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studying social work 1

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introduction

Social work is both an occupation and an academic discipline, in the sense that it is something that is both carried out in practice (across a variety of agencies) and studied at a higher education level. Studying social work usually begins when someone is commencing a programme of education and training leading to a social work qualification and is therefore associated with the early stages of becoming a qualified social worker. However, as we shall be arguing below, it is important that social workers carry on learning and developing their knowledge base throughout their career (the subject matter is far too vast and complex to rely simply on our initial period of training). We should therefore not make the mistake of seeing the topic of ‘studying social work’ as one that applies only until one becomes a qualified social worker and then becomes no longer relevant. Being awarded the degree means that you are considered competent to *begin* your social work career, but *remaining* competent will be something that will be your responsibility throughout your career, even though you may have that degree qualification under your belt.

NOS Key Role 5

Manage and be accountable, with supervision and support, for your own social work practice within your organization

In Part 1 we look at what is involved in studying social work, not simply to gain an academic qualification, but rather as a preparation for – and aid to developing – professional practice. We begin by setting the context for practice by explaining how such important factors as law, policy and society underpin the work of social workers. We cannot develop an adequate understanding of social work without a good appreciation of these important issues that have such an influence in shaping the nature of social work and how it is practised in various settings.

Next we move on to look at what is involved in becoming a qualified social worker in terms of the demands of the course you will need to complete satisfactorily to gain the qualification and thereby be in a position to register as a social worker. Also in Part 1 we explore the important topic of maximizing your learning. People engaged in professional education and training face the challenge of studying effectively in pressurized circumstances. Chapter 1.3 is intended to assist with this by providing guidance on what to expect and how best to respond to the demands involved.

1.1 law, politics and society

introduction

It is important to recognize that social work is shaped and constrained by a number of powerful forces. In this chapter, we shall explore three of these in particular, namely the law, politics and society. We shall examine how the law affects what we can and cannot do in certain circumstances, how it provides a legal framework and a fundamental basis for our work. Here we shall discuss the broad issues relating to the role of the law, but more specific discussion will be found in Chapter 2.5. We shall explore the political framework and the power of politicians and political actions to shape policy and practice. We shall also consider how social norms, values and expectations, public opinion and the role of the media can all have an impact on social work. Finally, we shall explore the key concept of professionalism – an increasingly significant topic in contemporary social work.

law

Social work is often loosely used as a term to refer to any caring or philanthropic work: ‘I help out at the soup kitchen. I enjoy doing social work’. However, social work in its more formal sense – that is, as practised by actual social workers – is largely governed by law, although there is a complex relationship between the law and social work. It is not simply a matter of the law dictating exactly what social workers should or should not do (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 1997). If it were that simple, we would not need well-trained, well-informed professional social workers – we would simply need ‘social technicians’ to implement the law and its specific requirements. As we shall see in our discussion of professionalism below, being an unthinking ‘social technician’ who simply does what the law says is not what social work is all about.

One essential thing to recognize is that the important role of the law is not specific to the discipline of social work. If we look more broadly at how our society works, we can see that the law plays a role in regulating social practices in general. Social work is no exception to this. For example, the law governs how trade transactions take place, how health care is delivered, how the safety implications of transport systems are managed, and so on. However, social work goes beyond this general sense of law shaping social practices. This is because the law relating to social work:

- › *Defines certain roles.* For example, in relation to mental health social work, there is a specific role, ‘the approved social worker’, which has certain legal connotations (that is, the ability in particular circumstances to apply for a person to be admitted to a psychiatric facility against their wishes). This is a very responsible role that

requires additional specialist training to ensure that approved social workers are well equipped to fulfil their legal duties.

- *The law regulates practice.* This can be seen to apply at two levels. First, there is a broad level in terms of policy – that is, as we shall see below, policies within social work organizations owe much to the law. Second, there is case law – that is, social work decisions can be challenged in the courts if necessary. For example, if a decision is made to withdraw a service from a client, an application can be made (in certain circumstances) to a court for the decision to be reviewed (this is known as a ‘judicial review’). **law and policy, see p. 115**
- *Legal processes are involved in social work practice.* Many social work decisions (about removing a child from his or her parents because of abuse, for example) are made through legal processes. That is, in many circumstances, social workers do not have the direct power to make decisions and, instead, have to make application or recommendations to a court of law.

