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# 1

## Making sense of social work

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### Introduction

The main focus of this chapter is the attempt to clarify the nature and purposes of social work – that is, to try to establish some degree of clarity about what social work is. As we shall see below, many people have offered definitions of social work, often with confusing results. The approach I shall adopt here, then, is to work towards an understanding of what social work is, rather than *begin* with a definition.

I shall approach the question of what social work is by looking at, first, how it differs from other occupations and disciplines and then what it has in common with many of them. This will set the scene for a discussion of what social work is and why its nature is so often misunderstood. Following on from this, I shall present my own view of social work and outline what I see as some of the basic building blocks of good practice.

### Differences

Some people use the term ‘social work’ to refer to any type of activity that is geared towards helping people solve their problems. For example, during my own career as a social work practitioner, I was told by teachers, nurses and others that they too did ‘social work’. In making such comments they were using a very broad definition of social work and, in so doing, failing to recognize some of the more specific aspects of the social work role, and some of the key differences between social work in particular and the helping professions in general. My task here, then, is to outline what some of those main

differences are so that we can begin to build up a picture of what is distinctive about social work.

### Statutory duties

Although all members of the human services, and indeed all occupational groups, are subject to the law, social workers have specific statutory duties that set them apart from other groups, as we shall explore in more detail in Chapter 2. These legal duties include, but are not limited to:

- investigating allegations of child abuse;
- applying, where necessary and appropriate, for a person to be detained in hospital when his or her mental condition presents a serious risk of harm to self or others; and
- supervising children in the care of the local authority.

Such duties are complex and often require consultation with legal specialists. These duties can also have a bearing on other professionals, but the point remains that they are *social work* duties.

Because of these statutory duties, social workers are legally accountable – they are answerable, under the law, for their actions or, in some cases, their inaction. In some instances, the ultimate responsibility lies with the local authority, rather than the individual social worker who acts as a representative of the authority. However, in other cases, as in the case of duties under the Mental Health Act 1983, it is the individual social worker who carries personal responsibility. This means that, where negligence is alleged, it is the individual social worker who would be held to account in law, and may therefore be the subject of a legal action.

Regardless of whether it is the individual or the employing organization that carries ultimate responsibility, the social worker is, of course, always accountable, morally and professionally, for his or her actions. It is for this reason that social workers should:

- be aware of what their legal duties are, and be prepared to carry them out to the best of their abilities;
- ensure that the necessary steps are taken to comply with the law, or where this is not possible for some reason, make this known formally to a senior member of staff;
- receive appropriate training, support and supervision in order to feel equipped to undertake their duties.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that many social work students comment in the early stages of their first practice placement that they had not realized just how closely linked social work practice is to the legal context. This is also something that members of other professions often do not appreciate. For example, a health visitor concerned about the welfare of a young child may wonder why the social worker involved does not remove the child and place him or her with foster carers. The health visitor may not understand that the social worker is not free to act independently of the law, and that fairly strict criteria would have to be met and accepted by a court of law (or by a magistrate in an emergency outside the hours in which the courts operate). This can lead to tensions between workers, and so we should perhaps add to our list that social workers should, where necessary, make sure that other professionals involved in a particular case understand the statutory duties of the social worker, so that there is some degree of clarity about what can or cannot be done. This is an example of ‘setting out our stall’, a key part of the ability to negotiate expectations – see Chapter 12 of *Practising Social Work*.

### Care vs. control

Social work is, of course, one of the ‘caring’ or ‘helping’ professions, and so caring and helping are very much to the fore. However, it would be naïve not to recognize that there are also significant elements of social control. This is because social work involves promoting and protecting the welfare of not only the individual but also the wider community, a dual responsibility that can often lead to conflicts and tensions (see ‘caught in the middle’ below). Protecting the wider community is an example of *caring*, but, in relation to specific individuals, the same actions can amount to *control*.

This is not to say that other professional groups are not involved in matters of control, as clearly they are (for example, doctors are involved in detaining certain people in hospital against their will). The difference is that, for other groups of staff, control issues are generally marginal to the central purpose of their work. For social work, however, control issues can often be just as central as those of caring. Indeed, the two can be so intertwined that it is difficult to tell them apart. Examples of this ‘intertwining’ of care and control include:

- child protection;
- probation and youth justice work;
- dealing with elder abuse and the abuse of other vulnerable adults;

- compulsory admission to hospital in circumstances where a person's mental condition warrants this.

In this respect, control can be seen to be part of care. However, we should also recognize that control can, at times, become an end in itself, leaving little or no room for care. In such cases, practice can become oppressive, an additional problem for the client to deal with. For example, in working with someone with mental health problems, a social worker over-concerned with control issues may become preoccupied with matters of 'policing' at the expense of meeting needs. Ironically, a failure to address the client's needs is likely to make for a more stressful situation, and therefore to make the need for policing even greater. The balance between care and control is therefore an important one for social workers to bear in mind – although it is often a difficult one to maintain. To ignore control is to run the risk of being ineffective (for example, by not fulfilling statutory duties and/or leaving vulnerable people unprotected), while to ignore care is likely to be not only ineffective, but also potentially abusive and oppressive.

### Practice focus 1.1

When Sheila went on placement as part of her social work degree, she was really looking forward to working as part of a child care team. However, what she hadn't anticipated was the control element of the work. At first she felt very uncomfortable with some of the work that was going on – for example, in making arrangements to apply to the court for a care order so that a child could be removed from his or her parents. She felt a little disoriented as she had wanted to be a social worker because she felt a very strong need to be helpful and supportive of others. In the early stages of the placement she could not see how playing a controlling role could be seen as part of a caring profession. However, over the course of the placement she had the opportunity to deepen her understanding, and came to realize that it is not helpful to draw a simple distinction between care and control as if they are incompatible opposites. She learned that it is often necessary to control in order to care, but could also see the need to make sure that control issues did not take over and leave no room for care. She could see that it was a tricky balance to sustain.

