

# SOCIAL WORK and SOCIAL CARE PRACTICE

Ian O'Connor, Mark Hughes, Danielle Turney,  
Jill Wilson and Deborah Setterlund



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# PREFACE

Social work practice and education have undergone considerable change in recent years. The Care Councils, the Social Care Institute for Excellence, and the new framework for social work education and training are important developments that are still in their early stages of operation. While social work has long demonstrated a commitment to working alongside service users, a renewed emphasis on service user involvement in recent years offers possibilities as well as challenges. In these developments there is hope of a reinvigorated social work that strives for both professionalism and social justice.

However, difficulties remain. The challenge of social work practice lies in its complexity and diversity. On a daily basis social workers engage with people, groups and communities who are most damaged by social and economic structures and by the consequent ways of living and coping. Social workers often feel limited in their roles because of the particular policies of government or the organizations that employ them and many are overworked because of staff shortages or lack of funding. Some may feel let down by their professional education, which they believe has not equipped them to handle confidently the real day-to-day tasks of social work practice.

In this book we encourage social work students and practitioners to determine and control their own practice, rather than experience practice as being totally reactive to immediate demands or as being exclusively determined by external forces. We hope that through contextualizing social work and social care, by articulating the purpose of practice, by raising issues and by advocating a disciplined approach to practice, students and beginning practitioners will be able to locate themselves in practice, whatever the country, agency or field of practice may be. While we acknowledge that social work is influenced by its location within organizations and the wider legal, social welfare and social care systems, individual workers can put into practice their own social work purpose. We aim to encourage an active approach so that you are empowered to deal with, and enjoy, the challenges, diversities and complexities of practice.

In the book we introduce to Britain a practice framework that was originally developed in Australia. We provide a way of understanding human behaviour in interaction with social structures, in order to select interventions that produce improved social outcomes for the individuals, groups and communities with whom

we work. Our practice framework encompasses a particular view of the world, a definition of purpose derived from that view, and a particular approach to assessment which guides the choice of interventions. While the framework draws broadly on critical, feminist and postmodern theories, we argue that different fields of practice require the application of a range of theories and knowledge and that the application of theory and knowledge needs to be guided by an explicit understanding of the purpose of social work. We have not written an encyclopaedia of practice, nor produced a series of recipes for practice. It is not our intention to provide the intricate details of specific forms of practice. You will need to go beyond this text for such an understanding and we suggest readings that are useful in this regard.

Throughout the book we acknowledge and respond to current issues in social work practice and education in Britain. In particular, each chapter of the book covers material that can assist in developing and ultimately demonstrating competence in relation to the Code of Practice for Social Care Workers, the National Occupational Standards (NOS), and the knowledge and skill requirements outlined in the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's Benchmark Statement for Social Work (QAA, 2000). These documents outline the expectations of qualified workers as held by governments, regulatory bodies and employers (particularly social services departments). We will be returning to the National Occupational Standards (NOS) at various points in the text and will also be referring to the Scottish Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE). The Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE) draw on the NOS and key elements of the Quality Assurance Agency's Benchmark Statement and will be a key source of reference for students in Scotland. Throughout the book we also acknowledge the ongoing devolution of constitutional powers to each of the countries of the United Kingdom. While some of the implications of devolution are only just becoming apparent, we note where some differences lie, particularly in relation to social policy.

The changing nature of social work in Britain is apparent also in shifts in terminology. The language we adopt in this book reflects current terminology in social work practice. In general we speak of service users rather than clients, except where people are involuntary clients. However, in using the term 'service user' we are careful not to obscure the wide range of differences between different service user groups (Beresford, 2001). Students' practice placements are also referred to as 'practice learning opportunities', although we recognize that there are other forms of practice learning which may not take the form of a placement, such as skills labs and one-off observations of service users or workers. In this book we employ the current term 'practice assessor' to refer to the assessor of a student's work while on placement. The term 'practice teacher' is reserved for those who hold the Practice Teaching Award. Nevertheless we are mindful that practice teacher and supervisor continue to be used in a more general sense in line with past practice. In the book we use the term 'social welfare' to refer to the organized delivery of services by society to meet people's needs, including their health, social care and education needs. This term is similar to the concept 'the welfare state' and is much broader than 'individual welfare' or the provision of social security benefits.

