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## Needs, unmet needs and problems

### Introduction

The concept of need is a fundamental one in social work. It underpins so much of what we do. This chapter therefore explores what is meant by the term 'needs', how they are significant, and other related matters. In particular, it focuses on the concept of *unmet* needs and the problems that such unmet needs can generate. In doing this, I am setting the scene for the chapters that follow, in so far as they will all relate back in one way or another to the question of needs, unmet needs and problems. The significance of the concept of need should therefore not be underestimated.

We begin by looking at the central question: what are needs? This is followed by a discussion of the significance of situations in which a person's needs are not being met and what can arise as a result of this. This in turn sets the scene for a discussion of the problems that people may experience that are likely to bring them to the attention of social work personnel.

### What are needs?

This is a more complicated question than it immediately appears to be. For example, there are different types and levels of need. We can begin with survival needs – those fundamental needs that have to be met if we are to stay alive. These are primarily biological – for example, in relation to food, drink and shelter. More complex issues arise when we consider the psychological dimension of needs in relation to such matters as identity, for example. This involves knowing who we are and where we fit into the world. Related to this are esteem needs – our need to feel valued. The picture gets even more complex when we add to this the significance of social needs. These include, among other things, being part of a community and citizenship (see Table 1.1).

One well-known theory of need is associated with the psychologist, Maslow (1973), who wrote of a hierarchy of needs, with physiological needs as the most fundamental, followed by safety, belongingness and love, esteem and self-actualization:

The basic principle underlying Maslow's theory is that we cannot progress from one level to another without our needs first being met at the lower level. That is,

we cannot be safe unless our physiological needs (air, food, water and so on) are satisfied; we cannot experience love and belongingness unless we feel safe. The ultimate 'pinnacle' of this hierarchy is 'self-actualisation', the realisation of our full potential through finding or constructing a coherent framework of meaning and value which allows us to achieve a sense of personal fulfilment.

(Thompson, 2004, p. 20)

**Table 1.1 Types of needs**

Biological needs	Food, drink, warmth and shelter; medicine at times of illness and so on.
Psychological needs	Self-esteem; identity: a sense of who we are; stimulation and learning; achievement; sense of security; play/relaxation.
Social needs	Citizenship; social contact/being part of a community

However, this approach has been criticized for being too narrow and individualistic and for not taking enough account of the social circumstances and how these can change over time. It has also been criticized for being too fixed and rigid and thereby not allowing for the diversity and flexibility of human experience. None the less, despite these limitations, it is a useful starting point for understanding the complexity of the concept of need.

It is unfortunately the case that oversimplified conceptions of need have been adopted by many people over the years. These oversimplified conceptions can be criticized for being 'essentialist' – that is, they seem to regard need as something that is a fixed essence, an essential part of an individual or the human condition. For example, it is often stated that sex is a basic need, and yet many people live happy and fulfilling lives without sex. Above and beyond basic survival needs, this conception can be seen to be far too narrow and oversimplified. It is important to recognize that needs are, to a large extent, culturally defined. That is, what is perceived as a need in one culture may not be perceived as a need in another. Another way of putting this is to say that needs are socially constructed. They are defined within the context of a set of social relations and social processes as well as social institutions. What is considered a need by, for example, a wealthy westerner in a highly industrialized country, may be very different from someone living in a rural, agricultural, underdeveloped part of the East. Clearly, then, a more sophisticated understanding of need is called for.

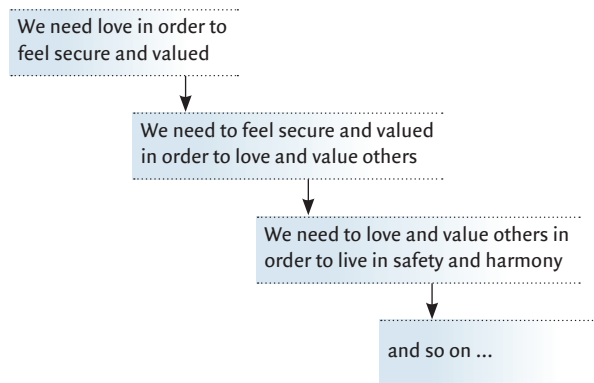


**Practice focus 1.1**

Karen was excited to begin her placement with the older people team. When she received her first referral to deal with, her practice teacher explained that she would be expected to visit the client, Mrs Peters, and carry out an 'assessment of need'. She was

very anxious about this as she wasn't 100 per cent sure what was meant by 'need' – what sort of needs? Need for what? However, she was reassured when she realized that she would be able to 'shadow' her practice teacher on a number of assessments she would be doing before she was called upon to do it herself. As a result of this 'shadowing', she had a much clearer picture of what was involved. The discussion she had with her practice teacher about what constituted a need, how serious it needed to be before it became a social work matter, and so on, was also very helpful for her. She realized that defining and assessing need are not necessarily straightforward matters, but she could see what some of the key issues were that she would need to give attention to. She could now understand why there was so much emphasis on this important concept of need.

