of what are regarded as 'appropriate practise responses'. The self does influence the knowledge and skills that are applied in practice, although there is some variability in the manner in which this is presented. Again the worker's sensitivity, insight and understanding of contextual expectations are important features in determining the extent to which permeability exists between the personal and the professional self.

The personal identity of the worker is recognised as being socially constructed. While traits such as personal style represent individually shaped characteristics, it is crucial to understand the pervasive influence of structural dimensions on the self. These include the worker's gender, cultural identity and social class. Each dimension represents social expectations, experiences and opportunities that inform the worker's responses and interactions with others. The extent to which each factor shapes a worker's personal identity is linked to meaning attribution and reinforced by societal responses. While each worker's personal identity is variously located at the intersection of knowledge and meaning, the use of self in practice needs to be regarded as a fundamentally structural process.

The transferability of knowledge, meaning, experience and skill between the personal and professional context is constantly evolving. The process of transferability reinforces the dynamic role played by the self as a carrier of knowledge and meaning. The extent and direction of transferability is variable, partly influenced by the meaning, which experience and knowledge represents for the worker. The worker does apply the knowledge acquired from lived experience to their practice. In turn the knowledge and

skills gained from practise are variously utilized in the personal context. The need for workers to protect themselves from the effects of stressful and difficult experiences, from either the personal or the professional context, restricts the degree of permeability. While demands for the use of knowledge and skills facilitate a more open process of transferability. This once again reinforces the ongoing and uncertain nature of the intersection between the personal and the professional self.

The intersection of knowledge and meaning is also constructed as a reaction to the perceived needs and responses of the individual and community with whom the worker is engaged and as such reflects an inherently dialogical process. That is, the use of self involves both the transferability of experiences and knowledge between the personal and professional self of the worker and an exchange of experiences and knowledge between the worker and their client or community. The objective of developing shared understandings in practice means that the worker's knowledge and lived experience is not privileged over the client's (individual, group, community) knowledge and experiences. Thus the relationship between the personal and professional self is multi-faceted and relationally determined. The aim of demonstrating a common humanity becomes a driving force, with the importance of demonstrating humility underpinning the practise response.

Recognising that uncertainty and change characterise the relationship between the personal and the professional self is a pivotal feature of these new ideas. A lack of absolutes suggests that the socially constructed self is constantly changing and evolving. This means that the influence of the self is variable and that workers need to be continually engaged in the process of critically reflecting on how their lived experience informs the intersection of knowledge and meaning in practice. The capacity of dealing with uncertainty is recognised as a professional quality. Further discussion of the development of this skill will be undertaken in the latter part of the chapter.

Uncertainty, change and variability of the use of self are all potentially problematic when determinations need to be made about the ethical use of self in professional practice. I would argue that these characteristics do not necessarily or automatically create ethical dilemmas. However, they do challenge the notion that social workers are in total control of the self. How and where do workers position their lived experience in order to achieve the

objectives of ethical practice? The next section of the chapter confronts these issues and takes the development of these new ideas further by conceptualising the intersections of knowledge and meaning as essential features of an ethics of care.

8.5 Integrating intersections of knowledge and meaning in practice: The self and an ethics of care

Developing awareness of the multifaceted nature of the self in social work and the role that lived experience plays in practice creates opportunities for the development of creative links between the concepts of the self, caring and ethics. The relationship between these dimensions is underpinned by recognition that the practice of social work is inherently diverse, dialogical and constantly in process, shaped by a range of influences arising from; the context of practice (geographical, organizational and cultural), the structural dimensions of the self (gender, class and cultural identity) and relational responses (from the individual and community). The presence of these characteristics as well as an increased recognition that a socially constructed self exerts diverse influence on practice, challenges the legitimacy of rule bound ethical discourse. An ethics of care offers the potential for a more open and considered engagement of the self in social work.

Hugman (2003) describes an ethics of care as consisting of a notion of ethics that is plural, unfinished and discursive, embracing the moral agency of both the cared for and the carer, "Ethics is about practice, as well as thought; in other words ethics is the praxis of the heart, hands and feet" (pp. 11-12). An ethics of care implies being open to the 'other' and assumes relationships that are bound by mutual interdependence (Parton, 2003, p.10-11). Care is "seen as a social practice where situated thinking and situated ethics is the key" (Parton, p.11). Understood in this way the use of self in social work is integral to the development of a moral identity, which is continually being developed and revised.

