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This book is about the ideas that shape the contexts and the professional practices of social work. Social work is a profession that varies enormously by historical, geographical and institutional contexts. Social workers aim to be agents of change with and on behalf of the people with whom they work; to achieve this, it is vital that we, as social workers, understand our practice contexts. Further, our institutional contexts of practice are constantly changing because of social, economic and political changes, while advances in social work theory and knowledge also influence our professional purpose and approaches to practice.

What remains constant is the need for us, as social workers, to negotiate our purpose in practice. All professions negotiate their purpose, but this is more complex for social workers than for many other professions due, in part, to the diverse character of social work practice and the range of contexts in which social work occurs. For example, the work of a social worker in a government child protection authority varies markedly from that of a mental health social worker in private practice or a community health setting.

Social workers usually negotiate their purpose with a range of stakeholders, including service users, service users’ families, communities, team members, employing agencies and society at large. In negotiating our professional purpose, we may draw on our formal practice base, which includes our values and the theories for practice developed within the profession. But this is not enough. Because social work practices are profoundly shaped by our practice environments, it is important that we are actively engaged in influencing these contexts as well. For example, social workers should be involved in challenging organizational policies that are discriminatory and interfere with our goals of achieving positive health and welfare outcomes for the people with whom we practise.

Part 1 comprises two chapters. Chapter 1 introduces a discursive approach to understanding our practice context. We argue that an understanding of practice context is an integral aspect of all social work practice.

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and that our practice context can be understood in terms of competing sets of discourses. The terms ‘discourse’ and ‘discourse analysis’ are defined and the three key sets of discourses that shape many contemporary contexts of social work practice are outlined. These are discussed in more detail in Chapters 3–5.

Chapter 2 focuses on a dynamic model of practice, which illuminates how key elements of institutional context, service user and community expectations, our professional practice base and our practice framework interact to construct our professional purpose. This dynamic model of practice underpins the analysis of the discourses shaping our practice contexts (Part 2) and theories for practice (Part 3). In Chapter 2, we also look at three approaches to theory use, with a particular emphasis on a critical reflexive approach, which informs the introduction and analysis of theories for practice in this book.
Our primary purpose in this book is to introduce a contextually informed approach to social work practice. We provide social work practitioners, students and educators with frameworks for understanding the diverse and often perplexing contexts of, and theories for, practice. By understanding the ideas that underpin our practice contexts and formal theory base, we enhance our capacity to achieve the values and goals to which we are committed. In this chapter, we explain the importance of discourse and discourse analysis for thinking about professional practice, and briefly outline the three sets of discourses that are most influential for social work (considered in more detail in Part 2). This will form an important preparation for Chapter 2, where we introduce a dynamic model of practice, which proposes that our professional purpose is constructed through interaction between various components of our institutional contexts, professional practice base, professional purpose and practice framework. Here, three approaches to theory use are introduced, which will be drawn on in the analysis of theories for practice in Part 3.

The Importance of Discourse

In this book, a discursive approach is used to identify and analyse the key philosophies and ideas that shape social work practices within health and welfare institutions. The term ‘discourse’ refers to ‘a system or aggregate of meanings’ (Taylor, 2013, p. 14) through which certain social phenomena, such as ‘need’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘intervention’, are constructed. In other words, from a poststructural point of view, discourses are the sets of language practices that shape our thoughts, actions and even our identities. They are, in Parton’s words (1994, p. 13), ‘frameworks or grids of social organizations that make some actions possible whilst precluding others’. This notion of discourse recognizes language as ‘a form of social practice, rather than a purely individual activity or a reflex of situational variables’ (Fairclough, 1992, p. 63); and a key assumption on which it
relies is that discourses have material effects on our practice. Discourses constitute our understanding of service user needs and shape what is regarded as ‘appropriate’ ways of understanding and responding to those needs, as well as legitimatizing some kinds of knowledge and practice while devaluing others. For example, as we shall see in Chapter 3, the increasing influence of the new public management discourse in mental health services has contributed to the categorization and valuing of certain kinds of activities, such as ‘therapeutic intervention’, while making it more difficult to recognize and value the ‘grey zones’ of practice such as relationship-building activities (see Saario and Stepney, 2009). This can create challenges for social workers in accounting for their practices in these grey zones.

