The Positive Social Worker

Stewart Collins

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Developed from the author's own experiences in social work and social work education, this book considers alternative approaches for social workers in dealing with the extensive demands, persistent pressures, and stress that they may face in their daily working lives.

The Positive Social Worker is firmly located in an individual, group, organisational, cultural, and socio-political context. It considers and celebrates concepts linked to the importance, and sources, of work-related well-being. Individual chapters describe and critically analyse the social work context, the role of hope, optimism, commitment, resilience, support, appraisals, positive emotions, and coping, self-efficacy, control, and agency. Throughout, clear links are made with social work practice. While the book concentrates on a UK context, it draws on literature from social work, social, organisational, work, and positive psychology and sociology, from the UK, the USA, Europe, Australasia, and other countries.

This book should be considered essential reading for social workers, graduate and postgraduate social work students, practice teachers, and lecturers. It will also be of relevance to professionals and professionals-in-training in the criminal justice and health and social care fields.

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“Even in the midst of fierce flames the Golden Lotus may be planted.”
Wu Cheng’en, *Monkey*, p.25.

“Sweet are the uses of adversity,
which, like the toad, ugly and venomous
wears yet a precious jewel in [its] head.”
William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 1, Scene II.

“Good, the more communicated, more abundant grows.”
John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book V.

Introduction

What is it that "keeps us going" in social work? What is it that sustains us? What helps us to maintain positive approaches to, and obtain satisfaction from, our work? The vast majority of colleagues who I have worked with have remained in social work, or social work education, despite stress, demands, limited resources, and high workloads. I considered what factors had helped me to enjoy a career of 50 years in social work and social work education. These included the ever-present, ever-expanding variety of challenges, a belief that one had things to offer in helping others, enthusiasm, and a "desire to make a difference", which provoked an ongoing commitment to social work. However, at the present time, the political and organisational context for social work, as outlined in Chapter 1, is enormously challenging. Whilst recognising this, it seems very important to consider the ways in which we can both establish and maintain positive approaches as social workers, along with the knowledge, understanding, and skills that can help us with the task.

My own experiences growing up in what was a deprived part of a then industrialised town in the North of England heightened my sensitivity to inequality and unfairness, especially the exploitation of working-class people. People who had struggled against a background of limited incomes, restricted educational, housing, health, and political opportunities were exploited, while a privileged few enjoyed wealth and power. This helped me to develop an understanding of, and commitment to, people who were seen as marginalised, deprived, exploited, and undervalued. This commitment also grew as a result of experiences in my own family and, in particular, a best friend who had an unhappy home life, had underachieved at school, found only limited employment opportunities, and became "an outsider" involved in crime, falling into aggression, depression, and, eventually, suicide.

My own formative experiences had taken me into higher education. Eventually, after experiencing alienation, lack of meaning and a sense of purpose, a feeling developed of "wanting to do something useful", to "pay back a debt", make a contribution to society and to try and help to make it a more equal place, to work with people, and to try and help people through relationships.

I entered social work education as a youthful, inexperienced, naive but enthusiastic student energised, in particular, to learn through practice experience, where I found a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning and a sense of personal and professional identity. Extensive support was available from colleagues, my tutor and, particularly, from practice teachers. One practice teacherwas especially supportive both professionally and personally. I had a strong belief in growth through relationships, partly influenced by my own personal experiences, partly influenced by literature, novels, and plays. I was full of hope and optimism for movement towards a "better world" with positive change, with improved policies and practices always on the horizon, believing that generally, things would turn out well. I trusted people, again, maybe naively. This applied to friends, colleagues, and service users. I believed essentially in their good qualities, strengths, and positive attributes. As a student I found it relatively easy to control demands from academic work and the small workloads on placements. Resilience came into play for me when subject to personal stress near the end of the course, but support from family, friends, colleagues, and my practice teacher helped me through this.

Upon commencing full-time work in probation, enthusiasm for social work continued, described as "relish" for the job by a probation inspector at the end of my first year! Hope and optimism were maintained. Optimism was sometimes dented by experience, for example, the need to be "objective" when writing assessments in court reports that presented tests of one's resilience, as service users sometimes reacted negatively to facts about criminal careers. However, once again, support from the team, from colleagues, line managers, the organisation, family, and friends was ever present, while the friends were often colleagues. There was a feeling around that one would nearly always "bounce back" from whatever happened, that one would endure and continue in the work, almost no matter what. At that time, stress seemed to be rarely present. Probation workers then had a great deal of autonomy, a high degree of independent control over their work. Perhaps even too much control as, at that time, there was a distinct lack of standardised procedures, for example, related to breaches of supervision orders. While I continued to feel committed to the belief that there was a lot to offer in relationships with service users, workload pressures were clearly evident, leading to prioritising of work such as court reports and statutory work and the neglect of work with "voluntary cases", while some of the on-going work was mechanical, superficial, and repetitive, with surveillance and control taking priority over relationship-based work. Hence the organisational context and agency culture had a heavy influence upon workload and how I coped with it.