It can be helpful to understand need as being related to purpose or desired outcome. That is, it makes more sense to understand need as need *for*, or need *in order to*. Such needs can also be seen to be layered, in the sense that one need is likely to be embedded in another. Figure 1.1 illustrates this.



**Figure 1.1** Layered or embedded needs

Source: Thompson, 2004.

This concept of purpose can be linked to the significant concept of well-being. A person's well-being can depend on purpose, in the sense of what goals they are aiming for and whether they are able to achieve those goals by having the associated needs met. We shall return to the important topic of goals later in this chapter.

What can also help us to develop a more sophisticated understanding of need is the question of negotiation, as this is involved in identifying and addressing needs. For example, in social work, needs are very relevant to the process of assessment. It has long been recognized that assessment needs to be done in partnership (Lymbery, 2003). It is not simply a matter of a professional making

a unilateral expert diagnosis of the situation (see Chapter 14 for a critique of a medical model approach to social work). Assessment involves gathering information to form a picture of the situation, so that needs can be identified, and ways of meeting those needs can be explored as part of an action plan.



### Voice of experience 1.1

Sometimes it's hard to get people involved in the process of assessment. They tend to see the social worker as the 'expert' and are waiting for us to come up with magic answers to their problems. But, it is certainly worth persevering and using your negotiation skills to get people involved. Once you get past that initial barrier you get a much better picture of the situation, and you get a lot more commitment on clients' part to moving forward on the important issues.

Andrea, a social worker in an adult learning disability team

Need also has to be understood in relation to the specific circumstances that apply at the time. For example, if somebody is grieving after a significant loss or is undergoing a period of recovery after a trauma, then their needs will be different from when they are not in such a situation. Attempts to understand need that do not take account of such circumstances are likely to be superficial and misleading – and can therefore be very dangerous at times.

Fook also emphasizes the importance of seeing situations in context when she argues that:

Reframing our practice as contextual therefore means we reframe our practice as working *with* environments, rather than working *despite* environments. We see ourselves as part of a context, ourselves responsible for aspects of that context. In this way, we see possibilities for change, for *creating different microclimates within broader contexts*.

(2002, p. 162)

Understanding the context is an important theme that we will revisit from time to time. This is because social work is a *psychosocial* enterprise, not simply a psychological matter of dealing with individuals. The social context – at both micro and macro levels – is therefore very important (this is the subject matter of Chapter 2).

## Unmet needs

By definition, our survival needs have to be met if we are to continue to exist. We cannot last very long without the basics of food, drink and so on. However, once we go beyond this basic level, we have to recognize that it is not uncom-

mon for some people to have many of their needs go unmet, while it is also the case that all of us at some time will be in a position where our needs are not met. There is an important sociological dimension to this, in so far as whose needs are met and when is not simply a matter of random distribution. There will be significant social patterns that shape to a large extent whose needs are met and whose needs are not (see Table 1.2). For example, while there is no guarantee that a very wealthy person will be able to meet his or her needs, the chances of being able to achieve many of those needs will be significantly higher than for a person who is living in poverty and debt. As Rogers and Pilgrim put it:

Although all social classes experience distressing negative life events, poorer people experience fewer positive life experiences to buffer them against these ubiquitous existential challenges.

