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The Idea of Social Work: A Brief Introduction

Overview and Learning Outcomes

This chapter will cover:

- History, contexts and ideas about social work.
- Being and becoming a social worker.

By the end of Chapter 1 you will be able to:

- Offer an explanation to others of the roots and relevance of social work.
- Discuss the contemporary context of social work practice.
- Engage with debates about recent social work reforms.
- Make an effective contribution to debates about the purpose and future of social work.

Introduction to Chapter 1

This chapter seeks to orientate you to the practice of social work and to help you prepare for your forthcoming practice learning placement. It differs from the later parts of the book, where the focus is more on the placement itself and the skills, knowledge and values that are required to be successful in your practice and learning.

In this chapter, we deliberately take time to consider the context and history of social work to inform our thinking about what social work is and what it is for. In preparation for your forthcoming practice learning placement you should be able to explain your work and why social work is important. This last aspect tells us something about the current status and profile of social work, which has come under repeated public scrutiny and criticism in recent years, with some justification in certain regards. At your interview to be accepted onto a social work course you may well have been asked why you want to be a social worker. You

possibly answered that you want to 'help' people. But what does this really mean and what does becoming a social worker really entail?

Students in training and experienced practitioners are often asked by service users, carers, other workers, critics and allies alike – *What is social work about? What do social workers do?* Whatever the quality of your answer, a supplementary question typically follows: *Why on earth do you want to be a social worker?* When you are out on placement, how are you going to reply?

It is important we consider these questions. After all, if we aren't clear about what we are doing and why, then not only will we not be able to do our job properly, we cannot reasonably expect others to accept or trust the services we offer.

So, when we say at our social work course interview that we want to help people, what are the things we may be thinking about? This question is further complicated, given social work and social workers frequently find themselves having to try to deal with very real and genuine crises in people's lives; severe needs and problems of daily living brought about by sudden illness, chronic health problems, family breakdown, domestic violence, neglect and abuse, loss and emotional distress. This list is by no means complete. Such events are perhaps among the most significant and life changing moments in people's lives. However, it is in just such circumstances we find social workers trying to do their work, often against a backdrop for individuals, families and groups of real poverty, neglected communities, health and social service cutbacks and experiences of inequality, discrimination and stigma. If we look back at the history of social work, it is exactly these social situations that gave rise to social work and gave purpose to our work. To be an accomplished social worker you need to be alive and alert to the broader context of your work and practice.

It is also important to note that today social work and social workers have a wide range of legislative and professional responsibilities which impose explicit duties and responsibilities on our practice (e.g. Children Act 1989, NHS and Community Care Act 1990, Human Rights Act 1998). You will undoubtedly look at human rights, law and policy in detail during your academic learning but it is important you are aware that significant areas of your practice are statute-led, whether this be in relation to social work in the areas of children and families, work with vulnerable adults or in specialist services and settings (e.g. community mental health work and specific duties located within mental health law). This aspect of social work practice is not only very challenging in itself, but frequently raises dilemmas for practitioners in terms of trying to balance respect for individual freedoms with responsibilities to the community and wider society which may involve intrusion into the private lives of people and aspects of 'social control' in our roles as 'agents' of the state.

Karen Broadhurst, writing about risk and social work, puts this challenge for social work elegantly by saying that the one of the key tasks of social work is providing effective risk management but trying to do this within the humane task of social work (Broadhurst et al. , 2010). These are not new tensions in social work and remain today. However, be assured, these are challenging dilemmas even for the most seasoned social work practitioner. Remember you are at the very beginning of your learning and career and your academic teaching and practice learning is provided to take you on the journey to be ready to begin your practice.

Contemporary Social Work in the Context of Reform

Social work in England today is once again facing major public scrutiny and review (DfE, 2011b, 2012; Social Work Reform Board [SWRB], 2010), driven most recently by public concerns following a series of high profile non-accidental child deaths and serious case reviews, perhaps marked most notably by the tragic death of 17-month-old Peter Connelly on 3 August 2007. The cumulative effect of these tragedies and reviews prompted the UK government to set up a comprehensive 'root and branch' reorganisation of social work. The Social Work Task Force, launched in 2009, was charged to drive and deliver social work reform and to improve frontline practice and management.

The Task Force quickly set out to examine and review the social work profession, ranging from social work management and casework, through to inter-agency working, administration and training and finally to change how social work is perceived by the public and reported in the media. The Task Force made 15 recommendations for a comprehensive reform programme and the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB, 2010) was set up to take forward the reforms. Alongside the Reform Board, the Munro Review of Child Protection was commissioned in 2010 by the Department for Education to provide an independent review of child protection in England. This review was published in three reports with the final report *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final report: A child-centred system* being published in May 2011 (DfE, 2011b).

Reinforced by Eileen Munro's complementary *Review of Child Protection*, the Social Work Task Force identified several key issues faced by children's services and the wider social work profession. Particular attention was drawn to the organisational difficulties social workers face in their day-to-day work, notably in relation to over-bureaucratisation of child protection processes and procedures, inadequate leadership and management and too little professional development and support, particularly for recently qualified social workers (Edmondson et al., 2013).