In the context of employment in social work education, control over workload eventually became difficult, as demands from teaching, placement visiting, administration, and research became excessive. Attempts to meet demands from research led to long hours, weekend work, and more stress. Greater demands were made on professional resilience, more was required from one's

coping resources. Support from colleagues was often present, but a few were less supportive, "difficult", and occasionally, almost impossible to work with. Nevertheless, commitment, resilience, hope, and optimism were maintained, along with a belief that a contribution could be made in preparing future social workers, in expanding knowledge, skills and understanding, working towards change, improving policies and procedures, and moving toward a fairer and more just society.

In this book the chapters that follow will be based upon my own professional experiences and the experiences of other social workers, whilst considering evidence-based and evidence-informed research findings. The chapters are developed from a series of articles written by myself and colleagues and published in the *British Journal of Social Work and Practice: Social Work in Action* and an earlier book chapter. The ideas and concepts presented are drawn from social work, social, organisational, work, and positive psychology, as well as sociology literature. The first chapter will concentrate on "setting the scene", exploring the current context of social work in the UK, prevailing pressures, frequent stress, and some alternatives. Overall, the aims of this book are to consider:

- The ways in which social workers can establish and maintain positive approaches to themselves, their work roles and responsibilities, and in their work with service users.
- The knowledge, understanding, and skills that can enable social workers to establish and maintain positive approaches.

The book is intended primarily to be of interest to undergraduate and postgraduate social work students, newly qualified and experienced social workers, practice educators, team leaders, managers, social work academics, and researchers. It may also be of interest to associated professionals in the criminal justice and health care fields. The book has a UK contextual focus, but literature is drawn upon from a wide range of countries including the UK, Europe, the USA and Australasia.

The selected concepts that follow are seen as key in maintaining positive approaches for social workers. All the concepts are theory- and research-based; they are linked to social work practice. They are "state-like" in that they can be developed through learning experiences. The concepts are related to attitudes and behaviours as a social worker and, if necessary, could be "measured" as part of one's own on-going personal and/or professional development, although such concepts may be anathema to some readers. The chapters that follow will examine hope, optimism, commitment, resilience, support, positive appraisals, and coping, self-efficacy (confidence), and control. The concepts also have their critics. Hence critical perspectives will be provided in each chapter. Most of the topics in this book have not been explored in social work literature in any depth, but some of the concepts may well be quite, or very, familiar to social workers. For instance, much has been written in the social work field

about the importance of support and about resilience, but perhaps less about the other topics that will be covered. Some of these concepts are very wide ranging; others have a narrower focus. For example, hope has clear implications for social workers ranging from political perspectives and social activism through to individual goal setting. Others are more generally "individualistic" such as self-efficacy, appraisal, coping, and control, and have been criticised for this, but they are also located in organisational contexts.

The concepts discussed in this book do contribute significantly to a positive approach by social workers and each is worthy of detailed exploration in their own right, although they are particularly meaningful and particularly powerful when combined.

The topics covered in the chapters are neither "exhaustive" nor the "final word", as these are developing fields. Other concepts might have been included such as emotional intelligence, mindfulness, well-being, self-compassion and self-care, and leadership. They have been considered elsewhere. This book is one contribution to a wide-ranging, very complex web of ideas that inform social work practice. It should be seen in a context of structural, political, legislative, and organisational policies and practices, many significant social theories, social work theories, skills and values, including anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. The topics discussed in the book, in and of themselves, will clearly not mitigate the impact of poverty, social injustice, and social divisions, but they can contribute to the struggle.

This book is part of a journey leading towards a better understanding of "the positive social worker". It is a movement towards, a searching for, a world in which social workers not only survive but flourish and thrive, acting as agents for change in a challenging, provocative, demanding world of limited and limiting resources. I hope you enjoy the journey!

Chapter 1

The social work context, pressure, stress, and some alternatives

Introduction

These are really difficult times for social workers, who clearly operate within challenging socio-political, cultural, and organisational contexts. New managerialism, market-oriented practices, ideas from the business and commercial world, and the private sector have been transferred to, and incorporated into, social work (Harris, 2003, 2007). Since about 2008 with the establishment of austerity in the UK, there have been cuts to public services, local authority budgets, and resources – with the prospect of more to come. Local authority budgets will have fallen in real terms by one third by 2019–2020 (Greer, 2016). There has been an increase in rationing, gate-keeping mechanisms, standardised assessment measures, rules, procedures, performance monitoring, and targets in statutory social work agencies. Individual responsibilities of social workers have been emphasised, with decreasing power for social work collectives and unions. The media continues to focus on the failings, problems, and negative aspects of social work.