What has to be recognized is that social workers are in positions of power, and that power can be used positively and constructively to

help people gain greater control over their lives (a process of *empowerment* – Fook, 2002; Thompson, 2007), or it can be used inappropriately and destructively in the form of abuse, exploitation and/or the reinforcement of existing disadvantages and inequalities (Thompson, 2003a). This theme of power, and its potential to go either way – empowerment or oppression – will be a recurring theme of this book, but it is particularly relevant to the question of managing the tension between care and control. Indeed, managing this tension can be seen as an exercise in the appropriate use of professional power. See the extended discussions about professionalism in Part 4 of *Practising Social Work*.

### Being ‘caught in the middle’

One of the difficulties and demands of social work is that of being ‘caught in the middle’. We have already seen that social work occupies the territory where care and control meet. But social work is also ‘caught in the middle’ between various other conflicting forces, not least between the individual and society. Clarke (1993) makes an important comment about this:

Social workers have always been expected to balance the claims of the client’s needs with the needs of society. To some extent, this balance has been resolved by assuming that the client’s needs and society’s needs are not in tension: restoring the client to ‘normal functioning’ satisfies everyone’s interests. At other times, social workers have been less willing to accept this assumption of harmonious interests and have tried to redefine their role as the champions or advocates of the client. In other circumstances, social workers have insisted that, although clients may think they know what their needs are, social workers as society’s expert representatives know better. (p. 19)

It is, of course, no coincidence that social workers find themselves ‘caught in the middle’. This situation owes a great deal to the fact that social work is located at the intersection of ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public ills’ (Mills, 1959). That is, many of the problems individual clients encounter are closely linked to wider social concerns or problems in society, such as:

- poverty and deprivation;
- racism and other forms of social exclusion;
- inadequacies in housing, health care and education;

- crime and social unrest; and
- abuse and exploitation.

It can often be difficult for social workers to manage the conflicts inherent in being ‘caught in the middle’. What can also make this more difficult is a lack of understanding of such conflicts on the part of others. This can lead to situations where social workers are criticized for not tackling a problem in a simple or direct way. A clear example of this arises in relation to child protection. In cases where children are suspected of being in need of protection from abuse, the social worker has to balance the need to ensure the child’s safety against the danger of breaking up families unnecessarily through over-intrusive interventions. Someone who does not appreciate the sensitivities of such matters may easily dismiss the careful actions of the social worker as ‘pussyfooting’. This is not to say that such a criticism is never applicable, but there is a very real danger that a lack of awareness of the ‘caught in the middle’ dilemma will lead to a great deal of unfair criticism – and possibly significant barriers to multidisciplinary collaboration as a result of the tensions and recriminations that can arise.

This dilemma is also one of the reasons why social workers cannot rely on simple, formula answers. Each situation has to be dealt with on its own merits, carefully analysed (assessment), with clear steps identified to address the situation (intervention) – a process of sensitive and well-informed professional practice, rather than the application of general rules in a uniform way. Formula responses do not equip social workers for dealing with the complexities of being ‘caught in the middle’.

### **Doing society’s ‘dirty work’**

One way of looking at social work is to see it as a ‘sweeping up’ operation, clearing up the problems caused by the failures or gaps in other social policies or systems. That is, social workers are asked to step in where ‘society’ has failed its citizens in some respect. Examples would include:

- elder abuse as a failure of a civilized society to treat its older citizens with dignity;
- crime as a failure of the education system and the moral order more generally, as well as a failure of the employment and welfare benefits systems;

- fostering and/or residential care of children as a failure of child welfare systems more broadly.

In this regard, social work can be seen as the ‘patch up’ system of the welfare state. In some respects, this is too narrow a view of social work, and it certainly does not capture the whole range of social work activities. However, there is, I would argue, at least a grain of truth in the argument, and it is certainly the case that social workers do at times feel as though they are charged with ‘doing society’s dirty work’. This is particularly so in relation to some aspects of practice where many members of the general public would prefer not to be reminded that such problems exist: child abuse, ‘domestic’ violence, terminal illness and so on.

In addition, where many people have a judgemental attitude towards recipients of social work help, viewing them as ‘scroungers’ or ‘inadequates’, such a negative judgement can also be applied to social workers, who are then stereotyped as naïve ‘do-gooders’, easily exploited by unscrupulous, streetwise clients. Although these views bear little resemblance to the realities of social work practice, we none the less have to recognize that it is not uncommon for people to hold such views. There is often an element of this in the media response to child protection tragedies where children die. Consider, for example, the witch hunt mentality of some aspects of the tabloid newspaper reporting in the UK in late 2008 relating to the death of ‘Baby P’.

Consequently, the general view of social work and social workers can be very mixed, partly very positive, but often also very negative – even where there may be no grounds for such negativity. The standing of social work is therefore mixed as a result of its ‘structural location’ – that is, the part it plays in society generally in relation to its problems or ‘dirty work’. This is often illustrated by attitudes towards social workers in the media, particularly in national newspapers. Aldridge (1994) provides many examples of the ways in which the actions of social workers are often portrayed in unduly negative terms, particularly where child abuse cases are being reported. These can be seen as examples of situations where social workers are being used as scapegoats, blamed as individuals for problems that have more to do with wider structures and systems (Parton, 1985). Again, this is not to say that social workers never make mistakes, but there is clearly a world of difference between making a mistake on the one hand, and being blamed for matters beyond one’s control on the other.

Although other professional groups do not escape criticism, these rarely, if ever, reach the proportions of the negative feelings that can

be shown towards social work and the ‘dirty work’ that social workers do. This is therefore something that sets social work apart from other helping professions (the negative views of social work are discussed further in Chapter 7).

