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# Towards a critical understanding of social work

# 1

## Chapter overview

*People often confuse social work with other ‘socials’ including social security, social services and social care. In this introductory chapter, we clarify what social work does and how it relates to social care. We also clarify what the ‘social’ in social work refers to. We show how expertise in being ‘social’ is one of the unique features of the profession of social work.*

## What is social work and what do social workers do?

Social work aims to improve and facilitate the working of society, the environment of relationships and social institutions developed from relationships, in which human beings live. In its most general aspects, this is about improving human cooperation because this helps human beings to survive and develop. This means improving social relationships, facilitating the development and use of both kinds of social institution – those such as families, which develop from relationships, and those such as residential homes, which aim to improve people’s lives – and generally improving society as a social environment for human life. A word that expresses these linkages between people and their environments is ‘connectedness’. Care can contribute this aspect of connectedness to different dimensions of people’s lives – social relationships, families, organisations and institutions.

The aim of social work, therefore, is improvement in social life, increasing cooperation among human beings and increasing solidarity in society. This has been expressed in a variety of ways by social workers and others over the years (Payne, 2006). The most-used formulation currently is the international definition of social work devised jointly by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and supported by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW):

“ The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW, 2000) ”

The above definition identifies three aspects of social work, also identified by Payne (1996, 2006):

- Social change – *transformational*
- Problem-solving in human relationships – *social order*
- Liberation of people to enhance wellbeing – *therapeutic*.

Good social workers maintain a critical, that is, questioning, attitude to their work. We can see this threaded through these aspects. The first of these aspects is work that emphasises the social improvement and social solidarity objective, regardless of whether a social worker is working with individuals, groups or communities. In work with individuals, it includes advocacy for users' and carers' needs within social, education and healthcare services and enabling individuals to understand how social arrangements oppress and disadvantage them and, within their limits, to do something about that. In work with groups and communities, this aspect of social work aims to bring people together to support each other for mutual help and in action to change disadvantageous and oppressive aspects of the way in which society affects them. A good example of individual, group and community interventions within this aspect of social work is working with women affected by domestic violence (see Adams et al., 2009c, Ch. 3). Individually, practitioners help women to accept the need to change their lives to avoid the risk of violence, perhaps leaving their present home or excluding a violent partner. Group and community work involves creating and supporting refuges, changing legislation to enable it to support non-violent social relationships, and trying to develop appropriate services to enable women and their children to re-establish a more satisfactory way of life.

The second aspect of these definitions is providing personal help, advice and support in difficult situations and packages of services that help people to deal with the difficulties in their lives. A good example is the care manager role in local authority adult social services for older people (see Chapter 23). Practitioners give advice and information and organise basic services in the home as older people become more frail. Eventually, practitioners will organise extensive packages of help with the ordinary activities of life from paid carers alongside the service user's family and friends. Some people might argue that this includes practical help with bathing, dressing and food, connected with healthcare services aimed at keeping a service user in good health, while others maintain that this is the job of a healthcare or social care worker. Because social work is particularly concerned with how interpersonal relationships help people and create security and solidarity in their lives, social work's role in these services is to personalise them, assessing each individual's needs and the

help that their informal carers need and tailoring the package of services to those needs. New patterns of service, such as self-directed care using independent, personalised budgeting, allow service users a high degree of control of the organisation of these services to fit their preferences. Social work also has a role in supporting people in making these decisions, advocating for their wishes in the system of services and facilitating arrangements that make them feel secure and connected to their existing social network and community (Payne, 2009).

The third aspect of these definitions is empowering therapeutic help. Examples of this might include helping an older person in hospital to think about the consequences of their increasing frailty and decide to how to reduce the risk of being alone at home, or helping a young person who is addicted to heroin make the decision to change aspects of their lifestyle that are keeping them in the 'drug culture'.