Hence social workers are said to be "despondent and disillusioned" (Stanford, 2011, p. 1515). There are concerns about the recruitment of workers and difficulties in retaining staff, especially in the child care and mental health fields (e.g. Evans et al., 2005). Practitioners are said to "feel powerless to enact their professional vision and values in a climate [that emphasises] proceduralisation, legislation and regulation", with little space for preventative work (Stanford, 2011, p. 1515). Critics have talked about a climate of passivity, powerlessness, despair, despondency, and hopelessness in social work, with practitioners trapped and struggling to survive. This is a bleak picture.

However, are social workers trapped? Practitioners can turn to alternative concepts, to alternative models. There are positive ideas which continue to motivate social workers to help them to survive, to sustain themselves, to take up challenges, to thrive and flourish. There are positive discourses, options and choices beyond narratives focused upon role ambiguity, role conflict, demands, pressure, stress, exhaustion, and burnout. Yes, pressure, stress, and burnout are clearly evident, but social workers also experience considerable rewards and job satisfaction alongside the difficulties. In conjunction with their teams,

colleagues, managers, and organisations social workers can tolerate, can resist negativity, working both individually and together to recognise, to work with, and towards alternatives. Members of the social work profession sometimes may feel unappreciated, vulnerable, anxious, lacking in knowledge and skills. But they also have strengths. They can, and do, cope; they can, and do, feel confident, experience resilience, hope, optimism, support, a sense of control, and enthusiastic commitment to their work (Collins, 2008; 2015; 2017).

In this wide-ranging introductory chapter we will consider the dangers of an excessive focus on pathology. We will explore disease model thinking and some alternative approaches, such as the role of positive expectations, affirmative post-modernism, appreciative inquiry and the inevitable co-existence of both positive and negative experiences. We will move on to consider, in some depth, pressure, stress, and burnout, alongside job satisfaction and the rewards of social work. Then we will discuss other alternative approaches such as salutogenesis, sense of coherence, positive use of resources, and hardiness.

Disease model thinking

Several factors have contributed to an emphasis on negatives and deficits which should be recognised and partly accepted, but also can be understood and countered. There has been a tendency to develop a physical, emotional, and behavioural preoccupation with pathology, with what is difficult, flawed, and problematic. This has been influenced, for example, by some aspects of medicine, psychiatry, and psychology. Hence the emphasis that follows can be on disease, disorder, illness, problems, and pessimism. Perhaps we should more often ask ourselves asset-based questions such as "what makes us healthy?" and "what is working well?", rather than deficit-based questions such as "what makes us ill?" and "what is wrong?" (Garven, McLean, and Pattoni, 2016).

However, this is not to disregard the real suffering, pain and struggles of individuals, families, and communities nor, for example, the realities of abuse and addictive behaviours. Also, we should be wary of not undervaluing the successes of so-called pathology-based approaches. For instance, the biological, chemical, and genetic components of illness clearly can, and do, play important roles. As Saleebey (2009) points out, the organic and the neurological contributions to major physical and mental health problems have had many impressive aspects – without traditional medical help our physical and mental health would be infinitely more problematic.

Placebos and expectations

Nonetheless several social work writers in the past, for instance Smale (1977) and Saleebey (2009), have drawn attention to the limitations of some aspects of medical models, prescribed medication, placebos, and the power of expectations. The placebo effect has been the subject of extensive studies over many years, whereby one group of people is given a particular drug, while another

group is given an inert substance. In many clinical trials it is not unusual for 25 to 40 per cent of the placebo group to experience the therapeutic outcomes provided by the relevant drug (Saleebey, 2009). One meta-analysis of clinical trials for anti-depressants even found no difference in the effects of placebos and drugs (Kirsh et al., 2003). Therefore a person's expectations, their belief that they will get better plays a part in the mobilisation of healing systems. Expectations and beliefs that healthy, positive outcomes will follow also mobilise hope along with the belief in the possibility of things improving in the future (Saleebey, 2009). Verbal, non-verbal, and emotional messages can galvanise hope. Therefore placebo effects, positive expectations, and hope are powerful predictors of successful counselling, psychotherapeutic, and social work help. Both ourselves and service users need realistic, positive, and hopeful expectations to sustain our endeavours. These topics will be explored extensively in the second chapter of this book.

Negatives and positives

It is also necessary to challenge the emphasis on pathology, problems, and deficits as a medical and moral imperative. This helps us move towards a more balanced approach that places more focus on resources, competences, capabilities, assets, and strengths (Seligman et al., 2005; Saleebey, 2009; Garven et al., 2016). Cameron (2008) has highlighted some mechanisms that can help explain bias towards negativity. These include:

- Intensity – negative stimuli are experienced more intensely than positive stimuli; they are often perceived as threats that require immediate attention.
- Novelty – the rate of "ordinary" and positive events is usually commonplace; such events tend to be accepted, quietly internalised, and go unnoticed. Negative events tend to be more unusual or unexpected compared to "everyday" happenings and occurrences. Negative events tend to stand out; they capture our attention. Positive events, experienced more frequently, subside, fall, and fade into the background; they become diminished in relation to what may be relatively rare negative events.
- Singularity – in any system a single " negative" component, or person, can cause a whole system to malfunction, while a single positive component or person does not guarantee optimal system functioning. An example of a single person causing a system to malfunction can be seen when a "damaged", or even dangerous, team member can disrupt the otherwise healthy functioning of a team.

