DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

Introduction

When we interact with other people, we do not start from a neutral standpoint. We bring with us a whole range of values, beliefs and assumptions. These are linked to the person we are, and to the range of social factors that influence and shape identity (see Chapter 1). For example, the way I relate to other people will owe much to my gender, my ethnic group, my class background and so on. These factors, in turn, will interact significantly with the equivalent factors for the persons concerned. That is, the gender, class and so on of the other people involved will also be significant in influencing the outcome of the interactions (see Figure 7.1).

This presents a very complex picture in terms of the possible mix of interlinking factors. Man/woman, black/white, young/old are just some of the variables that play a part in shaping social interactions. Each individual is a member of a variety of social groups (gender, class, ethnic group and so on), and these have a significant bearing on our experience. It is often on the basis of such social groups that people are subject to discrimination and oppression:

There is no end to the ways in which people can be discriminated against or oppressed. You do not have to be a member of a particular social group to experience the negative effects of prejudice and discrimination. However, it would be naive not to recognise that certain groups in society are exposed to a disproportionate amount of negative attention, for example, women, black, disabled or older people.

(Thompson, 1994, p. 22)

In the interactions between individuals and groups, there is therefore an ever present danger of certain people being disadvantaged in the process. In this way, diversity (the differences between people) is a potential source of discrimination and oppression.
Being different from the mainstream can so easily be equated with being inferior, and so there is a need to respond positively to diversity, to value differences and be sensitive to the dangers of discrimination. This chapter therefore explores some of the key issues in relation to dealing with diversity.

First, we need to be clear why a sensitivity to diversity is important. Basically, the need to be sensitive to, and positive about, diversity is crucial because an approach that ignores such issues runs the risk of:

- **Alienating people** Making members of certain groups feel that they do not belong in society;
- **'Invalidating' people** Creating the feeling that one's views, perspective or experience are not valid because they differ from the mainstream;
- **Missing key issues** Not noticing crucial factors because we are not sensitive to how significant they are for the person(s) concerned;
- **Becoming part of the problem** Failing to challenge discrimination and oppression, and thereby playing a part in their continuance (Thompson, 1993b).