While mainly concerned with the activities of social work practitioners and students, we also hope that the book will speak to those in social work-related occupations, such as community workers, youth workers, care managers, support workers, project workers, and Connexions Personal Advisors, among others. Some of these people may be qualified social workers, but some may not. Much is to be gained from an ongoing dialogue between social workers and their social care colleagues. We believe that these practitioners can make good use of social work knowledge and, in turn, social workers can benefit from learning more about these related fields of practice. Our conceptualization of social work in Britain is not limited to the, albeit important, role of the statutory local authority-based social worker. Nor is it limited to those who may become registered as social workers by the Care Councils. We see social work as a broad discipline, informing directly the work of those who can be officially called social workers but also informing the work of others. It is for this reason that we see our book as an introduction to social work *and social care* practice.

Many people have assisted us in this collaboration. Staff and students from the University of Queensland and Goldsmiths College, University of London, provided support and advice over the development of the book and the application of the practice framework to the UK context. We also acknowledge the ongoing support of colleagues from Griffith University (Ian O'Connor), the University of New South Wales (Mark Hughes), the Open University (Danielle Turney) and the University of Queensland (Jill Wilson and Deborah Setterlund). We are particularly indebted to Suzanne Mullally, Diane Aldridge, Michelle Rusterholz, Geoff Fitzgerald, Morrie O'Connor and Christine Kerneke for permission to use examples from their practice and we are confident that these illustrations of good practice speak to both students and practitioners. We would also like to acknowledge the support and encouragement provided by editorial staff at SAGE Publications, particularly Zoë Elliott and Anna Luker, as well the invaluable role of Pearson Education Australia in developing the Australian editions of the book.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

BASW	British Association of Social Workers
CCETSW	Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (now defunct)
CCW	Care Council for Wales/Cyngor Gofal Cymru
CMHT	Community Mental Health Team
CPN	Community Psychiatric Nurse
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DoH	Department of Health
EU	European Union
GSCC	General Social Care Council (England)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NHS	National Health Service
NHSCCA	National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990
NISCC	Northern Ireland Social Care Council
NOS	National Occupational Standards
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PCTs	Primary Care Trusts
PSSRU	Personal Social Services Research Unit
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
SCIE	Social Care Institute for Excellence
SiSWE	Standards in Social Work Education (Scotland)
SSI	Social Services Inspectorate (now incorporated within the Commission for Social Care Inspection)
SSSC	Scottish Social Services Council



# INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

In this chapter we examine:

- The practice framework developed in this book;
- The contexts of social work, including social welfare policies and politics, and the social work organization;
- The importance of understanding people's social arrangements;
- The focus and purpose of social work practice;
- Our assumptions underpinning the practice framework;
- The book's structure and chapter contents.

## WHAT IS SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE?

### THE ACTIVITIES OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONERS

Social work practice seeks to promote human well-being and to redress human suffering and injustice. Practitioners aim to mobilize the forces of the individual, community and state to address the processes by which individuals and groups are marginalized or diminished in their capacity to participate as citizens. Such practice maintains a particular concern for those who are most excluded from social, economic or cultural processes or structures. Consequently social work practice is a political activity and tensions between rights to care, control and self-determination are very much a professional concern. This agenda is expressed in a wide variety of practice contexts involving many different service user groups. It is practised in government settings, voluntary organizations, religious organizations, and the profit-making sector. In any one of these settings, social work practice embraces a huge variety of activities.

The authors asked a group of social work students from Goldsmiths College, London, about their first few days of placement. Their activities included:



- typing letters to service users about assessment interviews;
- arranging visits to outside agencies;
- checking resources in the borough;
- attending an information seminar on benefit entitlements;
- talking through an induction programme with a practice teacher;
- attending a large team meeting;
- reading through case notes;
- attending a ward round;
- visiting an older service user at home;
- participating in a case allocation meeting;
- having a supervision meeting.