Myers (2000) and Robertson and Cooper (2011) have also pointed out psychology research and literature contains at least 15 times as many articles about negative topics – such as negative emotions – compared to positive ones. Negative organisational outcomes have also received a similar disproportionate

amount of attention (Robertson and Cooper, 2011). Thus negativity tends to have a stronger effect on our attention, on our information processing systems, memory, self-concept, and relationships, while outcomes of positive events can be experienced as under-noticed, under-emphasised, and under-valued. In turn, perhaps psychology has paid comparatively little attention to psychological health, positive growth, development, and well-being. There are some exceptions, such as the work of Carl Rogers (1980; 2004). Rogers emphasised constructive growth, forward movement, "becoming", and self-actualisation, within a supportive social environment.

Also, some postmodernists have presented negative and nihilistic perspectives. Rosenau (1992), cited in Parton and O'Byrne (2000), talks about *sceptical* postmodernists who present gloomy, pessimistic, despairing, hopeless, meaningless scenarios, portraying the end of the subject, the end of the active agent, and the impossibility of truth, with few opportunities to make social, political, or practical commitments. Alternatively, Rosenau (1992) talks about *affirmative* postmodernists who, although agreeing with the critiques of modernity around science and rationality, have a more optimistic, hopeful view. There is a concern not just with deconstruction, but with *reconstruction*. The affirmative approach involves trying to build political, practical interdependence and collaboration with different cultures which, while appreciating the diverse nature of subjectivities, clearly recognises and opens up wide-ranging *possibilities*, including choice, control, and agency which are discussed later in this book (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000). *Affirmative* post-modernism therefore links more closely with constructive, positive approaches.

In considering an emphasis on positives, appreciative inquiry (AI) has an important contribution to make. AI was established in the late 1980s in the field of organisational analysis, development and change (Cooperrider, Witney, and Stavros, 2003; Whitney, 2004). It has also been developed as a research approach (Ludema, Cooperrider, and Barrett, 2001). AI focuses on the transformational power of positivity, based on strengths, hopes, possibilities, and opportunities (Whitney and Trosten- Bloom, 2010). It involves a mind shift towards recognising good practice, seeing what works, what is right and what people really care about in creating a future with new, expanded opportunities (Cooper, Flint Taylor, and Pearn, 2013). AI often follows distinct phases:

1. Discovery – involving an extensive, joint search to ascertain what already works well, the best of what is, and has been, building on success, good practice, achievements, and positive attributes.
2. Dream – looking beyond what is, envisioning the best of what might be, a better future, what might work well in the future, exploring hopes and dreams for organisation and organisational relationships.
3. Design – involving "provocative propositions", describing the ideal, planning, and prioritising goals, what would work well and further developing good practice.

4. Destiny – comprising a series of inspired actions to support learning innovations and what will be, delivering, maintaining, and sustaining the ideal in a "real" world.

Work is undertaken in all of these stages by sharing experiences with participatory, collective, collaborative, and cooperative dialogue that energises and excites people, without the use of incentive, persuasion, or coercion (Cooper, Flint-Taylor, and Pearn, 2013). The focus is on supporting people, getting together to tell stories of positive development that they can build on. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005, p. 8) state "AI involves the art and practice of asking unconditionally positive questions that strengthen…capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential."

In social work, few studies on AI have been undertaken in the UK, but those that do include experiences with small numbers of students (Hughes, 2012; Rowntree, Zufferey, and King, 2016), a practice learning manager (Bellinger and Elliott, 2011), some experienced social workers (Wendt, Tucker and Prosser, 2011), workers in social work pilot projects (Teater and Carpenter, 2017) and in criminal justice contexts (for instance, Robinson et al., 2012).

Robinson et al.'s (2012) research work is particularly illuminating. Probation workers considered the quality of their supervision of people involved in offending from an AI perspective. They were asked about their best experiences, which is unusual, because practitioners rarely tend to discuss best practice, positive work, strengths, and achievements (Carter, 2006). Probation staff were questioned first, about their "best times" in terms of producing good quality work; second, about their "best case scenario", illustrating best quality practice, and third, examples of good quality practice in their own team or office. Several interviewees, who were modest, self-effacing practitioners, found it difficult to talk about their own best work, preferring to talk about the good work of colleagues. But for many workers the most significant theme in the research was the novel experience of discussing their "best work…to think about it from a positive angle [which tended to] elicit and expose achievements and success stories that are otherwise hidden from view" (Robinson et al., 2012, p. 12). Normally, not only did there not seem to be an opportunity, setting, forum, or mechanism for discussing these successes, but also a clear lack of encouragement or recognition for achievements. Practitioners enjoyed, they valued, the positive recognition the AI-based interviews gave to their work – recognition which was often lacking in supervision. In that setting, the emphasis tended to be on negatives around tasks which were done less well. Generally, monitoring and surveillance matters seemed to dominate good practice and individual case discussion in supervision.