Social work is not only about social relationships and institutions, it is practised socially. An important characteristic is that its work to improve social solidarity is done by providing social relationships and institutions as a substitute for weak relationships and institutions, or as a learning experience, or to help existing relationships at a particularly difficult time. Here are some examples. Foster care and adoption of children whose parents cannot care for them are a substitute for poor parental relationships or an unhelpful family. Cognitive behavioural social work might provide a learning experience that would help someone with anxiety or depression to find ways of managing their problems. Palliative care in a hospice, for someone who is dying, provides extra care and support at one of the most difficult times in a family's life. All these use interpersonal relationships and social institutions to help people to deal with their social difficulties.

One of the best examples of how this is done is social work in residential care. Whitaker et al. (1998) carried out a study of practice in children's residential care. They found that residential work took place on three 'fronts' between staff and young people. The first front involved containing and controlling the young people so that they led an orderly life in a way that encouraged acceptable behaviour. This means that there was an attempt to improve social behaviour and relationships at the time in the residential care situation, with the aim of developing improved social behaviour and therefore improved social relationships in the future. This first front also involved maintaining the viability of the relationships in the residential care home, a social institution, reducing the possibility of difficulties affecting the managers of the care home or people in the local community.

The second front involved working individually with young people to meet needs that will allow their life situations to improve. This focused on individual social relationships, with the aim of improved social relationships in the future outside the present social institution, the care home.

The third front involved providing experiences that repaired the relationships the young people had missed or lost, such as good relationships with parents or authority figures. Staff did this by trying to increase the occurrence of group situations that help residents and by reducing occurrences of group situations that were damaging

and repairing the consequences of group situations that had produced difficulties. Their practice tried to avoid mixes of residents that might cause difficulties, noted and responded to early warning signs of difficulties in group relations and avoided behaving in ways that might escalate a difficult situation.

## Social care and social work as social professions

In this book and this trilogy, we aspire to social work in the UK being prominently located in a constellation of social practices, known as the leading social profession, in the sectors of services for children, young people, families and adults. It is perhaps the only one that situates people in their social and physical environment. Social work is an international profession, and operates within a range of social provision that differs in every country, according to the political and social debate and the social institutions in each society. Most countries have a number of 'social professions', with varying descriptions and differing systems of training. In mainland Europe, for example, you might find social pedagogues, social educators and in many countries around the world you would find social development workers.

Similarly, in the UK, social workers practise alongside residential workers, youth and community workers, education social workers and a range of social care workers. Many of these practitioners, such as youth and community workers, would be regarded as social workers in some other countries. Others, such as education social workers, are regarded as specialised social workers. Many social care workers, such as registered managers of care homes or social care workers in various community care projects, may or may not be social workers.

The governments in the UK are increasingly using the term 'social care' to describe this range of services that in most other countries would be social work services or social services. This reflects a particular social ideology:

- A public choice or modernisation agenda that argues that people receiving social services should have a choice of provision from public, private and voluntary sector agencies, rather than feeling that they are dealing with monolithic state services that reflect the interests of the professionals that provide them with what they think is best rather than taking into account their personal wishes and feelings.
- An emphasis on 'care' rather than social or behavioural change.
- A focus on providing services, rather than an emphasis on therapeutic work.
- An emphasis on helping people experiencing difficulties with the social consequences of long-term issues or disabilities in their lives, rather than short-term problem-solving.
- A close integration of the work and services with service users themselves and people in their families and social networks who care for them as they try to deal with the issues that affect them (Payne, 2009).

These activities are still social work according to the international definition, with a

focus on trying to personalise help with the social consequences of long-term difficulties in people's lives. This personalisation aims to help people to be more in control of their lives, more self-directing. Social care workers are social workers who need just as many skills in assessing and working through interpersonal and social relationships to do this kind of work, as someone who sees their work as trying to change behaviour or change the depressing social environment of a housing estate where people experience exclusion and poverty. Social care services are just as likely to be trying to help people experiencing poverty and social exclusion as, say, a children and adult mental health service that works with young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties, a youth worker organising day centre activities for a range of young black minority ethnic groups, or a community worker trying to help people in a run-down urban area prevent rising levels of violence and crime in their community.