The approach to discourse analysis developed in Chapters 3–5 can be described as ‘critical’, in that we interrogate how discourses operating in our field of practice construct our contexts, our professional purpose and the relations of power and knowledge in them. Critical discourse analysis is concerned with understanding how language use contributes to the dominance of certain truth claims and the privileging of particular actors within any practice context, and what, if anything, other actors, such as social workers, care providers or service users, can do to disrupt these truth claims to allow for alternative meanings, including different ways of understanding need and responding to ‘problems’ (Taylor, 2013, p. 14).

The concept of discourse and the method of critical discourse analysis provide important tools for social workers as we seek to understand and create change in, and through, our institutional contexts. Health and welfare contexts are sites of competing discourses, each of which offers different interpretations about the nature of client needs, expert knowledge, the nature of the social work role and, specifically, the kinds of ‘help’ or interventions that will best address the concerns and issues facing service users. In some health and welfare contexts, there is little overt struggle between different discourses. In these contexts, one discourse, or set of compatible discourses, has gained dominance in determining the official practices of the institution. However, in many contexts, tensions exist between different ways of constructing the practice context, particularly in determining the nature of client needs and the social work role.

The relationship between discourses and social work practice is dynamic, in the sense that discourses profoundly shape social work practice, yet social workers can also actively use and contest the discourses that influence their practice domains. To do so requires that we understand them. At a minimum, discourse analysis can help us to understand, and actively use, the concepts that shape our institutional environments and influence our professional purpose. From a discourse perspective, it is vital that social workers understand and use the language practices that
understand their own and clients’ perspectives to be recognized in these contexts. For example, in many health and welfare settings, concerns about cost-effectiveness dominate and so, at a pragmatic level, it is helpful for us to understand and use this concept in presenting our practices and new initiatives with and on behalf of service users.

Social workers can also use discourse analysis to contest established ways of viewing and responding to client needs. Fook (2002, p. 89) asserts that: ‘simply choosing not to accept dominant ideas and pointing out contradictions can work to resist, challenge and change these dominant meaning systems’. By understanding the discourses that construct our practice environments, social workers can be involved in opening these contexts to ‘alternative framings of reality’ (Parton, 2003, p. 9). Using discourses in this way, social workers can work with stakeholders to develop different and more helpful ways of understanding and responding to client ‘needs’. For example, in many fields of health and welfare, social workers have an important role to play in highlighting the social and structural contexts of the issues facing service users and encouraging service responses that move beyond ‘fixing’ the individual’s problem to addressing the social and structural origins of these issues.

Part 2 illuminates the discourses shaping our purpose as practice. Three sets of discourses (Figure 1.1) profoundly influence the practice context, people’s expectations of social work services and the construction of service user ‘need’, and the theories underpinning social work practice.

![Figure 1.1 Discourses and professional practice purpose](Copyrighted material – 9781137024244)
The three sets of discourses shaping professional practice purpose are dominant discourses, social and behavioural science discourses, and alternative discourses. ‘Dominant discourses’ (Chapter 3) refer to the discourses that are most influential in shaping power and knowledge relations in health and welfare services. They shape the institutional contexts of practice, determining the forms of knowledge that are valued, the types of services and the power/knowledge relations between the service provider and service user.

‘Social and behavioural science discourses’ (Chapter 4) are those received from the disciplines that have traditionally provided the knowledge and theory base for the social work profession. They are founded primarily in the social and behavioural sciences and while it is possible to identify a wide variety of disciplinary influences on our professional knowledge base, we focus on the ‘psy’ and sociological discourses. They have been influential and also the site of considerable tension within the professional base of social work, with significant variation internationally and across different fields of practice in the extent to which the profession recognizes and constitutes itself through these discourses. For example, social workers working in mental health and counselling services are more likely to be informed by, and constituted through, ‘psy’ discourses, while those practising in community and policy practice roles will probably draw more significantly on and constitute their role through sociological discourses.

The ‘alternative’ discourses exist outside the other two discourses but nonetheless exert a powerful influence on the construction of our purpose and practices as social workers. Chapter 5 considers three sets of discourses – citizen rights, those associated with religion and spirituality, and environmentalism. In the first edition of this book, the term ‘consumer rights discourse’ was used, but here we refer to a ‘citizen rights discourse’, which better reflects the construction of the people engaged with social services as rights-bearing citizens rather than as consumers of services. This broader notion of the citizen as rights bearing in all domains of life, rather than merely having the right to consume services, has been central to various progressive social movements in health and welfare services. An analysis of the influence of the environmentalist discourse on social work is new to this edition, and reflects the emerging influence of broader environmental debates on the (re)constitution of professional practice.