Participants did also value the "dreaming" phase of AI. It was seen to enable frustrations and complaints to be reframed as aspirations. Overall, the experience of concentrating on achievements, strengths, positives and "being heard" was seen as empowering. In general, in diverting away from negativity, in

focusing on positives, probation staff were able to explore, discuss, and concentrate on their views about what constituted best practice, on what they enjoyed and on what they – or their colleagues – had done well.

Hence AI offered a lot of valuable and positive opportunities to these workers to reinforce their professional self-esteem and confidence. Nevertheless, despite AI's clear emphasis on positives, with its approach having been described as "relentlessly positive", Grant and Humphries (2006), Bellinger and Elliott (2011), and Robinson et al. (2012) all reinforce the need to recognise and to acknowledge, the impact of negative experiences. The focus on positives does not mean avoiding difficult, negative experiences of what went badly wrong, but rather that creative and innovative alternatives can also be explored. Indeed, Carter (2006) suggests "stories of the worst" are told alongside "stories of the best", as people need to have "bad stories" heard and understood. Hence, clearly there will be dissatisfaction about some aspects of an organisation's policies, procedures, and practices, but there is still the opportunity to identify good, positive elements and strengths that might be developed.

We should be wary of over-emphasising positives at the expense of negatives. We should seek to integrate, to synthesise, *both* negatives and positives as interacting, interdependent aspects of human experience functioning in a dialectical relationship (Fineman, 2006; Joseph, 2015). Ivtzan et al., (2016, p. 21) have pointed out that Taoism "provides the ultimate dialectical symbol" of ying (negative and passive) and yang (positive and active) linked together in a dynamic, fluid, mutually dependent relationship. Seemingly negative experiences and emotions can be bound, can be linked in complex ways to positive experiences and vice versa (Ivtzan et al., 2016). Indeed engaging with negative experiences can bring the potential for growth, for possible transformation for some people, as seen in positive reactions to stressful and traumatic events (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004). Furthermore, so-called negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, fear, guilt, shame, and sadness, are inherently part of human experiences and the human condition. They can be very far from being pathological; they can actually drive organisational and social change, for example, fuelling struggles against structural oppression and the domination of existing power elites (Fineman, 2006).

When moving on to consider the wider field of social work literature beyond that linked to appreciative inquiry, it is not clear what proportion of research studies in social work focus on negative aspects. But relatively few articles seem to consider positive aspects such as the rewards of, and job satisfaction in, social work. (Collins, 2008).What is clear is that a great deal of research and writing has been produced about various aspects of pressure, stress, and burnout both generally and in social work.

Pressure

Robertson and Cooper (2011) suggest a constructive way of looking at pressure is to consider two categories – challenge pressures and hindrance pressures. Challenge pressures are generally seen as positive. Although they may

create some strain, they are seen as psychologically healthy, promoting growth, development, and achievement. In contrast, hindrance pressures involve barriers to growth and accomplishment. Hindrance pressures are likely to damage performance and to erode well-being. Hindrance pressures include, for instance, role conflict, role ambiguity, poor work relationships, job insecurity, lack of control, unclear goals, and unrealistic deadlines. Challenge pressures include, for example, manageable workload, taking responsibility, realistic time deadlines, job flexibility, and worthwhile goals. Podsakoff, LePine, and LePine, (2007) undertook a meta-analysis of challenge and hindrance pressures. They found hindrance pressures were linked negatively to satisfaction but positively to turnover and intention to leave, while challenge pressures were linked positively to satisfaction and commitment. Hence, challenge is an important ingredient in a job, although challenge inevitably brings with it a degree of pressure and stress (Robertson and Cooper, 2011). As van Heugten (2011) noted in her research about pressure and social workers, pressure can be a motivator; even relatively high pressure may be felt to be appropriately challenging by some social workers. We will explore the role of challenge in more depth in Chapter 7.

Stress and burnout

Stress involves complex, transactional interactions between environmental and organisational supports and constraints, individual perceptions and appraisals of perceived demands, the individual's ability to control and cope with them, accompanied by the physical and emotional outcomes of the demands (Lazarus, 1998; Dewe, O'Driscoll, and Cooper, 2010).

Stress has been defined as the "harmful reaction people have to undue pressure and demands…placed on them at work" (Health and Safety Executive, 2017, p. 3). Stress can increase job dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depression. Relationships at work, with family and with friends can be effected. Physical difficulties such as heart disease, stomach problems, headaches, allergies, skin complaints, and disturbed sleep patterns are associated with stress. There can be attendance difficulties at work (Shaufeli and Peeters, 2000). Furthermore, prolonged, chronic stress can lead to burnout, which has been found to be particularly evident amongst professionals such as social workers (Brown, 2004). Burnout has been described as leading to feelings of depersonalisation, a lack of empathy, a lack of a sense of accomplishment, and a symptom of emotional exhaustion (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). However, our focus is on alternatives to stress and prevention of stress before burnout is reached.