The Task Force also critically commented on how inadequate social work has been at explaining its work to the public, and that the value and role of social workers in child protection work, arguably one of the most demanding and testing areas of social work practice today, are poorly understood and have failed to engage the public with the very real challenges and dilemmas facing many local authority social workers in their day-to-day practice. 'Damned if you do, damned if you don't' has become a commonly held view in social work team rooms about their likely treatment in the press in terms of the reporting of social work interventions where child protection is the main issue and removing a child may be necessary (*The Guardian*, 2012).

Commentaries about social work have reinforced the assertion that social work is again at a 'watershed' and a 'crossroads' in terms of its future and frequently questioned its ability to reform and change sufficiently to attain a new 'safe, confident' future (DCSF, 2009).

Later in the book, we will look at the implications of these reform programmes and particularly how these relate to your placements and practice learning.

Social work reform in the 21st century

Visit the e-links below to look at the work of the Task Force, Reform Board and the agencies relevant to the government's main social work reforms. Read about the Task Force and Reform Board recommendations for the future of social work and how the different agencies are involved in taking the reform programme forward.

The Social Work Task Force

In 2008 the Social Work Task Force (SWTF) was set up to improve the quality, status and public profile of social work, to reform social work education and training and also to review recruitment, training and retention of social workers.

   The Task Force produced its final report: *Building a Safe, Confident Future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force* in 2009, which made 15 key recommendations for the comprehensive reform of the social work profession (DCSF, 2009b).

The Social Work Reform Board

The Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) was established in 2010 to take forward the work of the Social Work Task Force.

The Munro Review of Child Protection

Alongside the Reform Board, the Munro Review of Child Protection had been commissioned in 2010 by the Department for Education to provide an independent review of child protection in England. The review was published in three reports with the final report, *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final report: A child-centred system*, being published in May 2011 (DfE, 2011b).

The College of Social Work

The SWRB's recommendations were also supported by the creation of a new independent College of Social Work, primarily established to represent the social work profession and be responsible for upholding the agreed professional standards for social work. The College has a lead role in the development of professional standards for social work; represent the profession in national planning of services and improve the public profile of social work.

THE COLLEGE OF
SOCIALWORK
The voice of social work in England

Figure 1.1

Have a good look around the College site and look at the useful student sections and news archive. Maybe sign up for the monthly e-bulletin or follow the College on Twitter.

Social Care Institute for Excellence

The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) was set up over a decade ago to promote and support the development and delivery of high quality social care for children and adults. SCIE is now considered an effective resource for people interested in social care and those delivering care.

Figure 1.2

Health and Care Professions Council

In July 2010, the government announced its intention to close the General Social Care Council (the previous regulatory body for social work), and transfer its regulatory functions to the Health Professions Council (HPC). In order to reflect this new remit, the HPC's name was changed in 2012 to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). The HCPC is the main regulator for health and social care workers and has as its main remit the protection of the public.

Anyone wishing to use the title of social worker – which is protected in law – has to be registered with the HCPC and comply with the Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers in England (2012).

The Standards relate to proficiency and conduct rather than professional aspirations or expectations. There is a range of actions available to the Council including stopping people from practising. In terms of professional development, registered professional social workers are expected to be responsible for the 'scope' of their own practice and for meeting the professional requirements set out by the College of Social Work.

e-Links

www.hpc-uk.org/
www.education.gov.uk/swrb
www.collegeofsocialwork.org/
www.scie.org.uk/

The Idea of Social Work – Histories and Roots

It is generally agreed that social work finds its historical roots in charity and help for the poor. Malcolm Payne in his book *Origins of Social Work* (2005) argues that social work emerged in Britain from three distinct historical strands. These included the reorganisation and centralisation of poor relief; the development of the 'settlement' movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (as a response to increasing social problems and poverty created by rapid urbanisation); and perhaps most recognisably within contemporary constructions of social work, in the form of 'helping others' and the organisation and delivery of charitable 'good works'. In early social work, this typically included practical social support, 'friendly visiting' and the promotion of mutual help and 'betterment' through friendly societies, cooperative movements, guilds, etc.

In its history, social work has made claims to a philosophical tradition of egalitarianism and a belief and commitment to social justice, humane values and principles. Pat Higham (2006) argues that social work developed out of the 19th-century philanthropic tradition of charity and help, on the one hand, and the more punitive measures of the workhouse, control and coercive change as a means of social welfare, on the other. These strands of care and control are readily evident in contemporary debates about the purpose of social work. Think back to Karen Broadhurst's analysis of social work today and consider issues social workers face.

INFORMATION POINT

The roots of social work

The 19th and early 20th centuries – Moving away from the Poor Law and workhouse; advocates for reform and change; organised welfare provision

The organisations described below are included here as examples of emerging 19th-century charitable providers of social welfare in the UK. Contemporary charities are quite rightly proud of their origins, longevity and service. However, these histories also tell us about some deep-rooted ideas about welfare and those who receive welfare. These ideas and threads also help to explain the roots of social work and have become part of the fabric of what we today understand as social work.