(2003, p. 26)

**Table 1.2 Social influences on meeting needs**

Finance	Income levels affect purchasing power and thus ability to buy assistance (for example, private health care or legal assistance). Debt can produce additional needs in terms of psychological pressures and feelings of loss of control. Access to savings can be helpful in some circumstances, and so people without savings will be disadvantaged in many situations.
Gender	The media are very powerful in shaping consumer behaviour and what is perceived as normal and desirable. This is often ‘gendered’ – that is, follows gender-specific lines. What is perceived as a problem owes much to gender, as does how people characteristically respond to problems. See, for example, Martin and Doka’s (1999) work on gender differences in grieving.
Race/ethnicity	Racism can both generate needs (for protection, for example) and stand in the way of some needs being met. There will also be considerable diversity relating to needs in connection with religious beliefs and cultural practices. There may also be language needs that are relevant to social work issues.
Disability	How physical and/or mental impairments are conceived and dealt with owes much to dominant social perspectives on disability that reflect a discourse of dependency and pity. See, for example, the work of Michael Oliver (Oliver and Sapey, 2006).
Culture	Culture relates not only to ethnicity, but also region, class, occupation and other social categories. People’s needs will be shaped in part by their location within this complex network of cultural formations.

Where needs are not met, there can be significant implications. At its simplest, where survival needs are not met, there is clearly a risk to life. In less extreme cases, there can be issues of neglect in relation to children and/or vulnerable adults. That is, while survival needs may be met to a sufficient degree to ensure that death does not ensue, they may be met to such a poor level that the individuals concerned suffer significant consequences – malnutrition at a physical level and psychological harm at the level of how individuals experience neglect as a very detrimental process.

**Practice focus 1.2**

Steven was expecting it to be a difficult case when he was asked to work with Callum, a 15-year-old boy who had been in foster care for about two years. Callum had experienced extensive neglect over the years that had remained undetected because his parents kept moving from area to area. However, Steven was taken aback at how much damage the experience had done to Callum in terms of his low self-esteem, his self-destructive behaviour and his unwillingness to trust adults. It soon became apparent that these problems presented major difficulties for Callum, as his lack of trust and his acting-out behaviour had jeopardized his foster placement on several occasions and had also seriously held back his education. To begin with, it made Steven feel quite distressed to think about just how detrimental the neglect had been, not only at the time it was happening, but also on a much longer-term basis. It made him determined to do his best to help Callum get over the ordeal and, as far as possible, to recover from the trauma that he had experienced. It was the sort of case that helped Steven to appreciate how demanding social work can be, but also how potentially rewarding it can be too.

Where identity needs are not met, dignity can suffer. A person's identity can be undermined in certain circumstances where who they are is not respected or valued. The result of this can be a damaging effect on confidence and self-esteem. These, then, can begin a vicious circle, in so far as a person with low self-esteem may encounter a range of other difficulties – for example, problems in securing employment. Such difficulties in turn can lead to financial problems, problems in acquiring suitable accommodation, and so on. These in turn can leave the individual concerned feeling inadequate and incompetent, thereby reinforcing a sense of low self-esteem. In social work, it is unfortunately not uncommon to meet many people who have suffered from this. Some people are more prone to this than others as a result of the sociological patterns mentioned above. For example, many older people encounter ageism which has the effect of treating them in a disrespectful way that in turn undermines dignity and associated identity.



### Voice of experience 1.2

I came into social work with the intention of working in child care. However, on my first placement I worked in an older people team and that really opened my eyes to how appallingly so many older people are treated in our society. I was so shocked to see the extent of discrimination against people who should be respected and looked up to – sometimes it was quite overt and shameless the ways some people treated elderly people, but very often it was very subtle. It made me decide to work in the field of elder care so that I could play a part in promoting more respectful and dignified attitudes towards the older generations.

**Kim, team manager of an older people team**

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In relation to social needs, where these are not met there can be significant problems associated with isolation, alienation and disaffection. The possible result of this (and the actual result in very many circumstances) is anti-social behaviour. That is, if people are not having their needs met, they may have little motivation to feel any sort of commitment to the broader social good. An important concept here is the notion of social capital (Putnam, 2000). There is a parallel between financial capital – that is, ‘money in the bank’ – and social capital. The latter refers to the resources we draw on as individuals within our social circumstances. Those who are rich in social capital will have, for example, a large number of friends and associates. They will be members of various organizations, clubs and networks. They will have lots of interests and activities that they enjoy engaging in. A person who is socially poor, by contrast, will perhaps have a much smaller network of human contacts, in some cases limited to one or two people only, or even in a minority cases, no contacts at all with the outside world in any meaningful way.

There will also be many people who are not members of any sort of club, society or association, and have little by way of interest which will enable them to engage with other people in their community and in life in general. Social capital is therefore an important issue to consider in relation to people’s needs. Rogers and Pilgrim offer helpful comment when they make the point that:

Resources, such as social capital, entail a form of psychosocial rather than economic wealth – the ability and opportunity to be involved in community networks and activities. As with economic wealth, it can be present in abundance or it can be depleted, with predictable consequences.

