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# chapter 1

# Making sense of social work

## 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 or employing body, rather than the individual social worker who acts as a representative of that organization. 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* (Thompson, 2009).

### 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* – Adams, 2008; 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, 2011a). 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’

It has long been recognized that 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, p. 19) 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.

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' and to a lesser extent in subsequent child death tragedies.

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. In a classic study, Aldridge (1994) provided 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. 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***

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*

### 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, p. 39) 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.

Similarly, the benchmarking statements developed by the Quality Assurance Agency in relation to setting up the degree in social work in the UK talked 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, 2012a). 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 (2009) 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 inequalities 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, 2013), 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

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