### Voice of experience 1.1

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In my career I have been only too aware of the negative attitudes towards social workers that so many people seem to have. But I’ve also been very aware of how important it is not to let things like that get me down. I know that I do an important job and I am lucky that I have a team manager who constantly reaffirms that not just for me, but for the whole team. I do think, though, that as a profession, we could do a much better job of explaining how things go wrong when they do and also publicizing the many successes we also have.

*Paula, a social worker in a child protection team*

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### Working towards social justice

I mentioned earlier that social work is a *contested* entity, open to various interpretations. The question of ‘working towards social justice’ is a good example of this. Some of the more traditional conceptions of social work would focus narrowly on the individual and his or her family and would not concern themselves with broader questions of social justice (Halmos, 1965). Other conceptions, and certainly my own, would see a commitment to social justice as a central theme and defining feature of social work. For example, Preston-Shoot (1996) emphasizes the importance of promoting social justice and challenging oppression:

If social work in particular, and professional groups with which it interacts, lose the ability or willingness to question, they risk losing the empathy, values and practice skills which seek to counter the inequalities, internalised oppression, alienation and exclusion characteristic of contemporary social life. They risk identifying with the aggressor rather than using their position to promote an empowering difference. (p. 39)

Similarly, the benchmarking statements developed by the Quality Assurance Agency in relation to the degree in social work in the UK talks in terms of social work being:

a moral activity that requires practitioners to make and implement difficult decisions about human situations that involve the potential for benefit or harm. ... honours graduates must learn to: ...

- understand the impact of injustice, social inequalities and oppressive social relations.
- challenge constructively individual, institutional and structural discrimination. (QAA, 2000, Section 2.4)

This willingness to question that Preston-Shoot refers to is part of a *critical* perspective on society and social problems that is, or should be, a fundamental part of social work. As we have seen, social work operates at the intersection of personal circumstances and broader social forces. Consequently, if practitioners do not adopt a questioning, critical perspective, there is a very worrying danger that they may reinforce existing inequalities, consolidating relatively powerless people in their powerlessness – in effect, ‘locking them in’ to their problems.

Because of this key position at the meeting point of the personal and the social (or, to be more precise, the *sociopolitical*), there can be no neutral middle ground – intervention will either challenge inequalities or reinforce them (Thompson, 2006a). For example, in working with a black family or individual, a failure to recognize the significance of racism in their lives may well exacerbate tensions and reinforce feelings that black people’s needs and experiences are not important in a white society. Similarly, Robinson (2008) argues that the application of psychological theories based on white norms to the circumstances of black people serves to devalue black experiences, values and lifestyles, to treat them as inferior to, or deviant from, their white equivalents.

By contrast, a social work practice which recognizes inequalities and power differentials between workers and clients has the potential to work positively towards *empowerment* through the promotion of equality and social justice. (This theme of empowerment is one which will recur in this and later chapters.)

Of course, issues of equality and social justice are not irrelevant to other human services. For example, inequality in health is a very significant issue for nurses and other health care professionals. However, my point is that, for social work, these issues are *central* to the enterprise, a defining feature of the nature and purpose of social work as an occupation. It is difficult to conceive of social work as a humanitarian endeavour unless we incorporate a commitment to taking whatever steps are possible towards eradicating the inequali-

ties and injustices that are part and parcel of the social problems social workers seek to address.

Although the ‘differences’ outlined here are not necessarily exhaustive, they should be sufficient to make the point that social work is a distinctive professional activity, linked to, but different from, the other human services. Before moving on to consider the other side of the coin – the similarities – it is worth pausing to summarize the differences.

Social work can be seen as distinctive in terms of:

- the central role of statutory duties;
- the challenge of managing the tensions between care and control;
- the dilemmas of being ‘caught in the middle’;
- the need to do society’s ‘dirty work’; and
- the primacy of a commitment to social justice.

## Commonalities

Social work is one discipline or profession amongst many that are concerned with the health and well-being of the populace or at least certain groups within the populace – and includes, for example, nurses and other health care workers; youth and community workers; housing officers; counsellors; advice workers; pastors and chaplains. It is not surprising, then, that social work has much in common with these other workers. This section briefly reviews what those common themes are.

### Humanitarianism

A humanitarian or compassionate approach is, of course, a fundamental component. However, there are conflicts and tensions between a personal commitment to humanitarian goals and one’s status as a paid employee of an organization, quite often a large, bureaucratic organization. One of the possible consequences of this is for staff to become ‘functionaries’, to lose their compassion in a web of bureaucratic routines, procedures and standard practices.

One challenge, then, that applies across these professional groups is that of maintaining a compassionate and humanitarian approach in the face of pressures to conform to organizational expectations and interests which may not always be compatible with the interests of the individual or family concerned, or with the values of the profession. Supervision can and should be of value in this respect (Morrison, 2000), but each individual worker also has a responsibility to do whatever he

or she can to avoid falling into the tramlines of routine, uncritical practice that has lost its heart (see the discussion of ‘burnout’ in Chapter 7).

### **A professional knowledge base**

As we shall see in more detail in Chapter 3, social workers need to draw on an extensive knowledge base in order to be equipped to meet the challenges of the work. This is something that is shared with other professional groups, with some of the knowledge being shared across such groups (knowledge of how communication works, for example), while some aspects are more specific to particular groups (for example, anatomy for health care professionals).

Sometimes the breadth and depth of the knowledge base of the caring professions is not appreciated, particularly by members of the general public. This is perhaps partly due to assumptions about caring tasks being ‘common sense’ and requiring little or no specialist knowledge or skills. It is perhaps also due to assumptions about gender and employment – skilled, professional work being associated with men (and the predominantly male professions of law, medicine and so on), while the less skilled, more ‘practical’ work is more closely associated with women (and the predominantly female caring professions).