Practitioners engage in all of these activities and more. Yet many find it hard to reconcile the image of the highly skilled professional with the apparently mundane activities undertaken in their day-to-day work. The mundane activities, such as filing or attending staff meetings, are often discounted as not being real professional practice. It is only when involved in a needs assessment interview or when facilitating a community meeting that they feel they are actually engaged in professional practice. Such a perspective reflects the divorce between the actuality of day-to-day social work practice and the way in which it is conceptualized and written about. In contrast, our text encompasses and embraces the diversity of practice and the myriad activities that social workers perform during the course of their work.

To understand social work practice one must take as a starting point the fact that social work exists only in contexts: personal, social, historical, organizational, economic and ideological, among others. It is socially constructed, not an ahistorical technological entity. By this we mean that social work and other forms of social care did not always exist and that they take different forms in different types of societies. The form that social work has taken in western societies reflects the particular issues associated with the later stages of capitalism. However, even within the western economies the characteristics and forms of social work vary between countries.

These variations in social work reflect aspects of the culture and the role of the state and social welfare in each country. The increasingly regulated form of social work that is developing in Britain is different from the social work practised in government agencies in Sweden, and different again from the social work of the voluntary sector in the United States. In New Zealand there are significant differences in how social work is conceptualized and practised because the profession has sought to respond to the bicultural nature of New Zealand society (Nash, 2001). For example, *Kaupapa* Maori research (where Maori self-determination and constructions of knowledge mark the starting point of the research) has the potential to inform western research and facilitate the development of Indigenous theories of social work and Indigenous interventions (Gibbs, 2001: 36). In the Asia-Pacific region the form that social work practice takes reflects the socio-economic reality that many Asian countries cannot afford extensive public welfare systems. In this context, Mehta and Vasoo (2001: 4) suggest that social work needs to focus more on family support and other development activities such as parenting, family lifestyle education, community care, and economic cooperatives to improve individual skills and capabilities.

In China, where cultural traditions are likely to inhibit some aspects of social work such as open sharing of problems, other traditions such as community rituals, and the value placed on individual qualities such as perseverance, may be utilized to develop innovative interventions that strengthen relationships within communities (Chan, 2000).

In this book, we are engaged in an exercise of transferring learning from the Australian context, itself based largely on British conceptualizations of social welfare, to the UK context. However, we are careful not to import without question the approaches and methodologies developed in different contexts to respond to the issues of our own context (Payne, 1997: 7–13). These historical and contextual issues are also important for the individual workers. We each bring to our practice our personal biographies, capabilities and desires as a product of and a participant in society.

## THE PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

In the book we develop a practice framework to assist students and practitioners in understanding the purpose of social work and in considering how they may express this purpose through their own professional practice. While recognizing factors that constrain social work activities, we see individual social workers as active agents, capable of making decisions about how they use themselves and their power in their practice. The practice framework is presented as a concept map in Figure 1.1. This concept map is reintroduced at the beginning of each chapter with those dimensions of the practice framework covered in the chapter highlighted. Each chapter builds on the previous one so that by the end of the book the practice framework is fully explicated.

## THE SOCIAL WELFARE CONTEXT

Social work developed as part of society's institutional responses to tensions of production and reproduction in the current social and economic arrangements (Berreen and Browne, 1986). These institutional responses are referred to as social welfare or the welfare state. Jordan argues that social work emerges where communities start breaking up under pressure from market forces:

It arises where systems of reciprocity, sharing and redistribution (either informal, as in communities and networks, or formal, as in public welfare schemes) begin to break down and are replaced by contractual exchanges, leaving some individuals without protection. It substitutes 'professional friendship' (or 'targeted intervention' in present-day business-speak) for the inclusive membership rights provided by those disintegrating systems, thus seeking to shore up the social relations of disrupted communities, and shield the vulnerable and excluded. There is a contradiction at the heart of social work, because it is spawned by market-orientated economic individualism, yet its values are those of a caring, inclusive, reciprocal community that takes collective responsibility for its members. (1997: 9–10)