This conceptualisation of an ethics of care powerfully resonates with the construction of intersections of knowledge and meaning in practice. According to this new theory about the relationship between the personal and the professional, the self, as a legitimate transmitter of skills, knowledge and experience is recognised as a moral agent. Workers are

imbued with the responsibility of being conscious “of the integrations of the moral dimension with technical choices that they make in practice” (Hugman, 2003, p. 11). Caring, even though paradoxical and risky, involves mutual connection and recognition (Benner, 1994), with the relational self-acquiring a “moral identity through interactive patterns of behaviour, perceptions and interpretations” (Parton, 2003, p.10).

According to Baumann (1993), the notion of moral agent implies recognition of the totality of the self. When an individual adopts the role of a worker their work identity is integrated within a holistic self. For example a young male social worker is also a young man who is single, middle class and a first generation migrant from the Philippines. Recognition of a holistic self means that workers need to take responsibility for the totality of their identities and their actions. This makes adherence to codes of conduct and guidelines for choices limited because they are “attached to the performance of a role and do not stretch to get hold of the real self” (Baumann, p. 19).

An ethics of care also recognizes the need in social work to incorporate a more holistic view of the private and public context of practice and of practice and theory (Baines, 1993). This involves recognition of the discursive, deductive and inductive nature of knowledge development and attention to social class and cultural difference. (Hugman, 2003; Parton, 2003). The values of ‘being for other’ and ‘respect for persons’ underpin a practice engaged with, and not just tolerating difference (Hugman). This suggests that theory building incorporates both technical knowledge as well as locally produced knowledges, traditionally relegated to the margins of the modernist landscape (Lynn, 2001; Tsang, 2001).

Recognition that ambiguity and uncertainty underpin the practice of social work is fundamental to an ethics of care, making adherence to universal moral laws inherently problematic. According to Bauman, as cited in Hugman (2003), “Instead of seeking to develop universal moral laws, ethical reasoning should be concerned with assisting every person in engagement with the messy business of negotiating the dynamic moral order in which we live” (p. 9). This does not mean that ethical practice is optional but rather that ethical action is everyone’s moral responsibility. In other words practitioners have a responsibility to make individual moral choices based on continual understanding and negotiation between persons-in-context. This requires workers to take responsibility for their actions by engaging in

reflexivity and self-criticism and adopt a constructive scepticism of authority (Hugman, pp. 9-12).

Another crucial feature of an ethics of care is recognition that the professional encounter reflects a process of 'reflective solidarity' in which "all participants including professionals shift their positions, enlarge their perspectives, value the words and offerings of the others and come to see the world in a slightly different way in order to negotiate and identify solutions" (Parton, 2003, p. 13). Underpinning this process is recognition that flexibility is crucial if such caring is to be of value, as well as acceptance that caregivers need to exercise judgment and demonstrate emotional commitment.

These principles resonate with the practice experiences presented in this thesis as well as in other research undertaken with experienced practitioners. Fook et al. (2000) regarded an 'expert practitioner' as a person who:

Subscribes to a value system, which seems to transcend the rule-bound thinking which is implicit in some professional codes of ethics. In a sense, an expert professional has the confidence to act in seemingly unprofessional ways, because they are acting according to a broader set of human and social values, without being stultified by professional boundaries (p. 195).

Adhering to a broader set of human and social values means embracing respect for persons, the principles of social justice and a common humanity. It also means recognising that ethical actions are fundamentally relational. According to Baumann (1993) moral phenomena "are not regular repetitive, monotonous and predictable" (p. 11). The existence of areas of ambivalence and multiple interpretations means that experienced practitioners are more likely to be guided by values rather than by rules. An essential influence on the worker's value system is the self, defined by socially constructed lived experiences. "Good social work is not marked by confident pronouncements, certain decisions, and resolute actions, but by an openness to dialogue, self-reflection, self-doubt, and humility" (De Montigny, 1995, p. xv). Recognising the centrality of the self in the development of ethical practice underscores the significance of these new ideas about boundaries and the self in social work.

The next section of the chapter identifies how these new understandings about the relationship between the personal and the professional can be taken forward in social work education, supervision, management and practice.

8.6 Implications of new understandings of the self and boundaries for social work

So far in this chapter the main themes from the research have been summarised and a new ideas about the relationship between the personal and the professional self has been presented. The concept of intersections of knowledge and meaning has been identified as a useful replacement for the notion of personal and professional boundaries, with integration of these ideas in practice facilitated by an ethics of care.