Theories for Practice

In Part 3, we concentrate on theories for practice, which are a specific aspect of social workers’ professional toolkit. Like discourses, theories for practice
contribute to the construction of our professional purpose, but unlike discourses, theories for practice represent particular ways in which our profession has sought to define and enact its professional purpose. In some instances, discourses shaping our context may clash with social work theories for practice, such as the tensions between new public management ideas and anti-oppressive practice, while in other cases discourses may inform our theories for practice, such as the influence of behavioural and social science discourses on our theories for practice.

Consistent with other social work theorists (Howe, 1987, p. 16; Payne, 2005), we use the term ‘theories for professional practice’, also known as ‘social work theories’, to refer to formal theories that are intended to guide and explain social work practices. Theories for practice are frameworks developed by social workers that offer specific guidance as to the purpose of social work, the principles for our practice and often imply specific methods of intervention. Part 3 is structured around five groups of theories for practice – systems theories, problem-solving theories, strengths and solution-focused theories, modern critical social work theories, and postmodern social work theories, as illustrated in Figure 1.2. Within each group of theories, key contemporary theories for practice are outlined and analysed.

**Figure 1.2** Contemporary theories for social work practice

Theories for social work practice are constantly evolving and new theories are also emerging from within these perspectives. Our key focus is on theories developed by social workers for social workers, because they were developed with at least one, and often more, contexts of social work practice in mind and it is vital that we are cognizant of our practice context and professional base. This is important because our theories for practice reflect the value base of our profession and the specific nature of our work, which involves working alongside people who are vulnerable and marginalized. Sheldon and Macdonald (2009, p. 3) assert that:
Social work’s disciplinary territory is the poor, troubled, abused or discriminated against, neglected, frail and elderly, mentally ill, learning-disabled, addicted, delinquent, or otherwise socially marginalized up-against-it citizen in his or her social circumstances.

To recognize and champion our own theory base is not to deny important contributions from other disciplines. Hence, where relevant, we have included reference to theories from other disciplines where these extend our understanding of, or capacity to implement, social work theories for practice. For example, Chapter 7 includes an introduction to motivational interviewing in relation to its potential incorporation into problem-solving approaches.

A contextual approach underpins the discussion of theories for social work practice in Part 3. We illuminate the historical, geographical and institutional contexts in which each approach emerged. An understanding of the original contexts and practice purposes for which specific theories were developed can assist us to adapt and transform these theories for practice within our specific practice contexts and with reference to the unique characteristics of every practice interaction. Furthermore, we show that the strengths and limitations of each theory need to be analysed within specific contexts of practice. While many social workers, and academics, have a favoured theory of practice, we seek to introduce a range of approaches rather than promote a specific theory for practice. By providing a critical analysis of the development and application of each theoretical approach, we aim to assist the reader to make their own judgements regarding the utility (or not) of the application of theory to their specific context of practice. For example, even where we accept a theoretical perspective, such as modern critical social work theory, as useful, its application in a statutory child protection context will necessarily be different to its use in a community development context.

Discourses and Theories for Practice: What’s the Difference?

Discourses and theories for practice are resources through which our professional purpose and practices are constituted. Yet, theories for practice (Part 3) differ from the discourses discussed in Part 2 in at least two important ways.

First, whereas discourses may privilege the knowledge of a specific group, such as the medical or legal specialist, they are a shared resource developed and maintained by a range of actors and institutional practices, while theories for practice are developed for social workers for social work practice. For example, in institutional contexts where the biomedical discourse is dominant, social workers (and other professionals) are required to develop a
capacity to use and, where necessary, translate biomedical concepts (see Opie, 1995). By contrast, while other professionals may utilize concepts from theories for social work practice, such as concepts regarding service users’ strengths and resilience, these theories are intended primarily to provide guidance in specific forms of social work practice. Indeed, many theories for social work practice have been developed within particular contexts of social work practice, and their utilization beyond these contexts often requires adaptation of the original concepts to recognize the different requirements of other institutional contexts. For example, the strengths perspective was originally developed for practice with people living with chronic mental health conditions, and adaptation to other fields such as child protection demands consideration of the specific practice obligations of social workers in that context (see Turnell and Edwards, 1999).