It follows therefore that social work practice is bound to, but not determined by, the domain of social welfare and the social, economic and culture structures in which it is embedded. This domain encompasses not just a wide range of formal and informal institutional

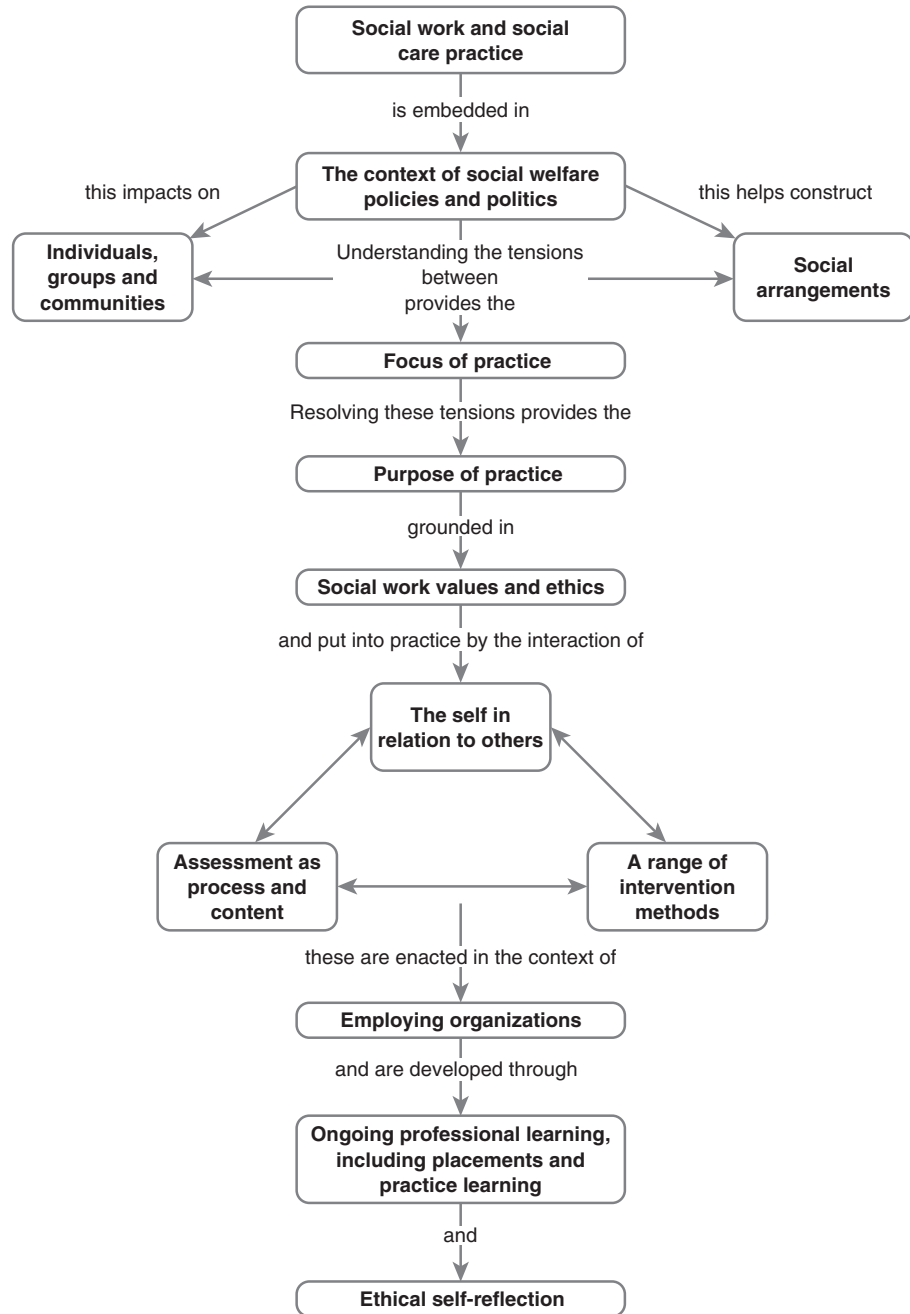


Figure 1.1 The practice framework

arrangements related to the distribution and redistribution of resources (e.g. the market, informal care, social security benefits, personal social services and so on), but also knowledge and ideology about social welfare and social processes. By this we mean that neither knowledge nor practice exists independently of its context. Social work practice is part of these welfare-related processes and social workers' understanding of and interventions in the world draw upon their arrangements, knowledge and ideology. This knowledge, technology and ideology do not exist independently of specific social processes or broader social conditions. See Payne (1991, 1997) for a discussion of the impact of the changes in social and economic circumstances and their corresponding impact on social work theory.

## THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Most social work practice is carried out in organizations. These organizations are similarly influenced by the social, economic and political structures in which they exist and by prevailing knowledge and ideology. Organizations also develop their own culture, interpreting and reinterpreting external influences in a variety of ways. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s social work organizations were significantly influenced by New Right and managerialist ideas and practices largely instigated by the legislation, policies and funding measures of central government. And now, managerial language and frameworks of thinking have become so pervasive that it is hard to know how we talked about things before we had the words: cost-effectiveness, quality assurance, performance indicators and outcome measurement.

A concern for many social workers in the UK is the extent to which organizational and managerial issues impact on a sense of professional autonomy and an ability to respond to the complexity and ambiguity of the work. Sheppard (1995), drawing on Jamous and Peloile (1970), summarizes part of this tension as indetermination versus technicality. In responding to the complexities of practice, organizations tend to encourage workers to follow clearly articulated procedures and to stay focused on and improve their technical skill. Professional agendas, however, tend to highlight the need for workers to be more flexible, creative and independent so that they can engage with the indeterminacy and ambiguities of practice. In order to be effective, social work (as a profession) and individual social