There are many examples to choose from; consider the following:

- The Charity Organisation Society (COS) was founded in 1869. The COS is of profound importance in the development of modern welfare. The COS sought to actively bring local and independent services together in order to better organise delivery of more coordinated and effective services. The COS introduced an approach to welfare work which included a form of initial assessment, prioritisation of service provision and allocated 'case' work. However, the COS also codified 19th-century assumptions about welfare and help for the poor. Distribution of services and resources was focused very much around criteria based on those who were deemed most in need, or, more tellingly, most 'deserving' and 'undeserving'. Rather like today, in fact!

- The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) was founded in 1884. Its development was informed in part by the example of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

- The National Children's Home and Orphanage was established in 1906/7. It was later renamed as NCH and then as Action for Children in 2008.

- Dr Barnardo opened his first home for boys in Stepney Causeway, London in 1870.

e-Links

www.infed.org/socialwork/charity_organization_society.htm
www.nspcc.org.uk/
www.actionforchildren.org.uk/
www.barnardos.org.uk/
www.workhouses.org.uk/

For an interesting history have a look at the History of Social Work website

www.historyofsocialwork.org/eng/index.php

In some respects, charitable organisations and welfare movements such as the ones above can be seen as a genuine and practical response to poverty, neglect and abuse but they are also important for our current discussion in demonstrating the influence and significance of shifting societal norms across the 19th and early 20th centuries. These ideas, particularly about what to do about 'the poor' and those in need, not only informed how these organisations were to emerge and develop but have also informed contemporary ideas about the provision and purpose of social welfare and in turn the development of 'social services' and social work.

Many charitable organisations were significantly informed by beliefs about those who are deemed 'deserving' and 'undeserving'; that there existed clear and definable religious and secular codes of morality and behaviour that could be instructively communicated to others and which should inform individual lifestyles and family life. There was also an acceptance that even in agencies driven by a commitment to religious and pastoral care, welfare provision and change could be organised and delivered within a secular moral framework of 'scientific charity'. This latter idea sought to apply a blend of science and business efficiency to dealing with the poor and also to addressing the perceived inefficiency and dependency creation of then charitable giving and charitable institutions. The development of 'the workhouse' in the 19th century as an organised and efficient way of addressing poverty was a typical manifestation of this idea.

Although such ideas about society have varied, modified and changed they are still relevant to our contemporary thinking about social welfare, social service and provision. These norms and ideas have strongly informed social service and social work as it has come

to exist today and continue to inform the idea of professional social work and its purpose into the 21st century. If you listen to contemporary debates about welfare provision, much of the rhetoric clearly features ideas of deserving and undeserving, welfare to work rather than welfare as need or right; and mistrust and abhorrence of any accepted role for local councils or the state to provide welfare.

Higham's (2006) position reflects two contrasting approaches to social welfare that have vied for dominance during the early 20th century. The first approach considered the main cause of social problems as located within the individual, whereby change was directed at the personal level in order to remedy social problems; in contrast, the second approach considered the cause of social problems as located within societal structures, and intervention was directed mainly at the structural, cultural and sociopolitical level. This debate is reflected in the writing of several contemporary social work authors (Leskošek, 2009; McLaughlin, 2008; Pierson, 2011; Thompson, 2000).

Another noteworthy feature of welfare provision emerging from the 19th century was the development of the Settlement movement. This began in the 1880s in London in response to social problems and poverty created by rapid urbanisation, industrialisation and immigration. The idea quickly spread to other industrialised countries. A good early example of the Settlement movement in England can be found at Toynbee Hall, founded by a Church of England curate, Samuel Barnett, and his wife in the parish of St Jude's in the East End of London, one of the poorest areas of London. Through education and community development the Barnetts hoped to improve and change society.

The truly radical idea behind the social settlement was to invite individuals to come to live in the settlement. Settlement houses typically attracted well-educated, native-born, middle-class and upper-middle-class women and men, known as 'residents', to 'settle' and visit or less commonly reside for a period of time in poor districts and neighbourhoods. 'Settlers' were expected to provide education and support to local residents. Some settlements were linked to religious institutions, others to universities and secular groups.

The roots of social work

The development of settlements as a response to social need and a catalyst for social welfare, change and justice

The Settlement movement expanded rapidly both in the UK and internationally. Hull House in Chicago, founded by activist and social reformer Jane Addams, is a well-known example of a settlement in the USA. Many cities developed and still have similar schemes both in the UK (Manchester, Birmingham, London) and across the world (Chicago, New York). Have a look at the websites below for an interesting account of the roots of the settlement movements and examples of contemporary settlement projects and developments. The International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres (IFS) connects global community organisations working for social justice. Have a look at their work.