Whatever assumptions may be made about the knowledge base of the helping professions in general and social work in particular, the fact remains that good practice depends on the appropriate use of an extensive knowledge base.

#### **Practice focus 1.2**

Margo was the first social worker to join the team at the health centre. Their multidisciplinary team had previously included a counsellor but never a social worker. Margo was a very friendly person with well-developed social skills, so it didn't take her long to put her new colleagues at their ease and to win them over. However, in terms of the knowledge and skills she brought to the job, her colleagues did not really know what to expect. Before long, though, she was contributing fully to multidisciplinary meetings and to one-to-one case discussions and that gave other members of the team a clear picture of how well informed she was on a wide range of issues. In particular, she brought a fresh perspective through her knowledge of sociological issues to do with stigma, social exclusion, discrimination and social disadvantage. Having such a useful knowledge base to draw upon proved very helpful to both Margo and her new set of colleagues.

### A set of skills

Arguably, knowledge on its own is of little use if it cannot be put into practice, and so a basic set of skills needed by all practitioners is that of being able to utilize knowledge appropriately – that is, to integrate theory and practice. However, there are also many other skills involved, and it is once again a case of going beyond common-sense notions that work in the caring professions is relatively straightforward and unskilled. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the skills involved in social work are many and varied, and often need to be developed to quite advanced levels.

Many of the skills involved are not restricted to the helping professions. Indeed, many of the ‘people skills’ apply to a whole host of occupations that bring staff into contact with other people in order to solve a particular problem or address a particular set of issues: communication, planning, assertiveness and so on. Furthermore, many of the skills – being able to ‘read’ nonverbal communication, for example – are part and parcel of the set of social skills necessary for everyday life. However, an important point to emphasize here is that it is necessary to *develop* such skills, to raise them beyond the everyday level. Indeed, a lot of emphasis in professional training is placed on the enhancement of existing skills.

### A value base

Although values can be very personal and individualistic, they can also be shared by a group of people with common aims, as in the case of members of a particular profession. Social work is a good example of this, with values playing a major part in education and training, policy making and the professional literature base in general.

As we shall see in Chapter 5, social work has a distinctive value base, although this is not to say that it has nothing in common with other professions. Of course, there is a significant degree of overlap, albeit with many differences of emphasis and interpretation.

Values are sets of beliefs and principles that have an important role to play in terms of:

- providing a guide to action;
- offering a framework for making sense of practice;
- providing a yardstick by which to judge the appropriateness or otherwise of particular actions;
- generating a degree of motivation and commitment.

One of the significant features of values is that we tend to become so accustomed to our own values and beliefs that we do not recognize that they are there or how they are influencing us. An important step, then, is to be clear about what our values are.

### **Professional discretion and accountability**

As we have seen, professional practice involves not only knowledge and skills, but also values. As Jordan (1990) comments: ‘moral reasoning is not an alternative to knowledge of the law and social policy, but it is an essential addition to them’ (p. 3). He links this to professional discretion and goes on to argue that:

The law provides the framework of rules under which social workers operate; policy provides an interpretation of those rules, and a commentary on their purposes. But there would be no point in using social workers to do these tasks if laws and policies could be precisely and unambiguously stated; it is because situations are complex and susceptible to a number of interpretations that the judgement, discretion and skill of a trained person are required. As Harris and Webb (1987) have remarked, ‘professionals do not create discretion; rather the inevitability of discretion creates the need for professionals’. But what needs to be interpreted, discussed, negotiated and communicated has an inescapable moral content. (pp. 3–4)

Social workers, like others in the human services, have to exercise professional discretion. That is, the nature of the work is such that judgements have to be made about how to proceed, and such judgements:

- inevitably involve values – they are not made in an ethical ‘vacuum’;
- have consequences, good or bad, and therefore involve risk;
- make the worker accountable for his or her actions.

As we shall see in Chapter 5, making professional judgements is not the same as being judgemental. However, the need to make judgements (discretion) is ever-present, in so far as ‘people work’ involves so many variations, complications and uncertainties that simple, formula responses are not appropriate. Both discretion and accountability are therefore fundamental aspects of practice. This is a point that has been recognized in the National Occupational Standards which make reference to the importance of professional accountability.

As with the list of differences outlined earlier, the commonalities identified here are by no means the only ones, but should none the less be sufficient to provide an overview of some of the important interconnections between social work and the other helping professions.

To summarize, then, social work 'shares' with other professional groups in the human services:

- a humanitarian or compassionate approach;
- a professional knowledge base;
- a set of skills;
- practice based on values; and
- discretion and accountability.

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## Voice of experience 1.2

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I worked as a nurse for a few years before retraining as a social worker. It has worked out very well for me because I have been able to see what nursing and social work have in common, but also what the differences are. That gives me a really good basis for working with health colleagues, and that is a really important part of my role.

*Myriam, a hospital social worker*

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## What is social work?

The discussions so far in this chapter have paved the way for addressing the fundamental question of: 'What is social work?' Of course, there is no single, simple answer to this question. Social work is a political entity and so, of course, how it is defined, conceptualized and implemented is therefore a contested matter. Readers looking for a simple, non-controversial answer should therefore prepare to be disappointed!

One definition which has been put forward is that of the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers:

a profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing 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. (2001, cited in NISCC, 2003)

I find this a helpful definition as it incorporates many of the elements of the preceding discussions, but even this leaves scope for debate and dissent. However, we have to be careful not to get bogged down in finding *the* definition of social work and losing sight of its variability, its complexity and its status as a contested entity.