workers (in their organizations) need to find a balance between exercising technical skill within procedural frameworks and exercising a degree of autonomy which may at times be used to challenge the organization. However, as we examine in Chapter 6, it is important for social workers not to become trapped in a critique which simply pits social work (as a caring, value-based profession) against organizations and bureaucracies (as uncaring, monolithic structures). Professional and organizational agendas often coalesce and the authority and usefulness of social workers commonly arise from the role they play within organizational systems.

## SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS

The domain of social work practice consists of the interaction between people and social arrangements. We have chosen the term 'social arrangements' to emphasize that the

world with which the individual interacts is socially constructed. So in this book the term ‘social arrangements’ refers to the many processes and relationships by which people and the social structure are produced and reproduced. Thus it encompasses the relationships between individuals and others, such as their friends, families, employers, community and so on. Similarly, social arrangements also include those formal and informal institutions of the state: the judicial, health, economic, social care and education systems, the labour market and so on. Social arrangements express and reflect the distribution of power and the processes of domination and subordination in society, including those related to gender, disability, class, ethnicity, sexual identity, age and so on.

People’s lives are not only affected by the apparently objective components of these factors, but also by the way we theorize about them. Thus it may seem a fact that a particular individual is a 10-year-old girl, but our understanding of what it means to be a 10-year-old girl and what capacities a 10-year-old girl has are heavily influenced by a whole range of theoretical formulations which are culturally, occupationally and historically specific. Thus the understanding that a teacher or social worker in a local authority in Wales has of the needs, wants, desires and rights of a 10-year-old girl may differ from the understanding of the child’s parents, or from the parents and teachers of a similarly aged child living in a village in Bangladesh. Similarly for example, it is only in the recent past that we saw people with Down’s Syndrome or other learning disabilities as lacking any capacity to live an independent life and assumed that they were most appropriately cared for in institutions. Now we are guided by an approach which seeks to maximize human potential, social inclusion and human rights, and to respond to service users’ own definitions of their needs.