Settlements are relevant to our understanding of modern ideas of welfare provision in that they were local, community-driven and practical responses to need and poverty which emphasised the importance of community and mutuality, the importance and benefits of education in promoting healthy and enriched lives, and the value of 'reaching in' to communities and drawing on the knowledge, skills and values of committed individuals with a desire to help others.

Toynbee Hall, London (UK)

Figure 1.3

Manchester Settlement (UK)

Figure 1.4

(Continued)

(Continued)

e-Links

www.toynbeehall.org.uk/
www.manchestersettlement.org.uk/
http://birminghamsettlement.org.uk/
www.ifsnetwork.org/

A further and distinct feature of social work we do need to note here has been the association of social work with a range of radical political movements and action across the 19th and 20th centuries which have sought to improve the living conditions of the poor, elderly and infirm and promote a more humane and just society.

The Toynbee Hall settlement, which opened its doors in the East End of London in 1884, included among its residents Clement Attlee and William Beveridge, both of whom maintained a life-long connection with Toynbee Hall. It is largely forgotten today that Clement Attlee, who as Labour Party leader in 1935 and then Prime Minister of the 1945–51 Labour government, oversaw and achieved the introduction of the welfare state, National Health Service and free, state secondary education, had previously worked as a practising social worker in London. In 1920, Attlee had written his first book, entitled *The Social Worker*. The book outlines Attlee's ideas about social reform and welfare with a key role identified for enlarged and organised social services. This took forward the ideas outlined in the Beveridge Report (1942) – produced by William Beveridge – which became the basis for the creation of the welfare state.

Attlee's experiences and writing in the early 20th century reflect this argument and for him the task of the social worker is of community worker, activist and advocate for social reform and social justice. The new political context and economy of welfare in post-Second World War Britain (1945 onwards) increased public awareness and scrutiny of state-sponsored support; it also signified increased centralised regulation, new organisational structures and the development of performance management, some of which remain in place today (Payne, 2005). At the time of Attlee's book in the 1920s, there was a small number of social work taught courses which could be described as training schemes for social service and social work. These were typically offered in urban areas such as London and Birmingham and were later to be developed into formal and recognised training and preparation for social work.

INFORMATION POINT

The roots of social work

Social work, political action and championing social justice

Look at the extract below from Attlee's book. Although, we may be forgiven for finding the language used in Attlee's book rather fusty today, I think he writes with honest

purpose. In the best sense, I wonder if we can really say contemporary debates about welfare, poverty and helping the poor will really produce a '*better apportionment of all the things that make up a good life*'.
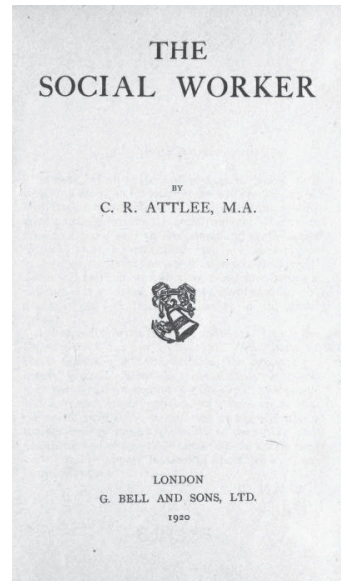

Figure 1.5

Photograph © National Portrait Gallery, London

'Social workers,' someone will say rather pityingly, 'good people no doubt in their way, but very dull, forever fussing over their lame ducks; all very well, of course, for people who like that sort of thing, elderly spinsters and men with no settled occupation.' This or something like it is a not uncommon view, but it is, I believe, a profound misconception. The Social Service movement of modern times is not confined to any one class, nor is it the preserve of a particular section of dull and respectable people. It has arisen out of a deep discontent with society as at present constituted, and among its prophets have been the greatest spirits of our time. It is not a movement concerned alone with the material, with housing and drains, clinics and feeding centres, gas and water, but is the expression of the desire for social justice, for freedom and beauty, and for the better apportionment of all the things that make up a good life. It is the constructive side of the criticism passed by the reformer and the revolutionary on the failure of our industrialised society to provide a fit environment where a good life shall be possible for all. (Attlee, 1920: 2–3)

The place of values in the idea of social work

So far we have looked at the historical context of social work in the UK and notably the emergence of organised responses to poverty, need and welfare in the later 19th century with the establishment of the Charity Organisation Society, Settlements and the emergence of particular charitable welfare organisations (Barnardo's, NSPCC). Social welfare in this context was still rooted in Christian-based ethics and influenced by religious ideas of redemption and improving the moral wellbeing of the individual.

However, into the early 20th century, more secular and liberal foundations of social welfare were coming to the fore with a growing ethos towards recognising the value of the individual and less conditional welfare provision and social service. It has long been argued that social work is a value-based activity (Barnard, 2006).

Frederic G. Reamer has written extensively on social work values and ethics, notably in relation to social work in the USA, and has identified four overlapping key stages in the evolution and development of contemporary social work: '(1) the morality period, (2) the values period, (3) the ethical theory and decision-making period, and (4) the ethical standards and risk management period' (Reamer, 1998: 488). Drawing directly on Reamer, Table 1.1 below provides an overview of the development of values and ethics in social work; the features and changes that have occurred over time to bring us to this point; and the relationship between values and ethics in social work and prevailing ideas in society about welfare and the role and purpose of social work.