As stated by Gergen (2001) at the beginning of the chapter, the generation of alternatives is a crucial step in the reflexive research process. In this thesis the alternatives that I wish to develop are presented as implications for different areas of social work, namely the education of students (including the ongoing professional development of workers) the supervision and management of social workers and the practice of social work.

Embracing the notion of a socially and structurally constructed self needs to be regarded as a valuable contribution to the development of social work. One of the contributions of this new understanding is that it provides conceptual strength and vigor to an issue that has been relegated to the margins of social work discourse. Understanding personal and professional boundaries as socially constructed, changeable and relational, places renewed emphasis on the need to understand how social workers develop meaning and knowledge in their practice.

Implications for social work education

One of the aims of the research has been to explore what aspects of the self influence practice and how knowledge, meaning and experience inform social work. Before embarking on a discussion of the educational implications of my research it is important to make a crucial distinction between the education of aspiring social workers and the ongoing development of social work practitioners. In this section I wish to address

both educational domains, in order to achieve the ideal of developing creative and responsive social work practice.

Integrating the self in the teaching of social work students

Aspiring social workers embark on their professional education with a myriad of personal experiences and expectations. In Australia, social work degrees attract both school leavers as well as mature-aged students. The educational process, accredited by the professional association (the AASW), demands that social work students acquire a range of knowledge, values and skills, which need to be demonstrated in field placements. The aim of this section is to present a model for teaching the self in practice that embraces the key ideas reflected in the research.

A crucial feature of this educational model is recognition that teaching about the self needs to be integrated into all aspects of social work education and not relegated to the domain of skill acquisition. While critical self-reflection is a core skill needed by social workers to engage the self in practice, the notion of a socially constructed self reflects epistemological and ontological concerns and as such needs to be integrated into all areas of the curriculum. In this way, the knowledge and meaning arising from lived experience merges with 'traditional' social work theory and practice to form a cohesive whole, reflecting recognition of the self as holistic and in process.

A useful example of this integration of the self in the educational process is the need to challenge the traditional 'banking of knowledge' approach that characterises many educational processes (Belenkey, Clinchey, Goldberg & Tarule, 1986; Rossiter, 1995; Zubrzycki, 2002a, 2002b). Freire (1994) regarded traditional teaching as based on a method of banking, "In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p. 53). Freire argues that it is crucial that both the student and teacher need to be regarded simultaneously as teachers and students.

In this research the alienation experienced, in particular by the Indigenous participants during their social work education (see Chapter 4), suggests that the teaching of knowledge and skills took place in spite of, rather than in partnership with, their lived experience. This does not mean that lived

experience needs to be elevated to the status of a truth, but rather that the sharing of personal experiences should be given credibility as a form of knowing and as such needs to be explored alongside established theories and discourses. In this way classrooms can become sites of learning that are exciting, challenging, confusing, as well as confrontational (Miehls, 2001).

Integrating the self and lived experiences across all areas of the curriculum supports the notion that uncertainty and change permeate the practice of social work. Considering the veracity of knowledge claims against the experiences of social work students could be perceived as potentially destabilising and chaotic. However, if these stories are facilitated in a dialogical process, underpinned by the value of developing shared understandings, then powerful parallels can be constantly drawn with practice, thus narrowing the divide between the classroom and the practice context.

Another feature of this educational model is the need to challenge the teaching of dualisms about the self in practice. The intersections of knowledge and meaning (see Diagram 1, p197) merge with the professional and personal context to create a holistic identity, encapsulating professional experiences as well as the worker's personal self. According to this theory, points of separation are not easily established, with the notion of transferability of knowledge, values and experience suggesting that permeability and change characterise the development of meaning in practice. Communicating the elements of these ideas can be facilitated by educators and practitioners openly sharing with students their practice experiences.

Social work educators and practitioners play a pivotal role in modelling the self as a carrier of knowledge and meaning in practice (Rossiter, 1995; Zubrzycki, 2002b). By being prepared to share their own struggles, uncertainties and thought processes, educators create valuable opportunities for students to learn about the practice of social work. "So long as teachers hide the imperfect process of their thinking, allowing their students to glimpse only the polished products, students will remain convinced that only Einstein or a professor could think up a theory" (Kapf, 1997, p. 87).

Preparing students for the uncertainty of practice also requires recognition of the complex relationships that may exist between the student and their client and/or community (O'Collins, 1993). As demonstrated in this research, obligation and reciprocity stem from a myriad of sources including contextual pressures (cultural and geographical) as well as kinship ties and friendship networks.