How particular writers or organizations define social work will depend, to a large extent, on their view of what social work should be. For example, Payne (2005a) describes three different approaches to social work. These are:

- *Individualism-reformism* This refers to a view of social work as an activity geared towards meeting social welfare needs on an individualized basis.
- *Socialist-collectivist* For Payne, this approach ‘sees social work as seeking to promote cooperation and mutual support in society so that the most oppressed and disadvantaged people can gain power over their own lives’ (2005a, p. 9).
- *Reflexive-therapeutic* This approach is geared towards promoting and facilitating personal growth in order to enable people to deal with the suffering and disadvantage they experience.

Adherents of these approaches will define social work in terms of their view of what social work should be. Different approaches will produce different definitions. And, of course, the types described by Payne are ‘pure’ types – there also exist various combinations of elements from across the three.

In view of these complexities I shall avoid the rather fruitless task of coming up with a single definition of social work. Instead, I shall explore some important issues that should help provide an understanding of what social work is, without necessarily producing a clear and explicit definition. What follows, then, is an account of some key issues relating to the nature and purpose of social work.

## **Social work is what social workers do**

At one level, we could simply say that social work is what social workers do. That is, we could take a descriptive approach and list the sorts of activities that social work involves:

- assessing the needs and circumstances of those who request, or who are referred for, social work help;
- purchasing/commissioning and/or providing services to meet identified needs, or ameliorate a harmful or unsatisfactory situation;
- engaging in problem-solving, facilitative and supportive activities at the level of the individual, the family, group or community;
- assessing the degree and nature of risk to which vulnerable individuals are exposed;
- establishing, implementing and evaluating protection plans;
- providing reports for courts in order to assist in determining the most appropriate outcome;
- contributing to multidisciplinary schemes and projects to support, and benefit from, the efforts of other professionals;
- providing or arranging advocacy or mediation;
- working with community groups, individuals and families to address social problems on a preventative basis;
- undertaking statutory duties in accordance with a number of Acts of Parliament.

However, while this may be helpful in providing a picture of the range of activities that come under the umbrella of ‘social work’, it still does not really answer the question. It is also quite vague as a result of the level of generality. Furthermore, it involves a significant degree of overlap with descriptions of other human services.

An additional weakness of this approach, of course, is that it is incomplete. It will always be possible for someone else to come along and add another item to the list!

### **Social work vs. social welfare**

Another way of addressing the question of ‘What is social work?’ is to locate social work in its broader context as part of the wider concept of social welfare. As Skidmore, Thackeray and Farley (1997) comment:

The terms *social work* and *social welfare* are often confused and sometimes used synonymously. Actually, social welfare has a broader meaning and encompasses social work, public welfare and other related programs and activities. Social welfare, according to Friedlander, ‘is the organized system of social services and institutions, designed to aid individuals and groups to attain satisfying standards of life and health, and personal and social relationships that permit them to develop their full capacities

and to promote their well being in harmony with the needs of their families and the community'. (p. 3)

Social work can therefore be seen as one form of social welfare amongst others, alongside youth and community work, housing welfare, advice work and so on.

A related approach is to present social work in terms of 'the personal social services'. This relates to the area of social policy that is concerned with the welfare of particular individuals or groups, rather than with the populace generally (as in the case of health and education, for example). This is significant in terms of the tension between the needs of the individual and those of the broader society (personal vs. social). This manifests itself in the following ways:

- Social work operates at the intersection of the personal and the social (a point to which we shall return below).
- The recipients of social work services are often stigmatized and disadvantaged.
- The role of the personal social services is to seek to redress the inequalities such people experience.
- Social work, although geared towards addressing social inequalities and related problems, functions at the level of individual and group needs and problems, rather than through social activism.

The conceptualization of social work as the central plank of the personal social services (and one part of the broader field of social welfare) still does not provide a definitive statement of what social work is. However, it does take us further forward in developing our understanding, and it also raises important issues that will feature in further discussions below.

### Practice focus 1.3

Jamie had been a volunteer in a Citizens' Advice Bureau for nearly two years when he started his social work degree. When he went out on his first placement in an older people team as part of the course, he found it all very confusing. He had expected that he would be given the opportunity to just generally be helpful to older people, to promote their welfare in a wide range of ways. He was very surprised when he realized that his work was much narrower in its scope and so closely linked to legislation around community care. By the end of the placement he had a much clearer picture of what

was involved in social work with older people and how it fitted into the broader picture of social welfare. He enjoyed the placement but felt that he wanted to take his career in more of a community development direction in future. He felt this would be more satisfying than individual casework.

## History and purpose

A further possibility for arriving at a definition of social work is to consider:

1. What is the history of social work? How did it arise?
2. What is the purpose of social work? Why does it exist?

While a detailed and thorough analysis of the historical roots of social work could help broaden and deepen our appreciation, it would still not give us a definitive statement. This is because social work is a fluid entity – it grows, develops and changes. Consequently, we cannot necessarily define present (or future) social work by reference to past work. By contrast, considering the *purpose* of social work could prove far more fruitful.

I made the point earlier that social work is a contested concept, with different perspectives on what it is and how it should be practised. Similarly, the question of what social work is *for* is one that is highly contested. Indeed, there are many schools of thought about the nature and purpose of social work (and social welfare more broadly), and many authors have developed typologies or classification systems to distinguish between the different approaches (Forder et al., 1984; George and Wilding, 1994). It is certainly beyond the scope of this book to explore the complexities of the various approaches and typologies. I shall therefore limit myself to one theme to emerge from a consideration of these issues, namely the distinction between conceptions of social work as an agency of social stability and an agency of social change. In some ways, this is an oversimplification of a highly complex situation, but it can none the less be helpful as an introduction to the intricacies of the debate about what social work is for.

## Social work and social stability

It can be argued that the role of social work is to contribute to social stability, to ensure that the level of social discontent does not reach a point where the social order may be threatened. A generous reading of

this role is that it is geared towards enabling disadvantaged members of society to function effectively in society – it is a *caring* response. By contrast, a more sceptical perspective on this role is that it is geared towards protecting the status quo of power and privilege from the threat of a disenfranchised ‘underclass’ – it is a *controlling* response.