(2003, p. 63)



### Practice focus 1.3

Bindhu was an experienced social worker in a ‘gateway’ team that dealt with all the new referrals in the area. One day she was allocated the case of an elderly man who was said to be living ‘hand to mouth’ in a semi-derelict building. As she drove to the address

she had been given she wondered what she would come across, as the referral was very vague. It seemed to suggest that this man possibly had mental health problems, but there was very little to go on. What she actually found was an 82-year-old man who lived in a single room at the back of a long-disused shop. He had no electricity or running water and relied on calor gas for heat, light and what limited cooking he did. Bindhu was shocked to find that he had no family, friends or other social contacts. He spent his life in this very dirty room and his only excursions from it were to the public toilets about five minutes' walk away where he would use their facilities and fill up his bottle of water while he was there. She discovered that he had been living like this for approximately 15 years since his wife died and he had to sell their family home because of debts. Bindhu realized that he had managed to survive on a very small works pension he had, but his 'social capital' was even more meagre than his financial position. It was as if he had been living in a trance-like state for many years. She began to wonder where to begin when it came to helping him.

The embeddedness of needs, as discussed above, means that where one need is not met, this can lead to the collapse of the whole network of needs. It is like a house of cards; if one of the lower cards is absent, then there is nothing to support the cards laid above. This interrelationship of needs is very significant, as it means that, if our assessment is skimpy and does not take adequate account of the range of needs a person faces, such an assessment may be superficial and of little value when it comes to making a positive difference to that person's life.

Unmet needs, then, are a significant factor in social work. Indeed, they are a fundamental basis of our work. Preston-Shoot goes so far as to state that:

It is possible to argue that a failure to satisfy need, and the tendency to construct and present complex social problems as an individual pathology, are acts of injustice, abuses of power.

(1996, p. 30)

This is a very important and valid point. The discussions in Chapter 2 about the importance of recognizing the *social* basis of social work concerns will reflect this perspective. We have to make sure that we adopt a broad psychosocial perspective on need and do not fall into the trap of 'atomism'. This is a philosophical term that refers to the tendency to focus narrowly on individuals and neglect the wider social context of people's lives, as if people live in a social vacuum, uninfluenced by the cultural and structural circumstances they grew up in and find themselves in currently.

Realistically, however, we have to accept that we are not able to meet everybody's needs all of the time. This is partly a matter of scarcity of resources and

also partly a matter of circumstances changing, with new needs developing all the time, as we make our way through our life course. Hugman captures the point well when he argues that:

By definition, social workers are concerned with situations in which someone, either the individuals or groups in question, or else the state, considers that ordinary social relations or arrangements are not meeting needs. (As England expressed it, 'social work is provided not for people with problems but for people who have difficulty in dealing with their problems unaided' [England, 1986, p. 13].) (1998, pp. 18–19)

This is a significant passage, as it underlines not only the significance of unmet needs as a fundamental basis of social work, but also the role of problems in people's lives. It also relates to the point made in the Introduction to this part of the book that it is important to distinguish between first-level problems that will affect the population in general some or all of the time, and second-level problems, the latter being the type of problems that can make it difficult to deal with first-level problems. For example, we all have to contend with the problem of grief from time to time, but for someone who has a drink problem, this might prove an insurmountable problem that plunges them into a deep, long-term depression or exacerbates their drink problem to the point where their level of alcohol consumption becomes life threatening. It is therefore to the link between unmet needs and problems that we now turn.



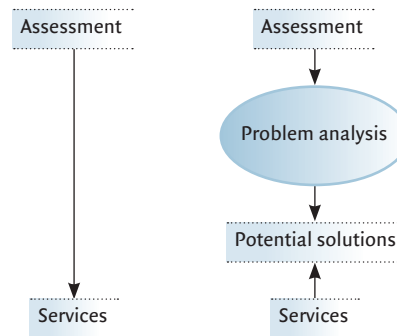
### Voice of experience 1.3

I suppose I was a bit naive when I first came into social work. I thought that those people who needed social work help were in some way not up to life's challenges. 'Inadequate' sounds too strong a word, but I suppose I was making assumptions about what I saw as their limited capabilities. But I soon had that illusion shattered. The more clients I met and got to know, the more I realized how significant their social circumstances and previous life experiences were. If I had had to deal with the social barriers and disadvantages that so many of my clients had faced in their lives, I'm sure I would have struggled to cope too – probably more so. I have learned to admire so many of the clients I have dealt with for their strengths and resilience, often in extremely difficult circumstances, rather than see them as 'charity cases'.