While the potential inevitability of these connections needs to be discussed, students also need to be made aware of the 'dangers' arising from the development of intimate and/or dependant relationships with clients. Making links to an ethics of care is an important aspect of this discussion. Operationalising the value of respect for persons, inherent within an ethics of care, means identifying how students can negotiate a professional relationship that takes into consideration cultural and class differences or similarities. This would involve acknowledging the power relationships that are inherent in practice and the need to avoid the abuse of power (Hugman, 2003).

This is one of the strengths of a theory of self that recognises the numerous intersections of knowledge and meaning in practice. Breaking down dualisms between the personal and the professional self creates valuable space for students to think critically about the existence of many layers of relationships in practice. The key here is the development of the skill of critical self-reflection, which assists students to gain insight into their practice in ways that reveal paradoxes, complexities and possibilities.

There are a number of ways in which this skill can be developed. An important premise is acceptance that students are adult learners who will acquire skills at varying times and in diverse ways, always building on their past and current experiences. The use of critical incidents in Fook et al. (2000) is potentially useful here, as long as the educator creates an environment of trust in the classroom, which invites the sharing of lived experiences. These reflective conversations about practice experiences could then form the basis of skill development and importantly an acceptance of the value of engaging the self in practice.

Another useful teaching tool that facilitates the development of reflective skills is the reflective journal (Zubrzycki, 2002b). Encouraging students to write reflectively provides opportunities for the development of insight

about the socially constructed self and the integration of the self in practice. The development of insight is an essential step in the development of the skill of critical self-reflection. Educators need to be aware that the development of insight is not a linear process and needs to be continuously encouraged.

Finally, a model of teaching about the self must be conceptualised as underpinning the development of a social work practice that is solidly situated within a discourse of social justice and human rights. The modernist positioning of the self as primarily located in areas of direct practice needs to be resisted and challenged. The merging of intersections of knowledge and meaning within an ethics of care provides the necessary springboard for the self to be a crucial feature of a critical social work practice. Fundamental to these new ideas is recognition that social workers are engaged in the development of a common humanity that respects the development of mutual knowledge and experience, a dialogical practice driven by the values of being-for-other and respect-for-persons (Hugman, 2003). The next section builds on these points by considering how social work practitioners can engage with these new understandings.

The ongoing education of practitioners: Resisting the urge to be finished

The aim of this section is to briefly present ideas about how to engage practitioners in new ways of thinking about the self in practice. "Resisting the urge to be finished" (Rossiter, 1995, p. 9) underpins the value of ongoing professional development. As identified by the participants of this research, the self and practice are constantly changing and evolving. This process of continual development is reflected in the diversity of practice stories presented in the thesis. The participants demonstrate an ability to be critically self-reflective and a willingness to share the paradoxes and tensions that characterised their practice experiences.

This is the first 'lesson' to be shared with other practitioners, and as such needs to be premised on an acceptance of individual difference and diversity. Learning from each other in study groups, learning circles or in peer supervision, are all valuable mediums through which 'new' ideas can be disseminated. Different ways of knowing can be presented, firstly from the sharing of experiences, and then from the presentation and discussion of different knowledge and practices. The key issue here is that the

presentation of the intersection of knowledge and meaning needs to be part of an exchange of experiences so that these ideas are located parallel to, and not instead of, the experiences of practitioners.

An important aspect of the ongoing professional development of social workers is the need to recognise the different educational experiences that practitioners bring to their practice. Graduating at different times and from a variety of educational institutions, located in various geographical contexts (within Australia and internationally) means that workers are informed by a myriad of theoretical paradigms. The influence of these conceptual schemas on practice should be explored in any ongoing professional and education forum.

The need to identify how workers conceptualise their self in practice is a useful beginning point in any discussion of the construction of personal and professional boundaries. The workers openness and willingness to explore notions of social construction of the self are potentially predicated on their understanding of these concepts. Bridging the gaps between 'old' understandings of the self and the ability to adopt 'new' ideas needs to be a central aim of any ongoing professional educational experience.

Implications for the supervision of social workers

Receiving individual professional supervision is one of the central features of social work practice. An important finding in this research (see Chapter 4) is that workers often feel reluctant to share their experiences of the use of self in supervision. Concerns about the supervisor's misinterpretation of these experiences as examples of a worker's vulnerability or unprofessional behaviour stifle the open expression and exploration of the self. This leaves workers feeling isolated and further reinforces a belief that the use of self is a private and personal experience that can and should be compartmentalised.