During what Reamer (1998, 2003) described as the values period in social work history, Reverend Felix Biestek, later to become Professor of Social Work at Loyola University in Chicago, wrote *The Casework Relationship* (1957). This book quickly became a landmark in social work writing, and in it Biestek set out what he called the seven principles for effective and positive social work practice and case-based work. These were:

1. Individualisation.
2. Purposeful expression of feeling.
3. Controlled emotional involvement.
4. Acceptance.
5. Non-judgemental attitude.
6. Client self-determination.
7. Confidentiality.

These principles were heavily influential in social work education and this book became a core text in many UK programmes. The set of principles was quite novel in that it was one of the early 'list' approaches to setting out principles for practice, required application and action on the part of the worker and was, as a list of statements to follow, relatively plain and unambiguous.

However, Biestek's work was to fall out of favour and was heavily criticised for its author's religious foundations and in focusing on individual working relationships without

Table 1.1   Values, ethics and the development of social work

	Period	Features
1. The morality period	Early 20th century	- Early emphasis on correcting and rescuing the moral wellbeing of individuals who were poor and in need - Paternalistic efforts to shift and rescue those who were deemed 'deserving' - The gradual move from 'cause' to 'case'
2. The values period	1950s–1970s	- Refocus of attention on the values and ethics of the social work profession - Focus on social justice, social reform, civil rights - Practice attentive to human rights, welfare rights, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice
3. The ethical theory and decision-making period	1980s	- Academic attention on new fields of applied and professional ethics and theories of ethics in social work and related professions, e.g. medicine and nursing - Debates emerge within social work of decision-making and dilemmas of practice, e.g. rights and duties; care and control; preventative work vs protection work
4. The ethical standards and risk management period	1990s onwards	- The provision of codified ethical guidelines which as well as providing guidance for practice also include statements of values and attention to direct practice issues, e.g. confidentiality, consent, distributing limited resources, reporting unethical conduct - Ongoing revision, updating and expa nsion of codes to contested and debated ideas about professional role; concern to set and maintain rigorous practice standards; legal issues and misconduct

Source: Reamer, 1998, 2003.

consideration of the wider political context of social work, notably in relation to structural oppression and discrimination as root causes of poverty and need.

Some decades later, Clark (2000) conducted a thorough analysis of ethical guidelines in social work, and identified eight value-led rules for good practice; these state that social workers should be 'respectful', 'honest and truthful', 'knowledgeable and skilful', 'careful and diligent', 'effective and helpful', 'legitimate and authorised', 'collaborative and accountable' and 'reputable and credible' (Clark, 2000: 49–62). From these Clark identified the following 'stocks' (Clark, 2000) of ethical social work practice as:

- Respect.
- Justice.
- Citizenship.
- Discipline.

Clark soundly argues that these principles cannot remain theoretical and abstract and 'have to be elaborated in the context of real lives in real communities' (Clark, 2000: 172). For our purposes here these translate into a model of 'real' practice which emphasises:

- the worth and uniqueness of every person;
- the rights and entitlement to justice;
- freedom; and
- the essentiality of community.

These last definitions are interesting in our contemporary practice as they explicitly link our professional values to broadly sociopolitical aspirations and ambitions for social work. They assert the role of social workers as active in promoting commitments to social justice, freedom and the importance of community. Implicit, therefore, is a call to actively challenge structures and systems which deny these goals, in particular, discrimination, oppression, social exclusion, poverty and need. Keep these principles at the forefront of your thinking and practice.
→ Look at: **Chapter 4 Understanding Values and Ethics**.

Social justice and a commitment to anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice

Lena Dominelli (2009) argues that social justice refers to individuals, groups and communities having rights and entitlements based on the notions of equality of treatment, access and inclusion. Such commitments are core components of anti-oppressive social work practice which is founded upon 'social work's historical concern with the underdog' and shaped by 'struggles against structural inequalities like poverty, sexism, racism and disablism' (Dominelli, 2009: 50). In beginning your social work career you will have the opportunity to read about and discuss social work in relation to 'anti-oppressive practice' and also 'anti-discriminatory practice'. These terms tend to get used in social work regularly and interchangeably, so be aware of this in your reading.

Neil Thompson prefers to use anti-discriminatory practice, which he defines as:

an attempt to eradicate discrimination and oppression from our own practice and challenge them in the practice of others and in the institutional structures in which we operate. (2006: 40–1)

Working with people to reduce and eradicate oppression is at the heart of social work practice. However, it is also important to acknowledge that as social workers we are an inherent part of society; and involved in personal, cultural and social interactions that create, and reinforce oppression.