Many traditional approaches to social work are premised on this notion of social stability. The primary task, it would seem, is to help people adjust to their social circumstances and learn how to function better within them. The possibility of changing those social circumstances is afforded only secondary consideration, if at all.

One key assumption underpinning this approach is what can be called a ‘consensus’ model of society (Thompson, 1992a). That is, it is assumed that society as a whole has the same basic interests and goals – that there is a consensus of moral and political values. According to this view of society, the task of social work is to help deal with personal and social problems at a personal or interpersonal level so that people can overcome, or adjust to, any personal difficulties that may be preventing them from sharing in the common good.

Consensus-based approaches are closely associated with a ‘medical’ model of social work. Here, the social worker is seen as a form of ‘doctor’ who diagnoses what is wrong with an individual or family, and prescribes a programme of treatment. This was, at one time, a dominant model of social work practice. It is only relatively recently that the term ‘diagnosis’ has been dropped from the social work vocabulary, and the term ‘treatment’ is still widely used, especially in a child protection context. According to this model:

- The social worker is the expert and therefore occupies a very powerful position.
- Although social circumstances are relevant, the primary problem (or ‘pathology’) is seen to lie in the individual or in the family.
- A successful outcome is either a ‘cure’ for the problem or an alleviation of the ‘symptoms’ so that a return to ‘healthy’ society can be facilitated.

## **Social work and social change**

The consensus approach can be seen to be seriously flawed, in so far as it neglects the inherent tensions and divisions in society (Thompson, 2006a). An alternative perspective is to see social work as part of a process of social change and amelioration. This approach is premised on a view of society characterized not by moral and political consensus

with common interests, but rather by significant social divisions and conflicts of interest. These social divisions include class, race and gender, along with many others.

According to this view, the recipients of social work help are predominantly members of oppressed minorities whose problems owe more to the structure of society than to their own personal failings or inadequacies. The task of social work, then, is to support oppressed individuals, groups and communities in challenging the discrimination and inequality to which they are routinely and systematically exposed. This is an approach that is closely associated with what became known as ‘radical social work’, a perspective that emphasized the importance of working towards social change, rather than simply helping people adjust to their disadvantaged position.

According to this model:

- Society is characterized more by conflict and division than by consensus.
- The task is not to return people to a ‘healthy’ society, but rather to work towards promoting social change by supporting oppressed minorities in their struggle against discrimination and inequality.
- Social work is not a morally or politically neutral exercise in technical problem solving, but rather a set of activities geared towards promoting equality and social justice.

### **Social stability and social change**

As far as the consensus and conflict models are concerned, it will be clear from the chapters that follow that I have little sympathy with the former and mixed feelings about the latter. As I have argued elsewhere (Thompson, 2003a), a medical model approach to social work is highly problematic. It reduces complex social and interpersonal problems to matters of individual failing or ‘dysfunction’. The radical school of thought succeeds in locating social work in its sociopolitical context and highlights the importance of power and inequality in the development of social problems and as a barrier to addressing them. However, at least some forms of radical social work appear to make a number of fundamental errors in their analysis of the relationship between social work, the state and the wider society:

- Social work practice is rooted in law and policy. While it can challenge or work against these factors to a certain degree, it cannot transcend them altogether.

- By and large, social workers are paid employees, often of statutory agencies. Their actions are therefore constrained by the policies, values and aims of their employing organizations (if they wish to continue as employees).
- Although structural factors are clearly important aspects of the development of social problems, these interrelate with cultural and personal factors (Thompson, 2006a). An unbalanced emphasis on structural factors can leave social workers feeling powerless and helpless.

What I wish to propose here, then, is an approach that builds on the strengths of the consensus and conflict approaches, but seeks to avoid their weaknesses. A consensus approach associates social work with social stability, while a conflict approach would concentrate on social change. However, I believe a more realistic view of social work is one that focuses on *both* social stability *and* social change.

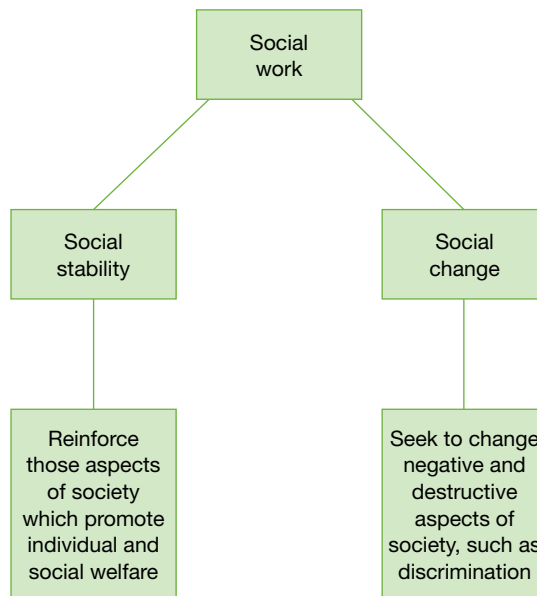
In some ways, the approach I develop below could be seen as a form of radical social work. However, I would be using the term ‘radical’ in its literal sense to mean ‘at the root’. The problems social workers seek to address are *social* problems, and therefore have their roots in society – in patterns of social relationships, distributions of power and resources, and attitudes and values. A radical approach is therefore one that seeks to address problems at a social level. However, to be realistic, it must be recognized that there are limits to how far this can go or how it can be done. It is important to avoid the naïve idealism associated with earlier forms of radical social work. As Davies (1991) comments:

Whatever the arguments of those who saw in social work an unacceptable vehicle for the oppression of the poor, the radical idea of using social workers as agents of political reform seemed to reveal – then as now – an astonishing naivety about the sociology of organisations, the relative powerlessness of individuals within them, and the importance of self-interest as a motivating force in any occupational group. There was bound to be a bitter harvest of disillusionment. (p. 4)

This is not to say that social work cannot contribute to social change and amelioration. Indeed, I shall be arguing below that it most certainly can. However, optimism about achieving change must be combined with realism about the obstacles to be faced and the limits on likely success. We should also consider the question of timescales. While social changes may not be likely in the short term, this should

not deter us from working towards changes in the longer term, a point to which I shall return below.