Sharing experiences of the self needs to be a core component of the supervisory relationship. Preparing supervisors to be aware of the socially constructed self and the existence of intersections of knowledge and meaning supports the notion that the self is omnipresent in practice. An important aspect of this exploration is the need for supervisors to be prepared to share their experiences of the use of self. Just as educators

need to resist hiding their imperfect thinking, supervisors need to model a process of open and critical self-reflection.

The next stage in a commitment to openness in supervision is the facilitation of joint learning, whereby the worker and supervisor share their experiences in order to create knowledge in an atmosphere of dialogical partnership. This does not mean that the power differences between the supervisor and the worker are discounted, but rather that, as in practice, the power issues are identified and acknowledged. Being prepared to learn from each other requires discussion of power differentials as well as a willingness to explore how the structural characteristics of the self, such as class, culture and gender impact on the supervisory relationship. Again parallels with practice emerge in such discussions thus facilitating development of the skill of critical self-reflection. Acknowledgment that the supervisor is often more experienced than their worker, does not mitigate against the development of joint learning.

An important aspect of the development of dialogical exchanges between workers and supervisors is a commitment by supervisors to not rely solely on the worker's knowledge to fill gaps in their own understandings of practice. In this research (see Chapter 4) some of the Indigenous participants were particularly concerned about supervisors who were unable to support their practice because of a lack of understanding of their cultural context. Non-indigenous supervisors often misunderstood the need for Indigenous workers to actively engage their self and construct permeable personal and professional boundaries in practice. In these circumstances the need to access cultural supervision becomes a crucial adjunct in the practice of Indigenous workers. Non-indigenous supervisors need to support and encourage the development of these networks.

Another core aspect of the supervisory relationship involves recognition that the process of transferability exists between all aspects of professional practice and the self. The supervisors in this research (see Chapter 4) regarded this issue as an important area of discussion. The need to form protective boundaries at the intersection of knowledge and meaning requires exploration as well recognition of the value of protecting the self without constructing unrealistic divisions and distance. Being aware of the importance of forming protective boundaries in practice needs to be highlighted by supervisors as a way of preventing burnout and stress.

The negative impact on clients of the development of unprofessional relationships with their workers is also an area requiring exploration in supervision. The crucial issue here is that the integration of knowledge about the socially constructed self and an ethics of care means that these discussions involve acknowledgement of the multiple intersections of knowledge and meaning in practice. As a consequence, there needs to be some recognition of the many different forms of relationships with clients which can emerge. The emphasis then becomes the need for the worker to develop insight about these relationships and an understanding of their responsibilities as a moral agent. Thus any ethical dilemmas are understood and addressed within their social, cultural and relational context.

The implications of integrating new understandings of the self and boundaries for the supervision of social workers also need to be extended to the management of social work staff. Exploring these issues will be the focus of the next section of the chapter.

Implications for the management of social work staff

The emphasis so far in this section of the chapter has been on identifying how new ideas about the self and boundaries can be integrated into social work education and supervision. Consideration of the implications for the management of social work staff requires some understanding of the pressures that currently exist in welfare agencies that employ social workers. This is potentially a wide-ranging area of inquiry, but for the purposes of this chapter I will limit my discussion to the exploration of generic principles that need to be considered by managers of social work staff.

An important finding in this research is the prominence of cultural knowledge and identity as an integral aspect of the self. This means that workers, particularly those from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds, are able to identify in what ways their practice is informed by cultural values and lived experience. These workers have insight about how their culturally informed practises clash with organisational expectations and values, culminating in tensions surrounding issues such as home visiting, appointment schedules and the integration of community development principles within a therapeutic framework (see Chapter 4).

The ability to conceptualise these tensions between workers and their agencies as stemming from the socially constructed self moves the issue from one, which could be regarded as being individually based, to an issue that is structurally located. This has crucial implications for the managers of social workers. Their ability to understand the diverse influences on a worker's practice opens up possibilities for engagement with their staff on a broader and more considered basis. Being aware that the agency and professional culture is dominated by western discourse and values fosters a manager's capacity to identify areas of tension that can arise when cultural 'clashes' occur within an agency context. Recognising that the culture of an organisation could potentially be influenced by the worker as well as the community and the client's culture offers potential in the development of creative practice responses.