Anti-discrimination legislation has been profoundly important in informing social work practice. This has historically included key legislation such as the Equal Pay Act 1970, Sex Discrimination

Act 1975, the Race Relations Act 1976 and Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Equality Act which came into force on 1 October 2010 brought together these and other separate pieces of discrimination legislation into one single Act. As social workers, we are trained to be aware of our legal duties and also our legal obligation to adhere to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), incorporated into UK law through the Human Rights Act (1998) and a professional obligation to work in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). It will be critical that you understand the legislative framework informing your practice. Ensure you read these key statements during practice learning. They will help you locate your work and the purpose of your work in promoting ethical and rights-based social work.

Anti-oppressive social work practice asserts a commitment to practising in a way that identifies and seeks to challenge and change legal and political systems, socioeconomic structures and interpersonal relations which impact negatively on the lives of those we work with.

However, Ruth Stark, writing for the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), acknowledges, in relation to social work:

> … we have not yet reached that state where dignity and justice for all people is either recognised or practiced. The fact that we have not yet achieved that state in our societies is the reason why many people become social workers – to work with people for positive change in their lives. … Where people are abused, harmed, discriminated against, commit violent acts against others; are confused, suffering from mental health issues; are deprived of basic life sources like food, water and shelter – you will find a role for social workers to help achieve social inclusion, social cohesion and social justice. (Stark, 2008)

Read this statement carefully. It sets out in clear terms how and why we should be helping people and about the idea of social work. As Neil Thompson asserts, for social work, there can be no middle ground; our interventions will either challenge inequality or reinforce it (Thompson, 2001). Consequently, as social workers we all need to adopt a questioning, critical approach to practice, otherwise we run the risk of unwittingly reinforcing existing social inequalities, social exclusion and the marginalisation of the individuals, groups and communities we claim we want to help.

Social work in the modern era

Into the 21st century Mark Lymbery (2005) has described the stages of the development of modern social work as characterised by models which emphasised 'individual casework' (drawing on the COS approach), 'social administration' (derived historically in the Poor Law, the COS and other larger scale welfare services) and finally 'social action' (identified with the Settlement movement and later politically active responses to need and poverty).

Malcolm Payne offers an alternative classification of the 'general perspectives' of social work which he classifies as: 'individualist-reformist', 'socialist-collectivist' and 'reflexive-therapeutic'

(Payne, 1996: 2). Lymbery (2005) suggests that the reflexive-therapeutic perspective was particularly powerful in the USA in the early part of the 20th century and in the UK in the 1950s onwards; that the socialist-collectivist perspective was prominent in the radical social work literature in the UK during the 1970s and early 1980s; and that the individualist-reformist perspective has tended to characterise the modern era of social work practice.

A response to the domination of the individual casework model outlined above was articulated in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the emergence of 'radical social work' which challenged the way casework was being used to target and pathologise the individual as the source and root of social problems and to ignore structural inequality or discrimination as causes of social need. In 1975, Roy Bailey and Mike Brake produced their classic edited book *Radical Social Work* (Bailey and Brake, 1975). Radical social work was defined as 'essentially understanding the position of the oppressed in the context of the social and economic structure they live in' (Bailey and Brake, 1975: 9) and emphasised the importance of sociological theories of community development to developing rights based social work practice.

However, Martin Davies has argued that UK social work falls largely within this individualist-reformist tradition and that although social workers have had recognisably differing roles over time, these can be 'all subsumed under a general theory of *maintenance*' (Davies, 1994: 57). Davies's emphasis here on the word maintenance is important as it critiques social work as ultimately accepting of both the basic structure of society and also of social work as a compliant profession which accepts imposed limits to its role and function. Within this maintenance model, varying beliefs and attitudes to social welfare and the purpose of welfare services can be identified, as can ideas about the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor: a belief in the existence of a set of clear and definable religious and secular codes of morality and behaviour that should be used to inform and instruct individual lifestyles and family life, and revulsion at, and the rejection of, state-based welfare.

Thus, social work has to be interpreted and understood as a product not only of its history, but also of the prevailing political, social and economic philosophies of its time. It is important that as workers we are aware of the roots of social work, and how these influence the profession as it is practised today. However, it is also vitally important that we think critically about the social and political context of contemporary social work – as all these factors combine to influence what we consider to be the purpose of social work.

Consider for yourself the path being plotted out for social work in the following section, which looks at contemporary social work in our present era of welfare reform and 'fairness'. Is there a place for social work?

Contemporary Debates and Ideas about Social Work

In the plan *Building a Safe and Confident Future: Implementing the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force* (DCSF and DH, 2010) the government outlined the context to reform but also the purpose and value of social work:

The Task Force was established at a time of considerable public criticism of social workers. In response to concerns about low levels of understanding of the purpose and

value of social work by the media and members of the public, the Task Force developed a clear and simple description of what social work is, and what social workers do:

Social work helps adults and children to be safe, so that they can cope and take control of their lives again.

Social workers [can] make life better for people in crisis who are struggling to cope, feel alone and cannot sort out their problems unaided.