All these types of work require partnership between practitioners, a range of agencies and professionals, great interpersonal and social relationship skills and a commitment to meeting the needs and responding to the values of services users, carers, their families and communities. They are all social work and we treat them all as such in these books.

## What is social about social work?

The social in social work engages with social relationships or interactions between people as they go about their daily lives in the context of the society in which they live. This covers the social aspects of social policy and the social aspects of living in a society in which some individuals, families, groups and communities encounter problems in their lives which are so major as to require help, support or intervention. The word 'social' appears in different guises, as we shall see below. It refers to social work's simultaneous responsibilities for working with the problems of individuals and families, while maintaining an awareness of the context of social problems and issues to which they relate. This is equivalent to the health professional working with the illnesses and conditions of individual people, while promoting and developing the health of the community. However, the tensions of managing the personal and the social dimensions of people's problems are more acute in social work than in most other professions. Halmos (1978) characterised them in terms of a tension between the personal and the political dimensions of a person's circumstances. They are not separate. Social workers work with people who experience complex problems that are multifaceted. They engage with 'the personal dimensions of multiple problems such as urban and rural squalor, deprivation and degradation in communities and societies, while attempting to empower and sometimes intervene' (Adams, 2007: 32–3). In this sense, many people regard social work as an intrinsically critical profession. Social workers are expected to maintain an open-minded, critical view of inequalities in society and, where necessary, to advocate on behalf of people to empower them to acquire the services to which they are entitled.

These responsibilities require social workers to maintain an awareness of the

social policies in which public services are rooted. In the latter stages of the Second World War, Sir William Beveridge (1879–1963) set out proposals to tackle the five giants of want, idleness, squalor, disease and ignorance (Beveridge, 1942). Today, we would term these a lack of financial means, requiring social security; being faced with insufficient work to create a need for employment; poor housing or an unsound physical environment; poor health; and inadequate education, respectively. Beveridge was convinced that many of these problems required tackling through new social policies. He viewed poverty as a social problem rather than a symptom of weaknesses of the individual. This touches on the uniqueness of social work today, because as social workers help individuals and families, they do so aware that many of their problems are generated by poverty and inequality. Social workers work with individuals, families, groups and communities in the knowledge that many of their problems can be tackled by some form of external or social intervention. Social work values refuse to blame people for this; they require practitioners to try to change things so that the effects of poverty and inequality do not oppress people and aim to empower people to overcome the barriers that poverty and inequality put in their way.

In the early twenty-first century, we no longer refer to the legislation following the Beveridge Report that set up the welfare state, but we still refer to welfare services. In the UK, the word ‘welfare’ has acquired a particular meaning since the formation of the welfare state. It refers to the policies and services developed during the 1940s, which provide a range of education, employment, health, housing, social security and social services for people who are unemployed, older, sick and disabled or vulnerable. Increasingly, we use the word ‘wellbeing’ to refer to something wider than welfare, to describe a consistent experience in an individual, family or community that they are happy in themselves and that the life they lead is satisfying and worthwhile. This sense of their lives being worthwhile derives from people feeling that their relationships with the people and the social institutions around them are good and that they are making a useful contribution to aspects of social life that are important to them. In Chapter 6, Jordan explores this concept further and connects it to social work practice and social care services.

We also attach the word ‘social’ to some other important ideas, which relate to social work but which have a different focus:

- *Social problems* are social ills that raise concerns in a society, such as disability, crime, unemployment, mental health, child and adult abuse and old age.
- *Social policies* are all around us, every time we switch on the TV or radio or pick up a newspaper or magazine. They are the measures that governments take to respond to our needs throughout our lives, from the cradle to the grave, such as services for children, older people, disabled people and people with mental health problems.
- *Social issues* include social inequality, disadvantage and discrimination, including age, ethnicity, gender, disability, wealth and poverty, inadequate income.

- *Social care services* refer to provisions that aim to meet the needs of people who are disabled, older and/or vulnerable.