Implementing these principles within an increasingly managerial organisational context could be regarded as extremely challenging. These pressures require workers and managers to continually account for their actions within an environment that demands clear outcomes and the articulation of goals against performance indicators. A socially constructed self does not weaken a worker or manager's capacity to perform within these contexts. The development of the skill of critical self-reflection enhances the ability of all workers to identify what they are doing and how they are achieving their goals. Being aware of the social and structural influences on their practice, in particular on the knowledge that informs their actions and reactions, strengthens their capacity to conceptualise practice responses.

Making links with other workers who are willing to engage in discussion of the influence of the self in practice is an important avenue for peer support. This type of initiative sends a strong signal to workers, that the self is regarded as an important tool in the development of practice. Exploring commonality of experiences, such as those identified between the research participants facilitates the development of insight and the skill of critical self-reflection. This is particularly useful for 'new' graduates, who generally require a higher level of support.

Another implication of the research findings for managers of social work staff is an increased recognition that the uncertainty that permeates the practice context requires social workers to respond variably to each

situation. This is reflected in the multiple intersections of meaning and knowledge that are experienced by social workers in their practice. Thus boundaries are constructed as a response to contextual, social, gendered and cultural issues and, importantly, are relationally determined. This means that no matter what the presenting issue may be, there will always be individual variability, both in the way that the worker responds to the client, and in the manner in which the client presents himself or herself. Community and group interactions are influenced by the same degree of variability and uncertainty, requiring social workers to be creative in their responses. Exploring these practice responses in more depth is the focus of the next section of the chapter.

Implications for practice

In presenting the implications of my research for practice it is not my intention to infer that social work practice is separate from education, supervision or management. One of the important assumptions in this research (see Chapter 1) is that practice encompasses all dimensions of social work activity, including working with individuals, groups and communities, as well as the development and implementation of policy (McArthur & Zubrzycki, 2002) and engagement in research. The purpose of this section is to identify the implications of the research for the way social workers engage with people.

One of the strengths of this thesis is the insight that it provides to the ways in which a group of fifteen Australian social workers experience their work. Their actions and reactions give voice to the view that social workers utilise their self in diverse ways and that lived experience does inform the development and implementation of knowledge in practice (see Chapter 7). These findings have significant implications in understanding how social workers develop meaning, engage with others and respond to perceived needs and challenges.

The research findings challenge the core foundations of western rationality upon which social work was developed (Ife, 2001, p. 67). According to Ife the positivist tradition in social work has traditionally valued context free knowledge as well as dualistic and linear thinking. Presenting the self as controlled and predictable is an important adjunct to these expectations. However, the stories of the participants in this research present quite a different picture of social work, thus potentially presenting a quandary to a

profession that is striving to maintain legitimacy in an increasingly uncertain context. I argue that the implications of this research do not necessarily undermine notions of professionalism or certainty. Being more aware of how a socially constructed self informs practice should be conceptualised as a strength, in fact a quality that can be supported and harnessed in such a way that the individual social worker is even better prepared to deal with challenges arising from the practice context.

For example, being a worker from a culturally diverse background potentially means bringing into practice a broad set of skills and knowledge deriving from lived experience that can enhance social work knowledge and theory. In making this assumption it is always important to be aware of the dangers of culturalism, the belief that because it is cultural it is good (Ife, 2001). The key here is the need to allow individual meaning to emerge and be articulated. This means all workers, regardless of their cultural identity, are encouraged by their supervisors and peers to identify how their lived experience informs their practice, including their construction of personal and professional boundaries. Understanding that these influences form a continuum, influenced by relational, contextual and structural differences is an important aspect of this discussion. The crucial outcome is a valuing of the self as an integral aspect of the practice of all workers, whether they are engaged with individuals, groups, communities, writing policy, conducting research, or supervising staff.

The influence of relational issues on the use of self is another area of practice that requires constant consideration and reflection. The responses of participants to individuals as well as the client's reactions to their workers were identified in the research as being highly influential in the integration of lived experience. The presentation of 'rules' regarding these constantly changing and evolving relationships is not useful. Rather, the importance of recognising the use of self within an ethics of care holds more promise.

The importance of developing a common humanity with clients needs to be teased out, with attention given to issues such as client and worker empowerment and the need to facilitate the development of practices that uphold human rights (Ife, 2001). Recognising the existence of intersections of knowledge and meaning supports the development of dialogical practices. Workers not only integrate their lived experience in practice, but

also need to be attentive to the development of knowledge and expertise with their clients, "Each learns from the other in a relationship of shared knowledge and expertise, they then act together towards the goal of achieving human rights" (Ife, p. 152).