However, it is important to recognize that the law is not absolute. This is because:

- 1 The law leaves considerable scope for interpretation. Because the law applies potentially to so many different situations, it has to be phrased in quite broad terms, and this in turn leaves a great deal of room for interpretation. In many cases the interpretation is made within a court of law – for example, a judge making a decision about an elderly person with dementia who is no longer of sufficiently sound mind to manage his or her own affairs – but more often the interpretation comes at the level of professional practice (by the social worker and/or his or her team manager or through a case conference).

Principle 3 Critical Analysis

This is an important example of the need for critical analysis – to weigh up the situation and develop our own perspective on it, rather than simply look for direct instructions on how to proceed.

NOS Key Role 6

Demonstrate professional competence in social work practice

- 2 The law offers a broad brush understanding, not the fine detail of the circumstances that social workers deal with. It would be entirely unrealistic for an Act of Parliament to try to predefine how each situation should be dealt with. The situations encountered in social work are often very complex and the law would need to be extremely detailed and unwieldy even to begin to provide detailed guidance on professional practice.
- 3 The law can be challenged – for example, there can be an appeal against a legal decision. Appeals usually occur when there has been some breach of legal protocol (for example, the proper procedures were not followed) or when additional information has come to light that may challenge the validity of the earlier decision made.

This is parallel with the way the law works in other settings. For example, there are legal parameters in terms of how commercial companies do business. However,

those companies still have to manage their businesses; the law does not tell them precisely what to do. It sets the broad framework or parameters and does not replace professional or managerial discretion. We shall return to this point below in considering professionalism. **professionalism, see p. 11**

It is not uncommon for those new to social work to express surprise about the extent to which the law features in their training programmes or to worry that they will be expected to become legal experts. If this is a concern, then be reassured that social workers are not expected to be legal experts – if they were legal experts, then they would probably be working in the legal field rather than in social work. However, we cannot escape the fact that there *is* a legal context to social work and so social workers need to know about relevant pieces of legislation, at least in broad outline. And, depending on the specific context in which you work, some pieces of legislation will need to be understood in more depth. For example, those involved in child protection work would need to have a good understanding of legislation such as The Children Act 1989 because it impacts on their day-to-day work in major ways. Understanding the legal context of one's work is part of the professional responsibility that goes with it – understanding the law in all its complexity is not. What *is* important is that you:

- › understand what your obligations and powers under the law are;
- › have the insight to recognize when you need further advice; and
- › know where to get that advice should you need it.

Alex was enjoying the teaching sessions on social work and the law. She liked to have structures to work to and felt that this would be where she would find them. But it soon became apparent to her that it was not going to be that straightforward. While discussing a hypothetical scenario in which Frank (a 50-year-old man with learning difficulties) and his parents were refusing to allow a social worker to assess his needs following concerns raised by a nurse attending his ailing father, Alex felt reassured that she would be able to turn to community care legislation for guidance should she have to face this type of situation in practice. However, when somebody raised the issue of human rights legislation, she began to realize that there could be a significant dilemma here in terms of protection from harm and the right to live the lifestyle of one's choosing. As they got deeper into the discussion about practice issues, Alex realized that, while having a legal framework would provide guidance to some extent, it certainly was not going to provide her with definitive answers to the dilemmas she would face.

practice focus
1.1

Principle 6 Realism and Challenge

The challenging nature of social work is illustrated in Practice Focus 1.1.

politics

Politics is often defined as the art of the possible. It can also be recognized as the exercise of power. Politics can be understood in a wide sense – for example, in relation to such matters as democracy and the state – or, more narrowly, in terms of, for example, office politics. In both cases, politics plays a significant role in shaping social work. Indeed, it would be fair to say that social work is shaped to a large extent by political processes. Within the UK, for example, this can be seen to apply at five levels:

- 1 *Transnational.* For example, EU directives can have a bearing on social work policy and practice.
- 2 *National.* The allocation of resources is in large part a political process. Within the UK, in particular, this is partly national in the sense of being UK-wide and partly national in the sense of relating to each of the four nations that comprise the UK. That is, since devolution, Scotland and Wales and, to a lesser extent, Northern Ireland, are in a position to influence policy and practice through political processes at this level.
- 3 *Local government.* The allocation of resources and the setting of policy are part of local democracy. Local councillors play a significant role in setting social services policy within their council area.
- 4 *Interagency.* There will be significant political processes involved in the collaborative arrangements between different agencies, for example, health, police and housing.
- 5 *Organizational.* As we shall explore in more detail in Chapter 2.4, there are significant political dimensions to organizational life.