Eustress

Over many years several authors have been critical of the emphasis on stress, along with its associated discourses (for instance, Jones and Bright, 2001; Wainwright and Calnan, 2002). By the very nature of stress, the emphasis

becomes pessimistic, with associated research focusing on negatives rather than positives (Collins, 2008). Thus the stress" industry" can become embroiled with research which gives insufficient attention to positives in the workplace, along with actions that might be taken to alleviate stress (Moriarty, Baginsky, and Manthorpe, 2015).

Indeed, many authors have observed that stress is an inevitable part of life, while the idea of considering the positives of stress has a long history. For instance, Selye (1984) differentiated between distress – the harmful, unpleasant aspects of stress and eustress – the positive, energising, curative variety. This approach has been criticised but nevertheless poses questions about what distinguishes distress from eustress (Dewe and Cooper, 2012). Beehr and Grabner (2009) point out the role of eustress in indirectly and directly improving health. Simmons and Nelson (2007) and Dewe and Cooper (2012) argue that the concept of eustress has much to offer, linking it to cognitive appraisals that involve an emphasis on challenge, which might benefit or enhance well-being. Dewe and Cooper (2012) suggest that even if the term eustress is not used, the idea of a multi-faceted notion of stress with both healthy, positive and unhealthy, negative features is both valuable and helpful, while Lefevre, Matheny and Kolt (2003) suggest maintaining hopefulness and meaning are associated with eustress. Also, moderators of stress include a range of protective factors which can help reduce stress and enhance well-being (Rothmann and Cooper, 2008). These moderators and protective factors will be considered later in this chapter and, in particular, in the chapters that follow. But first we will examine stress and job satisfaction in social work.

Stress and social workers

Professionals working in health and social care in the UK have revealed higher levels of work-related stress than other paid workers (Health and Safety Executive, 2017). Studies of social workers using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) (Goldberg and Wiliams, 1988) suggest the incidence of psychological distress among social workers, such as anxiety and depression, is between one third to one half of the profession (Moriarty et al., 2015).

In addition, many pieces of research have been carried out over several years examining stress in social work (summarised by Lloyd, King, and Chenoweth, 2002; Ting, Jacobson, and Sanders, 2011). Inevitably such research has focused on the difficulties in social workers' lives both internationally and in the UK. Yet studies of job satisfaction, the rewards of working with service users, and "making a difference" in their lives have received comparatively little attention. For example, Chris Jones's (2001) often cited qualitative research presented a particularly startling and striking account of the disheartening experiences of statutory social workers in England. Their perceptions of social work were of a

> traumatised, even defeated occupation...the manifestations of stress and unhappiness in…social service departments were various, serious

> and pervasive. Social workers talked about how commonplace it was to see colleagues in tears…[with] social workers…walking out…people locking themselves into rooms or just disappearing from the office for hours on end. Going sick for some time each week or month seemed routinised in many agencies. A large number of the long serving fieldworkers had recurring…serious health problems [resulting in] extended periods of absence. Many spoke of being emotionally and physically exhausted by the demands of work.
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> (Jones, 2001, pp. 550–551)

A study by Coffey, Dudgill, and Tattersall (2004) surveyed social workers in two local authorities in England revealing job dissatisfaction, especially with the management of the organisation, little recognition for good work, limited promotion opportunities, and poor pay. They concluded, pessimistically, that "mental well-being is poorer than previous studies have intimated, job satisfaction is considerably lower.…organisational constraints are higher…suggesting the situation in social work was worse than previously thought" (Coffey et al., 2004, p. 744).

Causes of stress for social workers are seen as many and varied. They have been well documented in various large scale surveys. For instance, in the UK a Community Care study indicated concerns about work conditions, the quality of supervision, lack of support for decisions made, size of caseloads, and lack of promotion prospects (Mickel, 2009). In 2015 another survey revealed very high levels of stress with very high percentages of workers thinking of leaving their jobs and leaving social work (Schraer, 2015). An extensive study by McFadden (2016) found high levels of emotional exhaustion amongst almost all social work practitioners, while two thirds experienced depersonalisation – a lack of feeling, lack of empathy, and uncaring responses. High levels of exhaustion were reported for all levels of caseload, even for those with smaller caseloads and for those who received supportive supervision. A Guardian (2017) survey showed that one third of respondents thought their workloads were unmanageable; one half were dissatisfied with work/life balance; and one quarter wanted to move away from a long hours culture. Ravalier (2017) discovered practitioners found working conditions to be unacceptable. High percentages of professionals were working longer hours than expected, experiencing high expectations and demands, low control, strained relationships, and a lack of support and reflective supervision from management. Almost one half were looking to leave. The length of time respondents wanted to stay in the profession was 18 months! Particularly prominent concerns were excessive, complex workloads, demands from extensive administrative work, and issues around physical conditions such as hot desking and lack of computers. Interestingly, pay was of less concern, with several respondents seeking only modest increases. This latter point was also echoed in Donovan's (2017) survey in the UK indicating social workers valued a reduction in stress more than pay rises.