**Kevin, a social worker in a mental health team**

## Problems

There is a close interrelationship between unmet needs and problems. Where there is an unmet need, a number of problems can arise. Where problems arise,



**Figure 1.2** The importance of problem analysis

this can lead to unmet needs. The two can mutually reinforce one another. It is important to be alert to the fact that a key part of a social work role is being a professional problem solver (Thompson, 2006a). There is a danger that, if we lose sight of this problem-solving feature of our role, we become reduced to rationers of services (see Figure 1.2).

In fulfilling our role as professional problem solvers, it is important to recognize that our primary concern is the problem *situation*. It is an easy mistake to make to think in terms of the problem *person* or problem *family*, rather than the problem situation. Where there are difficulties, there is often a person at the heart of these difficulties who may be acting in such a way that makes his or her life more difficult or may be causing difficulties for other people. It is therefore understandable that many people see the individual concerned as the problem. This is, however, a superficial and misleading view. It is also a judgmental view that is in conflict with social work values, in so far as it attaches a label to an individual that, in the vast majority of cases if not all, will be unjustified. When we look at the problem situation in greater depth and detail, we will start to realize that the behaviour of the individual, however problematic for him- or herself or for others, is part of a wider matrix of problem factors and not simply down to a 'bad' or 'inadequate' person. As Jack puts it: 'The problem is always the problem: the person is never the problem' (2005, p. 179).

Similarly, it is easy to apply the label of 'problem family' to those families that have significant difficulties or present problems in terms of, for example, anti-social behaviour. However, it is simplistic to assume that there is an entity known as a 'problem family' that is somehow a different species from other gatherings of humans. A social worker will need to take account of the wide range of significant factors, such as family dynamics and power relations; wider sociopolitical issues to deal with poverty and deprivation; and other such concerns. Simply dismissing a group of people as a 'problem family' is not an

acceptable approach to social work, although it may be one that in our work we encounter in others from time to time. This can bring us into conflict with such people, and we may have to use our conflict management skills to good effect to be able to manage such situations effectively (see Chapters 4 and 10). The key point, then, is that it is not a matter of oversimplifying and reducing complex sets of issues to the notion of a problem person or a problem family. In other words, we need a more holistic approach that takes account of the wider picture of how and why such problems are emerging.

Part of this will be a recognition of the social context of the problems that people encounter. Indeed, there is a strong link between the personal problems that individuals and families encounter and the wider social milieu. This is such an important set of issues that there is a whole chapter devoted to these concerns (Chapter 2).

Problem solving is an important part of empowerment. Given that empowerment is a central role of social work intervention, then the links between it and problem solving are significant. Empowerment is not simply a matter of 'giving' power to people in any direct way, as it is clearly not possible to do that. Power is a much more complicated set of issues than this. As Beckett helpfully puts it:

Empowerment, in a social work context, means working in a way that is aimed at increasing people's sense of power and control over their own lives, rather than diminishing it. It is not a single method or technique and, perhaps partly because of this lack of specificity, it is a word (like 'partnership') which can easily be used in rather a cosmetic and superficial way to give a warm glow to a social worker, to include in the publicity literature of a social work agency, or to provide a social work student with a named 'theory' to include in an essay or a placement report. Just as the word 'partnership' is often misused in social work to describe work in which the client is in *no* sense an equal partner, so the word 'empowerment' can unfortunately be used to put an acceptable face on practice which in truth is anything but empowering. 'Empowerment' as Brandon and Brandon (2001:20) observe, can 'become a method used to reconcile people to being powerless. Our systems are extremely seductive and manipulative.'

(2006, p. 126)

Empowerment can therefore be seen to involve helping people to develop greater control over their lives and circumstances. This will often involve helping them to remove barriers to progress, and this is where problem solving can be a key part of the empowerment process. If we can play a key role in addressing the problems that people encounter, we may be well placed, then, to help them move forward in terms of having a more fulfilling life and a greater sense of well-being by being better equipped to tackle any problems they encounter in future. Problem solving, then, is not simply a technical matter of providing a quick fix but, rather, of working in partnership with the people we are seeking to help to enable them to address their problems in a more confident, better informed and more effective way.