One important point to note is that we should be wary of making the common error of assuming that it is only statutory services that are affected by the state and wider governmental processes. These issues, of course, apply to any form of social work, as all social work organizations relate in one way or another to the state. For example, if their funding is not being provided directly from state budgets, then there will none the less be a state role in regulating the services that are provided. The role of non-statutory services (that is, voluntary and private) is just as political as that of the statutory sector. Indeed, the relationship between the various sectors can in itself be of a very political nature.

We should also note that politics is not just a one-way process. Social work can also be a contributor to politics as well as something affected by politics. Social work at a collective level can make a contribution to positive social change. At one time in the late sixties and early seventies, for example, there was a school of thought known as radical social work which emphasized the importance of social work trying to seek to influence society at this broader level. In many ways this approach to practice helped to shape today's emphasis on anti-discriminatory practice and the need to avoid processes of unfair discrimination leading to oppressive outcomes. **radical social work, see p. 258**

Principle 1 Social Context

Anti-discriminatory practice helps us to appreciate the political significance of the social context.

A further important aspect of the political basis of social work is the notion of citizenship. Neil Thompson (2005a) presents citizenship as a social work value: 'A major implication of the status of being a citizen is having certain rights – and this is why citizenship is an important value, because it places emphasis on *rights* and *social inclusion*' (p. 124). Citizenship is also an important concept because it fits in well with the notion of partnership (to be discussed in more detail in Part 2). Working in partnership means working *with* people, rather than doing things *to* or *for* them. For this to be successful, it involves recognizing clients as *active* partners in the work we are doing together. Some traditional forms of social work have not always recognized this

and have presented service users as relatively passive recipients of services – a far cry from the notion of citizenship.

Principle 2 Empowerment and Partnership

Citizenship illustrates well the theme of empowerment and partnership.

NOS Key Role 3

Support individuals to represent their needs, views and circumstances

Citizenship, then, is a useful idea, as it both helps us to understand the importance of working in partnership and acts as a bridge between actual practice and the political context of social work. Dwyer (2004, p. 4) sums this up well (by reference to the work of Lewis, 1998) when he identifies the following three salient characteristics of citizenship:

- **the citizen is one way of imagining a link between the state and the individual;**
- **the concept of citizenship implies membership of some form of community, in turn the notion of community opens up questions of inclusion and exclusion;**
- **citizenship is a social status that allows people to make claims in relation to state-organised welfare services.**

While reading some social policy books Ed began to think more and more about the concept of citizenship. He had given a lot of thought to how he could become equipped to help 'the needy' but he realized that he hadn't given much thought to the people he conceptualized as being in need of help. After reading more about citizenship he realized that not everyone had the access to resources and status that citizenship of a society is claimed to endow. He wondered whether this might account for how certain groups of people are pushed to the margins of society and began to think about his role as a social worker in a wider context than he had done before. He knew he wouldn't be able to change things in a major way, but the realization that living on the margins is not necessarily down to personal choice or failing opened his eyes to the ways in which he might be able to make a difference in people's lives.