8.7 Final reflections

The focus of this research has been on the experiences of practitioners. A missing element is the responses and ideas of clients and communities. While many of the participants' stories provide insight into their client's reactions to practice, it is important that social work is constantly being built not only upon the needs of the people with whom we work, but also on their impressions, ideas and responses. It is important to acknowledge here that valuable research has been conducted in this field, (see for example, Darlington & Bland, 1999; O'Connor, 1989; Rees & Wallace, 1982) yet we need to consolidate this area of inquiry, if as a profession we truly believe in the importance of dialogical practice.

An important aspect of this research would be the need for the participants to see direct links between their responses and experiences and changes to the practice of social work. One way of facilitating this aim would be to involve practitioners in focus group discussions and practice research with consumers. Being engaged in a collaborative research project has certainly highlighted for me areas of joint learning and growth. The involvement of consumers and communities in the teaching of social work also has some merit. Fundamentally, the development of partnerships of dialogue strongly endorses a view that social work is committed to the values of social justice.

One of the many 'lessons' that I have learnt in this research process is the need to be open to difference. The stories shared by the participants reflect the enormous diversity that characterises social work. A key element is the engagement of the self, which facilitates achievement of the purpose of social work in ways that promote change, challenge oppression and provide essential care. Listening to participants engaging with urban Aboriginal communities, acting as role models for disturbed adolescents, working with mothers of abused children, running groups with Iraqi women and supporting the elderly Chinese, are a reminder that the profession of social work is driven by the achievement of mutual understandings and the development of a common humanity.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate one of my research aims, the desire to challenge the social work profession to recognise the self as a legitimate carrier of knowledge, skills and experiences. The ongoing development of the profession in an era of uncertainty and change demands an ability to harness lived experience as a solid foundation upon which to develop social work practice. This research provides the conceptual underpinnings to take social work forward into a new era of creativity in the pursuit of social justice. The final words belong to Sue:

I think that basically at the end of the day all people need something that's accepting and that's not judgemental. Social work does teach you to do that. But there's ways of doing it. And if people can go into an environment that's relaxed and friendly and know that people already understand where you're coming from and you don't have to explain every step or every action or reaction, that's important. Being prepared to share makes it a lot easier. I think social workers are ideally placed to bringing about real change and real social justice. (Sue)

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Participant information sheet (University of Western Australia)

Appendix 2 - Consent form (University of Western Australia)

Appendix 3 - Participant information sheet and consent form (Curtin University of Technology)

Appendix 4 - Additional consent form (Curtin University of Technology)

APPENDIX 1



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Information Sheet

The construction of boundaries between the personal and the professional self in Australian social work.

Researcher : Joanna Zubrzycki, Lecturer in social work, Australian Catholic University, Signadou Campus, ACT. 02 6209 1159

Supervisor: Professor Jim Ife, Dept of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia. 08 9380 3188

Purpose of the research:

The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which a number of specific factors influence the construction of boundaries between the personal and the professional self in social work. The factors that will be explored include:

- ◆ Gender.
- ◆ Caring responsibilities. For the purposes of this study caring responsibilities will be defined as those responsibilities that require a social worker to undertake unpaid caring tasks outside the work place. These include parenting young or adolescent children or caring for elderly or disable relatives.
- ◆ Cultural identity.
- ◆ Indigenous identity.
- ◆ The rural/urban context.

Methods:

You are invited to participate in either individual or group interviews.

Focus group interviews – These interviews will comprise approximately 8 social workers. All participants will be encouraged to share their experiences of the use of self in practice. In particular the discussion will focus on what factors are influential in the construction of boundaries between the personal and the professional self.

The individual interviews – The individual interviews will also be conducted using a semi-structured format. You will be encouraged to share your experiences of the use of self in practice. In particular the discussion will focus on what factors are influential in the construction of boundaries between the personal and the professional self.

The individual and group interviews will take approximately one and half-hours and will be conducted in a location that is convenient to you. This may be at your workplace, the researcher's office or a meeting room at the University. To protect confidentiality, you will be asked to identify a pseudonym. All of the group and individual interview data will be transcribed and kept in a locked filing cabinet.

Potential benefits of the study to society and to the social work profession.

Achieving a greater understanding of the factors that influence the construction of personal and professional boundaries has a number of potential benefits to society and to the social work profession. These include:

1. Making a significant contribution to the professions' knowledge about the use of self in practice
2. Making a significant contribution to the development of the skill of critical reflectivity.
3. The development of knowledge about the identity and practice of Australian social workers.