Working towards social change, however, does not mean that social stability is not important. Trying to make a contribution to developing a more humane, compassionate society in which discrimination and oppression are not tolerated does not preclude working to maintain and safeguard many aspects of the social order. Social work can, then, legitimately claim to contribute to social stability without reinforcing inequalities or social injustices. That is, social work can work towards social change *and* social stability – it is an oversimplification to see the two as mutually exclusive.



**Figure 1.1** Stability and change

This leaves us, though, with a crucial question: what aspects of society need to be changed, and what aspects are worthy of safeguarding? How we respond to this will depend, of course, on our values – on our view of the type of society we wish to be part of. It is partly for this reason that values merit a chapter of their own (Chapter 5).

### Forging a new perspective

Webb (1996) argues that:

What passes for social work is the product of the varying capacity of certain institutions and agencies to give it a particular definition to shape what it is that constitutes legitimate professional knowledge and the manner in which the delivery of services should be organised. (p.173)

What counts as social work will depend on how powerful groups and institutions conceive of the social work role and tasks – it is a contested concept, contested in and through a process of shaping and reshaping, as competing groups and interests vie for dominance in putting their own stamp on the profession.

In view of this, my task here is to present what I see as the basis of social work practice, particularly of good practice. What follows, then, is not intended as ‘the right answer’, but rather my contribution to the debate about the nature and purpose of social work. It involves a rather complex philosophy, but one that has to be so to do justice to the complexities of the social work world it seeks to explain. If, in the following few pages, you find you are struggling to take on board the main points being presented, do not worry about this – it is difficult material to assimilate. You may prefer to come back to this section later after you have read some of the other chapters.

## **The existential basis of social work**

My aim is not to present a detailed analysis of existentialist philosophy and its relevance to social work. Rather, I wish to point out the value of trying to understand social work in the context of some of the fundamental elements of human existence. I shall concentrate on four such aspects.

### **1 Ontology**

Ontology is the study of being and is therefore concerned with questions about what it means to exist – the sorts of questions that are generally of little interest to us in our day-to-day lives, but which can take on major significance at times of loss or at turning points in our lives.

I see ontology as an important issue for social work because, as we have seen, social work operates at the intersection of the personal and the social. Human existence, ontologically speaking, is simultaneously personal *and* social. It is not a question of individual vs. society, but rather the individual *in* society (and, indeed, society in the individual, in the sense that social factors are a major influence in shaping the individual). Ontology teaches us that we should not see the personal

and the social as entirely separate, but rather as interlocking aspects of human existence.

## 2 *Existential challenges*

Human existence presents us with a series of challenges to meet or problems to solve. These can be classified under three broad headings:

- *Life course challenges* These are the changes we encounter as we move through the life course: growing up, establishing independence and so on, right through to facing up to death.
- *Challenges of circumstance* These are the challenges and problems that arise for specific individuals in specific circumstances – that is, the challenges we face as a result of the particular goals we are trying to achieve or lifestyle we are trying to live.
- *Sociopolitical challenges* These are the problems that can arise as a result of our position in society, our ‘social location’. These include poverty, racism, sexism and other forms of exploitation.

No-one, of course, has a problem-free life, but it can be seen that problems are more likely at transition points in the life course (having children, divorce, retirement and so on) and are more likely (and probably more intense) for groups who are socially disadvantaged as a result of their social location. These problems can be referred to as existential challenges because they are part and parcel of human existence. They are inherent in being human, rather than incidental to it.

The notion of ‘existential challenges’ is an important one, as it is helpful in trying to understand the nature of social work. Indeed, it could be argued that much of social work practice involves helping people deal with existential challenges.

## 3 *Uncertainty and flux*

One of the key themes of existentialism is that of ‘contingency’. This refers to the uncertain and ever-changing nature of human existence. Very few things in life are certain. However, for people experiencing the types of problems that bring them to social workers – and indeed for social workers themselves, uncertainty is often much to the fore. For example, when a case of child abuse comes to light, the child, the parents and the social worker all face a considerable degree of uncertainty (Thompson, 1992b). Trying to find simple answers can do more

harm than good in many situations, and it is often not possible to relieve the uncertainty, not in the short to medium term at least. Consequently, a basic task for the social worker in very many situations is the *management* of uncertainty.

## Voice of experience 1.2

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I don't mind admitting that, when I first came into social work, I was expecting it to be much simpler and more clear cut than it actually is. I had to make quite an adjustment to the reality of the situation, but once I appreciated the complexities involved and got used to the idea, it wasn't a problem. Now I quite like the uncertainty – I find it quite stimulating. I think that, if social work had been as clear cut as I expected, I would have been bored by now and would be looking for new challenges elsewhere.

*Rhian, a social worker in a family support team*

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Similarly, both the problems that lead to social work intervention and the nature of social work intervention itself are characterized by change or '*flux*'. And, of course, uncertainty and change tend to reinforce each other. Any attempt, then, to find simple, formula answers is doomed to failure, as such an approach does not pay adequate attention to uncertainty and change. Social work responses have to be tailor-made to suit the circumstances at the time and cannot be 'off the peg', once-and-for-all solutions.