Practice focus 1.2

Principle 3 Critical Analysis

A critical approach helps us to appreciate underlying processes and relations that can be very significant.

society

Neil Thompson (2005a) argues that part of social work's task is to 'do society's dirty work'. That is, social work often involves carrying out the tasks that the wider public would prefer not to know about or deal with: problems of abuse, exploitation, poverty, deprivation and so on. Partly because of this, there is a lack of public awareness of what social work is. We have been subject in social work for quite some time to negative media coverage, and the question is often asked within social work circles: why do we not, as a profession, place much more emphasis on 'blowing our own trumpet', making the media more aware of the successes as well as the failures? However, there are two problems with this. First, there is the issue of confidentiality. It is difficult sometimes for us to talk of our successes without breaching confidentiality. Second, it would be naïve

to think that the media would be interested in our successes. It has to be remembered that media organizations are primarily profit-making organizations. For example, a newspaper is not an educational body. It is a business designed to make profits from selling newspapers and, while so-called scandals may sell newspapers, tales of social work successes are far less likely to do so. This is not to say that we should not seek to promote a more positive public awareness of social work, but rather to recognize some of the difficulties involved.

Principle 1 Social Context

The idea of 'doing society's dirty work' reminds us of the public importance of social work, as well as its problematic image.

However, the situation is perhaps more complex than this. For example, the work of Aldridge (1994) has shown that there are two key issues in relation to media representations of social work. First of all, there are differences between how local and national media cover issues. Local media are far more likely to be interested in successes as well as failures. Second, there is a distinction to be drawn between children's and adult services. The media tend to take far more interest in issues relating to children than they do in issues relating to adults.

However, it is not only the media and their distortion of what happens in social work that can cause problems, there can often be a clash between social work and the wider community values. For example, there may be a so-called 'common sense' notion that 'young offenders should be locked up'. However, social work will be based on (a) a commitment to social work values that involves trying to prevent children and young people from being deprived of their liberty; and (b) research that shows that locking up young offenders is, for the most part, counterproductive, as it tends to 'teach them the ropes' rather than teach them a lesson (Muncie, 2002).

Principle 4 Knowledge, Skills and Values

Professional social work relies on more than 'common sense'.

Another important issue to consider is what Clarke (1993) refers to as being 'caught in the middle'. In other words, in certain circumstances we find ourselves trapped between social work's expectations of us and the wider society's. We can in certain circumstances be 'damned if we do and damned if we do not'. For example, in dealing with children at risk from abuse, we can find that, if we remove the child, we will be criticized for breaking up families. If we do not remove the child, and the child is subsequently harmed, we will be criticized for failing to protect that child. There is a very fine line between the two, but this in a sense is the nature of social work: dealing with the dilemmas, uncertainties and ambiguities of some of life's and society's challenges. Our understanding of these issues is generally not matched by wider society's understanding of these issues. We are, after all, specialists in this area and should not expect the general public to appreciate our role.

Principle 6 Realism and Challenge

Dealing with dilemmas, uncertainties and ambiguities is an inescapable part of the challenge of social work.

When Gita was asked the question ‘and what do you do?’, she often felt loath to tell people that she was a social worker. This wasn’t because she didn’t like her work – indeed she loved it and was proud of what she had achieved in her role – but she didn’t enjoy having to justify her choice to enter the profession. The responses people tended to make when she told them she was a social worker suggested that they thought of her as either (a) a cold-hearted official whose sole aim was to split up families; (b) someone ineffectual in preventing children from being harmed; or (c) someone to blame when things are not working to their advantage. It didn’t surprise her that her role was often misinterpreted, and she had become somewhat resigned to the fact that much of what she did went unnoticed and unrewarded in the public eye, but she longed for the day when someone would respond with a more informed or positive comment.



professionalism

The notion of professionalism is a contested one. That is, there are different views of what the term means and what its role is – or should be – in social work. We have the traditional notion of professionalism which is based on elitism, the idea that professionals ‘know best’. This traditional form of professionalism does not sit easily with social work values. This has led some people to reject the idea of professionalism and to develop what could even be regarded as a form of anti-professionalism:

The term, ‘professionalism’ is one that has a mixed history in social work. For many years, the notion of being a ‘professional’ was regarded with a great deal of suspicion, as if it were simply a way of seeking perks, privileges and status at the expense of the clientele we serve. Of course, it has to be acknowledged that professionalism can be abused in this way, used as an excuse for self-interest. However, we would see it as a significant mistake to reject the notion of professionalism for these reasons, as this amounts to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. (Neil Thompson, 2002a, p. 4)

The tendency to reject professionalism (rather than reject the elitism with which it had become so closely associated) has proven to be a problem for social work, as it means that, without professional credibility, we have struggled to convince others of the value of what we are doing (as per the discussion of media and the general public above). What we are now moving towards is a new type of professionalism, an empowering form of professionalism – that is, one based on the idea of working *with* clients and carers, not being somehow above them and doing things to them (Neil Thompson, 2000a; 2007).