Talking about empowerment at a general level without being able to pin it down to processes by which it can occur is of limited benefit and may actually be counterproductive, as it can add to the vagueness and superficiality that have tended to haunt this term (see Thompson, 2007a, for a discussion of this). Without clarity about what we mean by empowerment and what can be helpful in promoting it, we also run the risk, as Beckett (2006) rightly points out, of using the term to describe actions that are far from genuinely empowering.

A key part of empowerment is avoiding falling into the trap of seeing people's problems in narrow, atomistic terms by regarding them as signs of inadequacy or 'pathology'. Reference was made earlier to England's (1986) idea that it is not simply people with problems who need a social worker, but rather those people who (for whatever reason) have difficulties in dealing with their problems unaided. Folgheraiter makes a similar point but also emphasizes the significance of moving away from the idea of 'pathology' – that is, the judgemental tendency to see the problem as arising from a personal inadequacy rather than a complex interplay of a range of psychosocial factors:

Elsewhere (Folgheraiter, 1998), I have defined (in)capacity for action to be the subject matter of social work. By this I mean that a problem of interest to social workers is not a *pathology*, or a static state of affairs, but a dynamic difficulty: an impediment against the achievement of goals.

(2004, p. 44)

This helps us to appreciate the significance of goals in people's lives – that is, their aspirations for progressing from their existing situation. In terms of empowerment, we can see that personal goals have an important part to play, in so far as they are a significant source of motivation. Having a goal to aim for can help people address their problems and thereby develop greater control over their lives.

In a similar vein, Rogers and Pilgrim link goals to mental health when they argue that: 'Blocked or absent personal goals are consistently associated with poor mental health outcomes' (2003, p. 52). By this, what they mean is that people may struggle to cope with their life pressures if there are factors that are preventing them from achieving their goals or if they have lost sight of the benefits of goal setting (or have never learned the value of goals for giving life shape and meaning – an important aspect of spirituality; see Moss, 2005).



#### Practice focus 1.4

As Bindhu got to know Mr Jameson, she began to appreciate that, when his wife had died and he had to give up his home because of their debts, he had been so overwhelmed by cumulative grief that he had, in effect, been traumatized by the experience. She therefore decided to do some background reading on the subject of trauma and, from this, she

realized that an important part of the healing and recovery process was the development of new frameworks of meaning (the previous sense of normality having been shattered by the traumatic experiences). She therefore decided that a useful way to move forward might be to talk to Mr Jameson about what he had previously held dear by way of beliefs and values before adopting his hermit-like lifestyle. It had become clear that he was desperately unhappy living like he had been doing, but she was aware that trying to do too much too soon before he was ready for it could traumatize him further. She therefore decided to focus on issues of meaning to begin with, while also looking at the practical help she felt he needed. This seemed to work well, and she was quickly able to gain Mr Jameson's trust and thereby be in a strong position to support him in moving forward.

1

**Conclusion**

We all have needs: that is part of the human condition. Those needs will vary from person to person, culture to culture, situation to situation. Some people are more likely than others to have unmet needs as a result of a complex combination of personal, cultural and structural reasons. Unmet needs create a number of problems for the people so affected. As we have seen, those problems in turn can lead to further needs going unmet and having a knock-on effect in terms of creating a highly problematic situation for some people. It is often at this point that social work comes into play. We will often find ourselves drawn into situations where unmet needs and problems have begun to develop a vicious circle that leads to a highly unsatisfactory situation where one or more people are distressed or otherwise suffering. The role of the social worker in so many situations, then, can be seen as that of a skilled helper who, working in partnership, (i) identifies needs, particularly unmet needs; and (ii) then sets about assisting the person concerned to develop a plan of action based on problem-solving principles that can have the effect of addressing the unmet needs. In many cases, part of that problem-solving process will be the provision or commissioning of social services of some description (for example, day services and/or home care). However, we should not allow ourselves to fall into the trap of seeing a direct link between assessment and services that misses out the crucial stage of problem analysis and the implementation of problem-solving strategies (see Figure 1.4). Where problem solving is a key part of the process, the result can be, potentially at least, a very empowering one. Where there is no involvement of problem solving in terms of a direct connection between assessment and service, then the result is often one of dependency creation – the exact opposite of empowerment.

See page 58 for some questions about what you have just read.

See page 223 for some pointers to useful further reading.

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