General information

As a research participant you are free at any stage to withdraw your consent to further participation in the research process without prejudice. If you decide to withdraw, your individual data will be destroyed and in the case of a group interview the data will not be transcribed.

Questions regarding any aspect of the study can be directed to the researcher or the supervisor (see details above)

You are required to provide written consent before participating in this research.

APPENDIX 2



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The construction of boundaries between the personal and the professional self in Australian social work.

Researcher : Joanna Zubrzycki, Lecturer in social work, Australian Catholic University, Signadou Campus, ACT. 02 6209 1159

Supervisor: Professor Jim Ife, Dept of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia. 08 9380 3188

Consent Form

I, _____ have read the information provided above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw at any time without prejudice.

I understand that all information provided is treated as strictly confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required by law.

I agree that data gathered for the study may be published provided my name or other identifying information is not used.

Participant _____

Date _____

The Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Western Australia requires that all participants are informed that, if they have any complaint regarding the manner, in which a research project is conducted, it may be given to the researcher or, alternatively to the Secretary, Human Research Ethics Committee, Registrar's Office, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, WA 6907 (telephone number 9380-3703). All study participants will be provided with a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for their personal record

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Participant Information Sheet

Project Title: The construction of boundaries between the personal and professional self in Australian social work.

Contact person: Joanna Zubrzycki, Lecturer, School of Social Work, Australian Catholic University, Signadou Campus, ACT,
ACT contact details - Ph – 02 6209 1159
Western Australian contact details – School of Social Work and Social Policy, ph 08 9266 7030

Purpose of the research:

The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which a number of specific factors influence the construction of boundaries between the personal and the professional self in social work. The factors that will be explored are:

- Gender
- Caring responsibilities. For the purpose of this study, caring responsibilities will be defined as those responsibilities that require a social worker to undertake unpaid caring tasks outside the workplace. These include parenting young or adolescent children or caring for elderly or disabled relatives.
- Cultural identity
- Indigenous identity
- The rural/urban practice context

Methods:

You are invited to participate in an individual interview. The individual interviews will also be conducted using a semi-structured format. You will be encouraged to share your experiences of the use of self in practice. In particular the interview will focus on what factors are influential in the construction of boundaries between the personal and professional self.

The individual interview will take approximately one and a half hours and will be conducted at a location that is convenient to you. This may be at the your workplace, the researcher's office or meeting room at the University. To protect confidentiality, you will be asked identify a pseudonym. The individual interview will be tape-recorded, the tape transcribed and a copy of the transcript will be sent to you after the interview. You will be invited at that time to change any aspects of the transcript. The audio tapes and data will be stored in a locked cabinet.



Potential benefits of the study to society and to the social work profession.

Achieving a greater understanding of the factors that influence the construction of personal and professional boundaries has a number of potential benefits to society and to the social work profession.

These include

- 1. Making a significant contribution to the profession’s knowledge about the use of self in practice.
- Making a significant contribution to the development of the social work skill of critical reflectivity.
- The development of knowledge about the identity and practice of Australian social workers

General Information

As a research participant you are free at any stage to withdraw your consent to further participation in the research process without prejudice. If you decide to withdraw, your individual interview data will be destroyed and in the case of a group interview the data will not be transcribed.

Questions regarding any aspect of the study can be directed to the contact person.

You are required to provide written consent before participating in this research.

Compensation clause

Your participation in this study does not prejudice any right to compensation, which you may have under statute or common law.

Consent Form

Ihave read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw at any time without prejudice.

I understand that all information provided is treated as strictly confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law.

I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published provided my name or other identifying information is not used.

Participant _____ Date _____

APPENDIX 4



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Additional consent form

I have discussed with Ms Zubrzycki the question of whether or not I should be identified by my real name in the written research, or by a pseudonym. I have chosen to be identified by my real name, as I wish to take full public ownership of the views I have expressed in this research. I acknowledge that this will negate any possibility of anonymity in the discussion of the research finding.

I acknowledge that the researcher offered the use of a pseudonym, and that my decision to use my real name does not accord with normal research practice. It is my own decision, not influenced by the researcher.

I have read the sections of the thesis where I am identified by name, and where reported material can be directly attributable to me.

Name of research participant

Signature of research participant

Date

This would be signed at the end of the research, after the person concerned has read the penultimate draft of the thesis.



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