As a result of uncertainty and *flux*, social work practice needs to be:

- *Systematic* This means having a clear focus on what we are trying to achieve and why. This is important because uncertainty and change can easily lead to practice becoming vague and unfocused, and therefore ineffective.
- *Reflective* Unthinking, uncritical practice can be dangerous, especially where uncertainty and change are to the fore. It is therefore necessary for practice to be reflective – carefully thought through and reflected on, open to change and development where necessary.

Clearly, then, social work practice needs to be sensitive and responsive to uncertainty and *flux*.

#### 4 Moral commitment

Another central theme of existentialism is that of *engagement* or ‘moral commitment’. The basic argument is that we cannot be morally or politically neutral. Our actions will either support and reinforce the status quo (and the current distribution of power and life chances associated with it) or they will challenge it – there is no neutral ground in which our actions have no moral or political consequences.

This is a general principle, but it is particularly relevant to issues of inequality, discrimination and oppression. That is, given that we live in a society characterized by various forms of inequality, the actions and interactions of social workers will either reinforce (or at least condone) existing inequalities, or will play a part in challenging or undermining them (Thompson, 2006a). This is a point to which I shall return in Chapter 5.

A social work practice that takes no account of existing inequalities runs the risk of:

- failing to recognize important factors in people’s lives, and therefore basing intervention on very unsafe foundations;
- causing tension, ill-feeling and resentment as a result of what can come across to clients as an uncaring, insensitive approach;
- reinforcing the negative effects of discrimination; for example, adopting a paternalistic, patronizing attitude towards an older person is likely to reinforce the ageist assumption that older people are ‘past it’, and not of value to society.

Social work operates, then, not only at the intersection of the personal and the social, but also at the intersection of competing forces seeking to influence and shape society. There is a fundamental moral question of which set of forces our practice will support. As the forces geared towards retaining the status quo tend to be dominant, a supposedly ‘neutral’ stance is, in effect, a vote for the status quo.

My argument here, then, is that social work should be:

- explicit about its value base;
- committed to demonstrating these values;
- clear that the notion of a value-free practice is a (potentially dangerous) myth;
- *emancipatory*, in the sense of being geared towards supporting people in their struggles to break free from the disadvantage, discrimination and oppression they experience as a result of their social location.

## Summary

In sum, a social work practice premised on the principles of existentialism should be:

- *ontological* – sensitive to the personal and social dimensions and the interactions between the two;
- *problem focused* – sensitive and responsive to the existential challenges we all face, but particularly those that are related to social location and social divisions;
- *systematic* – with a clear focus on what we are doing and why (our goals and our plans for achieving them);
- *reflective* – open-minded, carefully thought-through and a source of constant learning rather than a rigid, routinized approach to practice;
- *emancipatory* – attuned to issues of inequality, discrimination and oppression, and geared towards countering them where possible.

## Conclusion

The main focus of this chapter has been the development of an understanding of what social work is, a picture of what it involves. This was tackled in three ways. First, I outlined the differences between social work and the other helping professions or human services more broadly, and the commonalities across them. Second, I explored a number of attempts to define social work, but without getting bogged down in trying to pin down a precise definitive statement. Third, I argued that social work is ‘up for grabs’ in the sense that what constitutes social work depends on the outcome of attempts by powerful groups and institutions to shape social work policy and practice. On this basis, I then proposed my own ‘submission’ of how social work should be seen by relating it to some of the key themes of a particular school of philosophy, namely existentialism.

My aim has not been to close the debate or provide a once-and-for-all solution, as that would be both unhelpful and unrealistic. Rather, I have attempted to provide a picture of the complex reality of contemporary social work, together with some guidelines as to what I see as a useful and constructive way forward. In this regard, this chapter has provided a foundation for the chapters that follow, each of which should help to develop the beginnings of understanding presented here.

**Guide to further learning**

Both *Practising Social Work* (Thompson, 2009a) and *Theorizing Social Work Practice* (Thompson, 2010) have helpful discussions about the nature of social work and the professional challenges involved. *The Social Work Companion* (Thompson and Thompson, 2008b) also provides a great deal of relevant information. Stepney and Ford (2000) and Coulshed and Orme (2006) both provide a useful introduction to social work practice, while Payne (2005a) provides a good overview of the various perspectives on the theory base underpinning social work (to be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). Forte (2001) and Healy (2005) are also interesting texts. Payne (2006) provides a detailed exposition of the debate about what social work is.

Payne (2005b) is a useful high-quality account of the history of social work and, as such, is well worth reading. Fook (2002) provides a very clear and helpful account of social work from a critical perspective. Parton (1996) is an interesting set of readings that explores some important issues. Smith and Smith (2008) is a useful guide to the helping professions, including social work.

As far as the existential basis of social work is concerned, Thompson (2000a) is a good starting point. Thompson (1992a) provides a thorough analysis, but is perhaps rather heavy-going for people not used to academic social work texts. Thompson (1992b) is shorter and more accessible, but relates only to child protection, rather than to social work more broadly. Chapter 4 of Thompson (2000b) should also be helpful. I have presented my ideas of emancipatory practice in an introductory text (Thompson, 2006a) and in a further book at a more advanced level (Thompson, 2003a) and with a particular focus on empowerment in Thompson (2007).

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**Exercise 1.1**

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This exercise is designed to help you develop your own perspective on social work. Consider the following questions.

1. What is it about social work that interests you or appeals to you?
  2. What do you think you have to offer to social work, and what rewards or benefits do you feel it offers you in return?
  3. What sort of society do you think we would have if we did not have social work?
  4. If you were a client, what would you expect from your social worker?
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### Exercise 1.2

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The general public tend to have a very limited understanding of what social work is and what it is intended to achieve. If you were asked to make a presentation to a community group about the role of social work in contemporary society, what key points would you want to include in that presentation?

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