Principle 2 Empowerment and Partnership

Working with people is a central part of empowerment and partnership.

In our view, Davies (1994) captures well what professionalism is about when he argues that:

1

the *true professional* is not someone who is cool, detached, career-minded and disinterested, but is the worker who can display friendliness ..., understanding and warmth of a manner which convinces the client of her active interest in and concern for the client's plight. And clients are remarkably sophisticated in being able to recognise that such professionalism is part and parcel of a social worker's formal occupation ... There is clearly an element of acting in this, but the performance emerges as crucial to good social work in the eyes of the client. Professionalism is the projection of a concerned interest in the client's welfare. (Davies, 1994, pp. 51–2, cited in Payne, 1995, p. 143)

Professionalism, in our view, is an important consideration in social work because, as Harris and Webb recognized as long ago as 1987: 'professionals do not create discretion; rather the inevitability of discretion creates the need for professionals' (cited in Jordan, 1990). The realities of practice are far too complex to rely safely on direct instructions, habits or formula responses. Approaches to practice that do not recognize the significance of discretion and thus of professionalism are therefore potentially dangerous forms of practice.

NOS Key Role 4

Manage risk to individuals, families, carers, groups, communities, self and colleagues

conclusion

Social work does not exist in a vacuum. It is part of a broader legal and political context. High-quality social work practice depends in part on having a good understanding of this broader picture, of appreciating where the actions of an individual social worker fit into this broader pattern. Without this broader understanding, there is a danger that we may act in ways which will cause us problems in terms of legal, political or social consequences that we had not envisaged. A wise social worker is one who is aware of this bigger picture and takes it into consideration in weighing up how to proceed in dealing with the day-to-day challenges of social work practice.

Principle 6 Realism and Challenge

Having a balanced approach to risk is part of realism.

In studying social work we need to keep coming back to this underpinning context of law, politics and society. Whether we are studying social work theories and methods, human development, community care, child protection or whatever, we must not forget to see them in the light of legal powers, duties and constraints; political processes, structures and policies; and social processes, institutions and divisions.

Principle 1 Social Context

The law, politics and society are all part of the social context of social work.

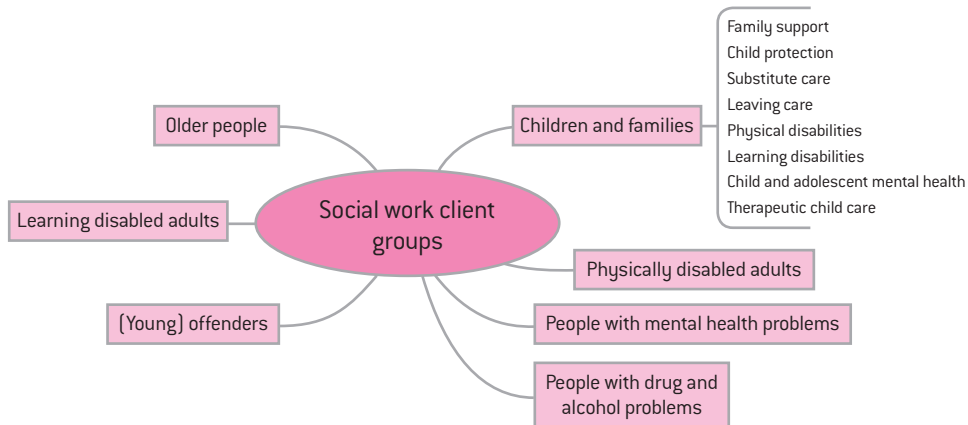


Figure 1.1 Major social work client groups

points to ponder

- › Consider any major piece of social work law. Can you identify three ways in which that particular Act shapes social work practice?
- › Can you identify three ways in which politics influences social work services?
- › In what ways is citizenship significant for social work?
- › What do you understand by the idea that social work 'does society's dirty work'?
- › Why is 'professionalism' an important topic in social work?

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