Factors such as class, ‘race’, gender and so on affect the nature and quality of people’s interactions with their social arrangements. For individuals and groups these factors may be experienced singly or in combination. However, according to Vernon (1999) the way various factors intersect can multiply the effects on the individual and the oppression they experience. For example, where social constructions of age, gender and sexual identity intersect, it is possible to identify the combined impact that ageism, sexism and homophobia has on the invisibility of and discrimination against older lesbians (Fullmer et al., 1999). While such factors do not solely determine an individual’s experience, when they are examined we can often gain a better understanding of why people are experiencing difficulties or tensions in their interactions with social arrangements.

## **ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING THE PRACTICE FRAMEWORK**

Our practice framework makes certain assumptions about the interactions between people and social arrangements and about the nature of social arrangements. We argue that people do not exist outside of social arrangements; they form social arrangements and are formed by them. These assumptions are important because they are central to our analysis of the purpose, roles and tasks of social work practice. They provide the lenses through which we understand and hence engage with social situations and engage with theory and knowledge. Practice involves choices – choices of how to understand and how to act, as well

as value choices – choices of preferred ends and ways of being in the world. The assumptions underlying our approach to social work inform our choices and understanding.

Our first assumption is that there is no fixed and unchanging reality and that people are active participants in the construction of their world. People constantly engage in a process of making sense of (i.e. imposing some order on) their world as they interact with it and act in terms of the sense they make of particular aspects of the world. One implication of this assumption is that we cannot assume that our understanding of a particular aspect of the world is the same as another person's. In consequence, a basic task and process for social workers is endeavouring to understand the sense the other makes of the world. This position contrasts with the perspective that individuals are passive and are formed or 'determined' by a given objective external reality.

Our second assumption is that while people are active agents, they do not individually control the social, economic or personal circumstances in which they find themselves and make choices. So social arrangements and social structures are real constraining forces in people's lives. Thus, while an individual may express a problem as being solely located within themselves, that problem may have a social counterpart. For example, a young unemployed man living in a rural area who feels depressed and perhaps suicidal, is likely to experience his emotional pain and physical symptoms as a personal problem. He may not be aware of the range of socio-economic and cultural factors that are often associated with male suicide, such as lack of employment opportunities in economically depressed rural economies, male cultural norms that can constrain emotional development, and difficulties within family relationships. Such a perspective assumes that there is a dynamic relationship between people and social arrangements. This may be contrasted with the view that the relationship between people and the environment is a deterministic, linear one in which the individual is totally determined by external environmental forces or alternatively by internal psychic forces.

The third assumption of our practice framework is that social arrangements are the result of the actions of people, individually and collectively, and are reproduced and changed by such actions (Mullaly, 1997: 84). For example, people do not necessarily consciously intend to reproduce the existing economic system through engaging in paid labour, or the existing system of family relations through marrying, but it is nonetheless the unintended consequence of their activity and a prerequisite for it.

Our final assumption is that power is always present in human relationships. There are many sources and mechanisms of power: economic, sexual, ideological, professional, age, 'race' and so on. People may simultaneously exercise power and be governed by it. Power and the exercise of power are central to the dynamic interplay between people and social arrangements. Social workers should be concerned with how power is experienced by individuals, groups and communities, and the difficulties it causes for them and the potential it offers. Power is not simply an oppressive force, it also produces relationships, structures and knowledge that can be enriching and liberating (Cohen, 1985). Social work and social sciences discourses function as sources of power. So too do other discourses that reflect ideological assumptions about gender, class, 'race' and age. Social work service users may find their capacity to attribute meaning to their own experiences are undermined by such

discourses. From our position, it is important that social workers understand their own power and the ways in which this can be used to advantage or disadvantage others.