There is also evidence from research in Nordic countries that social workers' working conditions are deteriorating. Tham (2017) undertook a follow-up study to her earlier work from 11 years previously. Two general patterns emerged. First, there was a perception of higher work demands, increased role conflict, and less opportunity to influence decision making. Intentions to leave either the job or the profession had also increased. Second, changes in job context – the work had become more focused on conducting investigations, whereas in the earlier study the vast majority of social workers had mentioned other tasks, such as advice giving and support. Tham (2018) also highlighted how the situations described above had deteriorated more for social workers based in low-income districts. While the practitioners based in middle-income districts seemed to be more satisfied with support and with the organisational climate, those in lower income districts were significantly less satisfied. The findings of Tham's studies reinforce the arguments about the importance of the environmental, as well as the organisational and individual aspects of stress and satisfaction in social work.

Most research on stress and social work in the UK has taken place within statutory contexts in a wide range of organisational settings with a variety of service user groups. Some studies suggest child care social workers experience specific demands which may lead to more stress, less job satisfaction, support and difficulties in coping (e.g. Bennett, Evans, and Tattersall, 1993; Coffey et al., 2004). Bennett et al. (1993) noted that while social workers in their study all shared the same organisational structure, significant differences were evident for child care workers, who were dealing with particularly delicate, ambiguous situations, which were emotionally demanding and important sources of stress. Coffey et al. (2004) also found high levels of organisational constraints, sickness levels and distress amongst child care workers, compared to those working with other service user groups.

Other UK studies contradict these findings. For instance, Balloch, Pahl, and McLean's (1998) research revealed social workers working with older people experienced higher levels of stress. More recent studies using the GHQ appear to be inconclusive. The proportion of mental health social workers and approved mental health professionals said to be experiencing potential psychological distress ranged from 43 to 47 per cent (Evans et al., 2005; Hudson and Webber, 2012), while amongst newly qualified children and family workers the figure was 31 to 41 per cent (Carpenter et al., 2015). McFadden's (2016) work discovered social workers working with adults experiencing physical disabilities had the highest levels of emotional exhaustion, while those working in mental health experienced the second highest level. Childcare, often considered the most stressful and demanding work, scored much lower. Other studies (for instance, Thompson et al., 1996; Ramon and Morris, 2015) found working in childcare or working with particular service user groups was *not* the most significant variable in perceptions of stress, The organisational context, its policies, procedures, and culture was perceived to be more significant. Storey and Billingham (2001); Lloyd et al. (2002); Morris (2015), and Ravalier (2017) also

emphasised the importance of the organisational context in determining both job stress and job satisfaction in social work, along with individual differences. A recent, important UK study by Antonopoulou, Killian, and Forrester (2017) of five local authority childcare teams revealed very different, significant patterns of stress levels in the five authorities. These ranged from very low stress levels (around one in ten workers) to high levels (over one third of workers). These findings again highlighted the importance and the impact of the organisational context on social work practitioners' stress and job satisfaction levels.

Collins (2008, p. 1176) suggested work stress was the result of "complex interactions between environmental and organisational demands and the ability of the individual to cope with these demands". Wilberforce et al. (2014, p. 13) argued that many stressors impinging on social workers connect "to the organisational factors of the working environment and their interaction with the wider societal, political and legislative contexts".

However, limited attention has been given to the impact of social divisions such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and age upon stress amongst social workers in the UK. In one of the few studies to consider the impact of race and disability on stress, Ravalier (2017) found the most commonly mentioned theme, in response to a question about the influence of ethnicity on how social workers carried out their work, was institutional racism. Respondents described being either the victim, or witness, of institutional racism from management and their local authority. Respondents commented about prejudice in social work organisations. They noted individuals were "undermined and overlooked due to their race".

From a question about disability in the same study, two distinct themes emerged. One theme concerned the lack of understanding about disability by some peers and managers. The other theme was that it was difficult for practitioners to obtain the reasonable adjustments they needed in the workplace, which made the job more difficult.

Kagan and Itzick (2017), amongst others, suggested that older, more experienced social workers experience less stress and burnout. Some research studies conclude younger, single, inexperienced, female social work students and social workers are more prone to stress and burnout, linked to idealistic job expectations, preoccupation with, and excessive emotional involvement in, the roles and tasks of social work (Collins, 2008). Women who experience demands from full-time social work responsibilities and the multiple roles in either caring for dependent relatives and/or young children also experience higher levels of stress and burnout (Collins, 2008.