This description makes a strong case for the value of the profession not only for the individuals who use social work services, but also for *the whole of society.* (DH, 2010b: 5)

The College of Social Work's ambition to offer a 'clear and simple' definition of social work as a springboard for supporting the profession in its current reforms and future direction (or some might argue its longer term rehabilitation) is worth noting here as this seems to acknowledge several features of the history of social work which have come to be played out in public debates about social work.

The first is the absence of a readily agreed definition of social work, both within academic social work but also across its different areas and settings of practice. As Vivienne Cree states:

… is almost impossible to find a simple definition of social work with which everyone is likely to agree. (Cree, 2003: 3)

This has not only hampered social work from being able to successfully explain its work in plain terms – unlike other professions such as medicine, nursing or teaching – but, it could be argued, has also undermined the ability of the profession, unlike those above, to elicit public support and respect for its work.

PLACEMENT ACTIVITY

Defining social work

Although defining social work is a challenge, it is important we try if we are to explain and justify our work to other people. Read the following definitions and highlight the key words and phrases which you think properly characterise social work.

Social work is a modern profession which forms part of a broad span of social care activities carried out by a huge workforce in the health and social care services. (Adams, 2010: 3)

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)

Social work is what social workers do. (Thompson, 2000: 13)

(Continued)

(Continued)

The Department of Health and Department of Education and Skills' report *Options for Excellence: Building the social care workforce of the future* (2006) set out to define social work and offered the following:

The term 'social workers' refers to those workers trained to assess and respond to people with complex personal and social needs. … Social Workers carry out a variety of tasks, including casework, acting as an advocate, risk assessment, and working as a care manager. As a profession, social work promotes social change, problem solving and human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. (DH and DfES, 2006: 9)

Note down the key defining words and phrases in these statements which tell us something about the purpose of social work.

Think about how you might use these terms during your social work placement to describe and explain what you do and why.

Defining Social Work

Possibly the best approximation of a definition which encapsulates contemporary social work is that of the 'International Definition of Social Work' as agreed by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW).

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, 2000a)

The IFSW goes on to state that as an activity:

Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments. Its mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction. Professional social work is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve. Social work is an interrelated system of values, theory and practice. (IFSW, 2000a)

The IFSW definition has now been adopted by over 90 member organisations (IFSW, 2013) including the UK's main social work and professional bodies such as the British Association of Social Workers (BASW).

Whose definition of social work?

The IFSW definition of social work emphasises a commitment for social workers to positive change, social justice and rights, empowerment and liberation. These are important principles and values for any social worker to be committed to and ought to be the foundation of your developing practice. This becomes even more important when we consider the contested nature of social work. As Vivienne Cree has stated:

Social work is always subject to competing claims of definition and practice, and cannot be separated from the society in which it is located. Rather social work has to be seen as a collection of competing and contradictory discourses that come together at a particular moment in time to frame the task of social work. (Cree, 2003: 4)

Further, Asquith cautions us to be aware that any discussion about defining social work has 'as much been about *whose* definition is seen as legitimate rather than *which* definition' (Asquith et al., 2005: 11). Asquith goes on to demonstrate this point:

What is seen to be valid knowledge or indeed the function of social work is defined by many others outwith the profession including academics, educators, professionals, administrators, politicians, users, carers and the media. There can be no doubt that within these different constituencies, there are very different views and assumptions about social work and its function, fuelled by vested interests and media representation. (Asquith et al., 2005: 11)

Thus, part of your introductory learning in any social work course has to consider not only the roots of social work as a way of understanding its historical threads, but also how contemporary political and socioeconomic discourses, as Cree puts it, 'frame the task of social work'. If we accept that social work is impacted on by contemporary ideas about welfare and welfare provision, then drawing on a clear set of values and ethical principles to direct and steer our practice becomes a key part of helping us work out how and why as social workers we go about our daily work.

> For a comparative and international view of social work, look at the following national social work websites:
>
> - Scotland: www.sssc.uk.com
> - Australia: www.aasw.asn.au/
> - Canada: www.casw-acts.ca/

INFORMATION POINT

Social Work Today

Debates about history and definition perhaps really reflect the view that activities that are traditionally described as 'social work' have been too many, too broad and too various to be easily consigned within the narrow strictures of an all-inclusive definition. It is arguable that we should simply ignore attempts at providing definitions altogether and instead focus on better describing and explaining social work activities which are meaningful and change lives. Contemporary discussion about social work too often emphasises the need to 're-image' or 're-brand' social work. Surveys and commentaries on public perceptions of social work in the UK have consistently evidenced the periodically difficult relationship between social work, the media and the public (Aldridge, 1994; Galilee, 2005). Social workers are 'routinely vilified in sections of the national press' (Brody, 2009) and frequently described or characterised in the media generally as either lazy, incompetent bureaucrats who are culpable in most welfare cases where things go wrong or, at best, well-meaning do-gooders. The association in various media of social workers as 'child snatchers' focuses almost exclusively on child protection, and the removal of children from families is a persistent and strong discourse of reporting, news and drama featuring social work and social workers (Edmondson and King, forthcoming).