## SOCIAL WORK PURPOSE

In day-to-day practice and in developing services, social workers are frequently involved in situations where there is tension in the interaction between people and social arrangements. We are not arguing here that the purpose of practice is to fit the individual into the current social arrangements. Who identifies this tension and how it is defined can vary. People may themselves experience the interactions as uncomfortable and therefore seek assistance. Examples might include:

- a man with depression seeking assistance from a community mental health team;
- a teenager seeking assistance from a community-based families agency because she is subject to assault at home;
- a son seeking help from social services with caring for his disabled father;
- a community group seeking assistance to remedy the lack of after-hours public transport in its suburb.

In each of these situations the tension in the interaction between the individual(s) and social arrangements is identified by the people concerned. Alternatively, the request or requirement for intervention may come from a concerned other or from the state, as in the following examples:

- a worker from a youth centre approaching a group of young people who have been reported for being disruptive in a shopping centre;
- a social worker contacting a family to investigate an anonymous allegation of child abuse;
- a care manager visiting an older person awaiting discharge from hospital;
- a youth worker inviting groups of young people to be involved in developing local resources.

The identification of tension between people and social arrangements as the focus of social work activity does not define a purpose or a direction for practice. It is simply a way of describing the situations with which social workers become involved. The direction of practice will come from how a worker understands their professional purpose and their related analysis of a situation. For example, in the situation involving the supposedly disruptive young people, a social worker who sees her or his purpose as assisting young people to function better in society may attempt to involve them in mentoring or social skills group work to encourage more acceptable behaviour. The source of the tension is located in the young people (individually and as a group) and it is the young people who are engaged in change, rather than the social arrangements. The worker's change efforts do not consider the possibility of a collaborative partnership between the shopping centre management and the young people to generate broader solutions such as developing more appropriate spaces for young people.

One of our central assumptions about the nature of the interaction between people and social arrangements is that people act *intentionally*: ‘They are agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experiences’ (Bandura, 2001: 4). This applies just as much to social workers as it does to service users. In our capacity to shape our own and others’ experiences, we need to be clear about the direction we want our practice to take. That is why a clear understanding of purpose is central to our practice framework.

We define the *focus and purpose of social work practice* as follows:

The *focus* of social work practice is the interaction between people and social arrangements. The *purpose* of practice is to promote the development of equitable relationships and the development of people’s power and control over their own lives, and hence to improve the interaction between people and social arrangements.

This definition identifies the focus for practice as: the interaction between people and social arrangements. It also provides a purpose and direction for practice: the development of equitable relationships and empowerment so as to enhance the interaction between people and social arrangements. By defining the focus and purpose in this manner we have provided:

1. a basis for assessment of practice situations;
2. a direction for any intervention; and
3. a benchmark for evaluating the outcomes of intervention. That is, the extent to which service user outcomes (e.g. increased information, enhanced social networks, receipt of community services) resulted in the development of equitable relationships and the service user’s development of power and control over their life.

This formulation of the purpose of practice expresses a clear view of the preferred end state: of equitable relationships and power and control over one’s life. The concern with equitable relationships reflects social work’s mandate to express what Jordan refers to as the common interest: ‘Social workers are not concerned exclusively with individual choices or social choices, they work on the borderlines between these, and are part of the process by which societies try to coordinate these two forms of decision making’ (1990: 28). As such our definition of purpose recognizes the limits of empowerment: that the empowerment of one individual should only occur in a way that promotes equitable relationships. It also accepts that the abuse of a child in a family is a matter of public as well as individual concern. So too the assault of women, discrimination against black people and so on. Each is legitimately a public matter and merits a publicly sanctioned response. Our purpose thus acknowledges and accommodates the fact that much social work practice in the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, is conducted within statutory or quasi-statutory organizations.



## SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE

The practice framework presented in this book draws broadly on ideas from critical, feminist and postmodern theories. Critical theories focus on the relationship between private troubles and public issues by providing an analysis of the ways in which societal structures and processes advantage some groups and marginalize and disadvantage others. Feminist theories have developed this analysis and show how different factors such as gender, socio-economic status, 'race', age, disability and sexual identity interact to shape individual human experience. Postmodern theories help us understand the complexity of power relations and the ways in which power can be exercised through language and dominant discourse. We encourage you to investigate these theoretical ideas and their application to social work in more depth. Critical reviews of theory for social work can be found in Fook (1993), Payne (1997) and Healy (2005).

While we acknowledge these theoretical influences in our practice framework, we believe that no single theory guarantees empowering, liberating, radical or conservative practice processes and outcomes. No one theory applies to all situations or all levels of practice (Mattaini, 1995: 80); different theories have their strengths and limitations (Mendes, 1997: 482) and different levels of usefulness at different points in the helping process (Sheafor et al., 2000: 84). The application of specific theories should be guided by what we know about what works for which service users under what circumstances and our sense of the purpose of professional practice.

From our position it is important that social workers understand their purpose and that they can engage with theoretical and professional knowledge so as to implement purposeful interventions. The professional challenge is therefore to develop a critical reflective practice that articulates purpose, establishes preferred outcomes with service users, systematically employs values, skills, knowledge and theories and incorporates strategies to evaluate with service users the effectiveness of the work undertaken in achieving outcomes. Equally important is the professional challenge for practitioners of working in a critically reflective manner within the constraints and opportunities posed by the parameters of their employing organization.

## THE VALUE OF THE PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

Our framework for social work practice focuses on the dynamics of power in interactions between people and social arrangements, and hence draws attention to the interactions between workers and service users, and workers and social arrangements. In this it does not differ from other approaches to practice in attending to the relational aspects of practice. However, the approach has specific implications for how that relation may be characterized. Within the many approaches to practice there is a continuum along which the relational aspects are characterized: at one pole there is a top-down approach where the professional is the expert, controlling the interaction and in control of the requisite knowledge; at the other pole, the practitioner is a co-learner with the service user, seeking mutuality in the relationship. Our approach strives towards mutuality in that it directs the

practitioner to seek to understand the world of the other and locate the practitioner as part of the social arrangements with which the other interacts. In so locating the practitioner (and their agency) in the analysis, it does not ignore the knowledge and expertise of the practitioner and in many cases their capacity to assert their interpretation of situations. The appropriateness or otherwise of such an assertion is judged against the explicit statement of purpose.

This formulation of social work practice has significant benefits:

- it is a frame of reference which can be grounded in daily practice;
- it provides a clear statement about the purpose of social work practice;
- it recognizes that social work and social care are part of the social arrangements that may impact positively or negatively on people's lives;
- it values subjective definitions of experience;
- people are viewed as active subjects, not passive objects;
- process is valued as well as product;
- the development of equitable relationships relates to every level of practice, whether working with an individual or a group, or trying to transform the nature of social arrangements.

This framework is not method-specific and does not discount mundane everyday activities. Rather, it provides a focus which will facilitate practice in many settings. Nor does it discount the potential for a critical informed practice in any setting, though different strategies need to be worked through for different contexts. In the UK, where the relevance, standards and professionalism of social work are sometimes questioned, the approach encourages workers to reflect on and critique their practice, eventually taking more personal control in their professional lives.

## **THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK**

The task of this book, and hence the content of the text, logically flow from this conceptualization of social work practice. Particular dimensions of the practice framework are elaborated and built on in each chapter. In **Chapter 2** we examine the context of social welfare policies and politics in Britain. In particular we focus on the assumptions underpinning New Right and Third Way ideologies and their impact on the practices of Conservative and New Labour governments. We examine the role of social work in the delivery of personal social services, including child welfare and community care services.

**Chapter 3** examines self, processes, communications and the relational aspects of practice. The disciplined use of self is basic to practice. The issues of 'Who I am', 'How I have come to be who I am' and 'How I seek to control my own life' are central to our reasons for becoming social workers and to the way in which we practise. Thus we commence with an examination of self and move to a consideration of the use of self in relationships. An understanding of our relationships and our self in relation to others enhances our ability