Job satisfaction and social workers

We have seen that there is obviously considerable, clear evidence of stress in social work. Nevertheless, it is important also to re-emphasise that while social work can be demanding and stressful, at the same time it also has

considerable rewards and job satisfaction. Job satisfaction has been defined as "overall satisfaction with one's job and multiple facets of the job" (Strand, Spath, and Bosca-Ruggiero, 2010, p. 339). Rose (2003) undertook a wide-ranging survey of a very large number of occupational groups in the UK. This survey found social work to be located just within the top 20 groups that experience high job satisfaction – a very positive but under publicised achievement, rarely quoted in social work literature (Collins, 2008). The emphasis on the negative aspects of social work tends to overwhelm or undervalue the positives. For instance, in Coffey et al.'s (2004) study 4.1 per cent of social work staff were absent due to illness. This is a sad, unfortunate figure – a real cause for concern. But, at the same time, what about the 95.9 per cent who were not off work (Collins, 2008)? In fact, many of the studies of social workers and stress also mention, for example, job satisfaction, coping, resilience, and support – all of which help to deal with stress. Hence there are factors which reduce stress – some of which may have received limited consideration in the social work literature. Furthermore, even research which has reached generally negative conclusions does acknowledge social workers get much satisfaction from their interactions with service users – in contrast to the stress generated by government and agency policies and procedures (for example, Jones, 2001; Stalker et al., 2007).

Over the past 25 to 30 years, studies consistently reveal social workers enjoy high levels of job satisfaction. For instance, in Gibson, McGrath, and Reid's (1989) study of stress in Northern Ireland only one in ten respondents found social work to be dissatisfying or very dissatisfying. Other research revealed social workers to have a high commitment to their work; they were well motivated by their contact with service users, they believed they could make a real difference to people's lives (McLean and Andrew, 2000; Eborall and Garmeson, 2001). Surveys conducted for Community Care also indicate continuing job satisfaction. Leason (2002) found 80 per cent of London social workers particularly enjoyed relationships with service users, challenging aspects of their work, and task variety. Winchester (2003) found job satisfaction was related to being valued for work in the community and practitioners' relationships with colleagues. Huxley et al. (2005) pointed out how cross-national studies of social workers reveal the repeated theme of enjoyment of relationships with service users, along with feelings of high intrinsic job satisfaction.

A further survey noted that three quarters of social workers were very or fairly satisfied with their jobs, despite poor conditions at work, the poor quality of supervision, lack of support for decisions, large caseloads, and concern about promotion prospects (Mickel, 2009). Research undertaken on behalf of the Social Work Task Force (Baginsky et al., 2009) revealed nearly three-quarters of over 1,000 respondents were satisfied with their work. Evans and Huxley (2009) discovered two thirds of social workers in a study in Wales were at least satisfied with their work. A Community Care

survey (Cooper, 2015) and McFadden's (2016) study of burn out and social workers highlighted that, despite high levels of emotional exhaustion and some feelings of depersonalisation, almost all respondents experienced a high sense of personal accomplishment i.e. feelings of competence and successful achievement.

Antonopoulou et al. (2017) also found that even in local authorities where working conditions were poor, social workers reported high levels of satisfaction about interactions with service users. Workers in local authorities with the least stressed employees reported good overall levels of job satisfaction. Those local authorities were well resourced with good administrative support, supportive teams, many reflective group supervision meetings, frequent, extensive amounts of individual supervision, job clarity and a sense of control for the workers. A large scale Guardian survey (2017) also revealed 84 per cent of practitioners were proud of what they did. Three quarters enjoyed their jobs, got real satisfaction from their work, feeling they were "making a difference"; 17 per cent wanted to leave social work, but reducing workload and better support opportunities would have changed their minds. Ravalier (2017, p. 14) found social workers to be "relatively to highly positive and fulfilled" by their work, despite the working conditions. These professionals enjoyed their jobs across a range of service user groups, particularly valuing peer support. Finally, a recent survey in Wales by Pithouse, Brookfield, and Rees (2018) discovered most practitioners looked forward to going to their work and felt satisfied with its quality.

A key, central point to emerge from all these research studies is exhaustive, extensive evidence that, although social work is demanding and stressful, it is also rewarding. Practitioners enjoy a high degree of job satisfaction, work commitment, and a sense of accomplishment. Many international studies starting 25 years ago and up to the present also indicate high levels of satisfaction for practitioners in countries such as Canada, the US, and Greece, a country which experienced massive economic upheavals in recent years (Stalker et al., 2007; Karpetis, 2015; Hermon and Chahla, 2019).

Little research seems to have been conducted directly focusing on the pleasures and enjoyment of social work. Pooler, Wolfer, and Freeman's (2014a and 2014b) work is an exception. They specifically asked practitioners about the joys of social work. The findings reinforced points made in earlier studies. Workers particularly enjoyed "making connections" and making relationships with service users and colleagues. They believed they "made a difference" in promoting active change for service users, in organisations and in communities. Social work provided a sense of "meaning" in serving and helping others, a sense of "fit" with workers' ideals, with their beliefs, and in providing them with a sense of professional identity and purpose. Finally, social work was seen as part of a "life" involving both personal and professional learning and growth, with satisfaction obtained from seeing small changes.