Let us return to explore the ‘social’ in social work. Practising to achieve solidarity and equality in society requires an understanding and commitment to the ‘social’. This is an aspect of social work that is often not discussed, and therefore not criticised. It is also a term that colleagues in other professions find unclear, and it often adds to their uncertainty about what social work is and what social workers do.

The ‘social’ implies several different things:

- The social, as an area of experience or study, is concerned with the experience of human beings, in contrast to the natural, physical world, for example the geology and geography of our planet.
- Human beings are ‘social animals’, that is, they live cooperatively in groups. They do so because collaboration confers a social advantage that goes beyond natural selection in the natural world in which the fittest survive. Thus, helping each other enables human beings and other social animals to survive better.
- The social is also the relationships between human beings and the traits and skills that help human beings form, build and continue those relationships. These relationships help to maintain the cooperative groups in which human beings most successfully live.
- These relationships develop into social institutions of two kinds:
  - the common pattern of relationships such as kinship, families, communities and organisations
  - planned and managed organisations that might include political institutions such as parliament, and collective institutions such as residential care homes.
- Society is the complete set of relationships, including cultural, personal and social relationships, that form the human social environment in which human beings live.

Social work focuses on and works with all these aspects of the social. This means that social workers may be concerned, for example, with the environment and sources of power for heating and cooking, because this is necessary for human survival; aid agencies and social agencies concerned with welfare rights may well want to make sure that homeless people or older people in their own homes can receive food and warmth. However, they are not professionally responsible for the physical alternatives that protect the environment or for finding oil and gas or generating electricity. Social workers’ responsibility is for the human consequences of the way in which society and social institutions express that society’s culture and social values make those physical provisions.

## How this book is distinctive

This book is presented in three parts, which deal with distinctively different but closely related aspects of social work, responding to three questions:

- 1 From which areas of knowledge do social workers draw their understanding and expertise? Our response to this question takes the form of a survey of the different contexts to which social workers relate. These refer us to areas of knowledge rooted in knowledge of the social sciences, including sociology and social policy as well as politics, philosophy and psychology, the law and the organisation and management of services through central and local government.
- 2 What is the nature of social work? The response to this question takes us into an exploration of the distinctive character of social work, through its processes and the key stages of assessment, planning, intervention, review and evaluation.
- 3 In which sets of circumstances and settings do social workers carry out their work with individuals, families, groups and communities? Early in a professional qualifying course in social work, it is apparent that the core of the learning lies in developing expertise in different settings and working with different groups of people who use services at different points in their lives. These include adult and children's services, which also involve work with families. Clearly, these are not comprehensive categories and involve an emphasis on some areas and the omission of others. As we write, the commissioning and procurement of services is increasingly distancing local authorities from direct provision, as local trusts and the third sector of independent voluntary and private organisations and groups become more involved in providing services.

## How this book is structured

This first book in the trilogy provides the foundation of knowledge required for the first stage of the qualifying programme. It enables you, the reader, to locate social work in relation to its social, policy, legal, psychological and values knowledge bases (Part I). It illustrates the character of social work by introducing the idea of process and taking you through its basic stages (Part II). It gives you an overview of what social work entails in its three main settings: adult services, children and families services and third sector work with voluntary and community groups and organisations and introduces material relevant to undertaking a period of practice learning in an agency (Part III).

Dominelli, L. (2004) *Social Work: Theory and Practice in a Changing Profession*, Cambridge, Polity Press. Explores the impact of globalisation, professionalisation and social work's dependent status on the development of professional practice.

Ferguson, I. (2008) *Reclaiming Social Work*, London, Sage. Explores the impact of the market on social work's commitment to social justice and solidarity.

Payne, M. (2006) *What is Professional Social Work?*, 2nd edn, Bristol, Policy Press Reviews a range of debates on the nature of social work, including an extensive historical review of definitions of social work.

Payne, M. (2008) *Social Care Practice in Context*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan. Seeks to theorise and develop social care practice as a social profession alongside social work and using many social work skills.

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