Such portrayals of social work increasingly serve to encourage and reinforce an increasingly hostile and negative impression of social work and endorse particular neoliberal ideologies and discourses about welfare, social work and welfare provision in England (Carey and Foster, 2012; Garrett, 2012). Importantly, the Social Work Task Force was particularly critical about the inadequacy of social work in explaining its work to the public and the value and role of social workers in child protection work. Arguably child protection is one of the most demanding and testing areas of social work practice today, but remains poorly understood and has failed to engage the public with the very real challenges and dilemmas facing many local authority social workers in their day-to-day practice.

INFORMATION POINT

Contemporary examples of effective social work

1. 'Success story'

Professor Colin Pritchard has demonstrated that numbers of 'child abuse-related deaths' of children aged from birth to 14 years over the period 1974–2006 tell a relative 'success story' for England and Wales, where rates 'have never been lower since records began' and reflect positively on protection services for children. As Pritchard concluded, 'This should help to offset something of the media stereotypes and be a boost for the morale of front line staff of the CPS and the families whom they serve' (Pritchard and Williams, 2010: 1700).

2. FAST

Professor Lynn McDonald is the founder of Families and Schools Together (FAST), and the creator of the FAST family engagement model. Based on systems and ecological models of practice (you will study these during your course) and adopting task-centred

social work principles (another social work approach you will become familiar with during your studies), FAST is now one of the highest rated evidence-based approaches to improving childhood success through supporting successful parenting.

The United Nations has recognised FAST as a leading evidence-based family skills programme. FAST has been implemented now in 13 different countries, including the USA, Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany, Russia, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan.

e-Link

www.familiesandschools.org/

3. Social work campaigners

Social workers as campaigners and reformers is not something confined to the past. Have a look at the links below, which also emphasise the importance of the role of women in social work history and in contemporary society.

There have been many links over the years between the Nobel Peace Prize and social work. Read for example about Jane Addams, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1931, and her work as a social reformer in the USA. Read also about Liberian social worker Leymah Gbowee, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her work in leading a women's movement to stop rape and the use of child soldiers in Liberia's civil war.

e-Links

www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1931/addams-bio.html/
www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/articles/heroines/
www.socialworkersspeak.org/media/liberian-social-worker-wins-nobel-peace-prize.html

Summary

This introductory chapter has sought to trace the history of social work, raise discussion of how and why modern social work developed in the way that it did and to inform how we can engage with contemporary debates about the future of social work. In doing so, we briefly outlined historical developments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries which produced increasing centralisation and organisation of services to address poverty and provide welfare services based on assessment of need and casework. In addition, one can trace the influence and importance of the settlement movement in emphasising community action and models of welfare provision which sought to "reach in" and support communities in most need and at most peril. For social work, this placed emphasis on the importance of befriending, helping others and following principles of egalitarianism and social justice.

However, we have also seen social work has experienced internal debates about its location and involvement in processes which maintain inequality, discrimination and oppression. Into the 21st century, neoliberal ideas of welfare and the role of the state have challenged the worth and future of social work.

Perhaps the need in social work and for agencies supporting social work is more than merely re-imaging the profession, as has been suggested, and more about relocating and re-imagining the role of the profession its purpose.

Critical friends of social work, like Professor Bill Jordan (2004, 2006) and Dr Iain Ferguson and Rona Woodward (2009), are concerned for the future of social work in the face of drives to marginalise and exclude radical and empowering models of social work and corral it within tightly prescribed roles of assessment, administration and bureaucracy. Chris Jones has raised a challenge for social work by asserting that contemporary social workers: 'are often doing little more than supervising the deterioration of people's lives' (Jones et al., 2004). Some would argue this is a strong and emotive statement and not for the faint-hearted.

However whatever our personal perspectives on social work, a typical day in the world of the social worker will be likely to include having to weigh and balance:

- Choice, rights and duties.
- The needs of individuals and the needs of the community.
- Care and control.
- Risk and risk taking.
- Public services and private lives.

Social work remains, as it always has been, a contested profession. In reviewing a range of social work literature, Asquith identified a number of conceptions of the role of social workers (Asquith et al., 2005). These include the roles of:

- Counsellor (or caseworker).
- Advocate.
- Partner.
- Assessor (of risk or need).
- Care manager.
- Agent of social control.

The debate about what social work is meant to be, and do, will not cease. All we are saying at this point is that you need to be willing and prepared to engage with this debate. Without doubt, social work reform is going to be a close companion during your forthcoming training and practice learning and this will probably be the case through the course of your career. Rather than be disheartened by this you should be emboldened to seek to be the best worker you can.

Core to being a good and effective social worker is to locate your work in sound values and ethics. There is no substitute for this if you intend to practise well and be valued by the people you will be working with.

→ See what young people tell us about social work in **Chapter 5 Translating Values into Practice**.

The one sure thing about social work is that it is never dull and no day is ever the same. We hope this chapter helps you think harder about what social work is about and inspires you to begin to work out 'what' sort of social worker you want to be and 'how' you are going to achieve this.