Second, whereas discourses shape knowledge and power relations in practice by influencing what counts as true and valid and who is recognized as authoritative, theories for practice are intended to offer a range of options for understanding and responding to particular concerns. In relation to social work practice, this means that within institutional contexts of practice, we may have limited choice over the extent to which we acknowledge or engage with discourses that exist within these contexts. A critical discourse analysis approach helps us to understand, and perhaps also strategically use, the opportunities provided by these discourses to realize our values or goals. For example, the growing influence of a citizen rights discourse in many fields of health and welfare has offered new opportunities for patients and service users to challenge some aspects of professional power/knowledge relations (see Crossley and Crossley, 2001; Shakespeare, 2006; Tilley et al., 2012). By contrast, theories for practice offer different possibilities for interpreting our purpose and options for understanding and responding to client needs. For example, a problem-solving approach (Chapter 7) focuses our attention on achieving a mutual understanding with service users and a step-by-step approach to resolving defined issues, while an anti-oppressive approach (Chapter 9) encourages an overtly political construction of service users’ concerns and the utilization of critical awareness and collective strategies for achieving individual and social change.

Why Context Matters

This book brings together a dynamic model of practice with a critical introduction to the ideas shaping the institutional contexts of practice and key theories of direct practice. By integrating the analysis of context and theory, we aim to provide increased opportunities for social workers to use and develop theories in situ. Discussion of social work theories for practice and
the contexts of social work practice usually occurs in separate domains, resulting in frustration for those charged with formal theory building and practitioners. One way we can promote dialogue between these two ‘worlds’ is by recognizing the profound influence of context in the use and development of theories for practice.

The book is intended to be used actively by you, the reader. You are invited to think through the perspectives presented here as they apply to your actual or intended contexts of social work practice. Each chapter provides an introduction to the time and place in which discourses and theories for practice developed and the core assumptions underpinning them. This background is intended to assist you to consider how the contexts in which discourses or perspectives developed, and the assumptions on which they are based, have commonalities or differences with the contexts in which you are likely to practise. For example, most contemporary theories for practice originated within a particular geographical and historical context and often with a specific practice concern in mind, such as counselling practice with people experiencing challenges in everyday living, or, as is the case with a citizen rights discourse, the political empowerment of people using health and welfare services. By understanding these original contexts and the assumptions underpinning them, we enhance our capacity to critically analyse the ideas shaping our practice context and, as appropriate, to adapt and develop theories within our specific contexts of practice. This approach encourages you to engage with the material actively and reflectively to consider the possibilities as well as the limitations of the perspectives for your practice contexts and further challenge or develop these perspectives. Opportunities for engagement with the perspectives are supported by exercises, case studies and questions in each chapter.

Throughout the book, you are invited to consider the implications of the material presented for practice with culturally and linguistically diverse client groups. Traditionally, social work practice with people from non-Anglo-Saxon cultures has tended to be characterized as a specialist area of practice. However, within the profession, there is increasing recognition that, in the aftermath of colonization and in a globalized world, social workers engage with service users from a range of cultural and linguistic groups. For example, in Australia, the USA and Canada, First Nations peoples are overrepresented in many areas of statutory service provision such as child protection and in juvenile and adult detention centres. In addition, globalization has resulted in the mass relocation of populations, especially from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, to postindustrial nations, and therefore social workers, even in ‘mainstream’ settings, can expect to have contact with service users from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Culturally sensitive practice requires that social workers develop an understanding of the history and cultural practices of the client groups they work with and consider the implications of these for prac-
tice. Thus, it is important that you consider the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the client populations with whom you work and the strengths and limits of these different perspectives presented here for practice with these groups of people.

Conclusion

Social workers practice in a broad range of contexts with people who experience a diversity of concerns and oppressions. Part of the social workers’ brief is to be agents of change in direct practice, within our organizational contexts, and within society more generally. I hope this book will further social workers’ capacities to understand, and contribute to, the profession’s capacity to use its practice contexts and formal theory base to create change in favour of the vulnerable populations with whom we work. Creating change of this kind should be our primary and unifying concern.

Summary Questions

1. What does the term ‘discourse’ mean?
2. It is claimed that discourses have ‘material effects’ on social work practice. What does this mean and what kinds of material effects did this chapter identify?
3. Discuss one similarity and one difference between ‘discourses’ and ‘theories for social work practice’.

Recommended Reading

  Explores how people at particular sites relevant to health and welfare services are discursively constructed as ‘deficient’. Demonstrates how the discursive construction of identities and relationships within sites such as the courts and child protection services materially affects people’s life changes and warrants intervention in their personal lives. Particularly helpful for illuminating how language influences power relations in social work practices and the material realities of people’s lives.

  Short, accessible introduction to discourse analysis; helpful for readers seeking to understand the origins, strengths and limits of this approach for analysing practice contexts.
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