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Contemporary Social Work Practice: A Handbook for Students

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Chapter 1: Introduction

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Introduction

Social work is a profession that works with individuals, families, groups and communities to promote human growth and development and social justice. The definition of social work, as provided by the International Federation of Social Work [IFSW], 2012 is as follows:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

The profession of social work enables social work practitioners to engage and work with individuals, families, groups, and communities in either the statutory or voluntary sectors in order to foster positive human growth and development, initiate and support change, and fight for social justice. Social workers are “change agents” whereby they focus on problem-solving, initiating and fostering change, and enabling all people to reach their full potential (IFSW, 2012). In order to achieve this aim, social workers must have the knowledge, skills and values necessary to work and intervene with individuals, families, groups and communities. This chapter serves as introduction to this book by providing a general overview of the knowledge, skills and values necessary in order to become a competent and effective social worker, which are further expanded upon in each subsequent chapter in relation to specific areas of social work practice.

Knowledge for social work practice

Social workers must have the necessary knowledge in order to practice social work with individuals, families, groups and communities. Knowledge is non-static. Acquiring knowledge is an infinite process; we are continually learning, gaining new knowledge and building upon existing knowledge. Given this, how do social workers gain the “necessary” knowledge to begin to practice and where does this knowledge come from? According to Trevithick (2012) there are three domains of knowledge that underpins and informs social work: theoretical knowledge; factual knowledge; and practice knowledge.

Theoretical knowledge consists of theories that have been adapted from other disciplines, such as social policy, psychology, philosophy, and sociology, theories that analyse and describe the role and task of social work, and theories that inform practice perspectives and interventions (Trevithick, 2012). Such theories are used to inform social work practice by describing, explaining and predicting human behaviour, social relations and societal structures, which assist a social worker in assessment and planning for intervention. Social workers must work from a solid theoretical base that serves as a starting point of any piece of work where a social worker refers to the theoretical knowledge to describe and explain what may have contributed to the presenting problem of the service user, predict what may happen if the problem is addressed or not addressed, and inform what course of action the social worker should take in addressing the problem with the service user. Teater (forthcoming) provides a complete overview of the different types of theories that underpin and inform social work practice, which have been collated into one of the following categories: developmental theories; psychodynamic theories; behavioural and social learning theories; humanistic theories; social constructivist theories; systems theories; and critical theories. Utilising, understanding and applying theories in social work practice will then lead a social worker to determine the best course

of action, referred to as a method, intervention or approach, with the service user (Teater, 2010).

Factual knowledge consists of the legislation, and social and organisational policies and procedures that regulate, dictate and inform social work's roles and responsibilities (Trevithick, 2012). This area of knowledge also requires an understanding of specific problems that require social work intervention and knowledge of specific groups of people, which can be gained through research, gathering of national statistics on specific populations or of people with particular characteristics, and gathering data and information directly from service users and carers.

Legislation and government policies are critical in social work practice as they influence, and often dictate, the ways in which social workers can practice. Each chapter of this book details a specific area of social work practice and specifies the relevant pieces of legislation. As the case examples in the each chapter illustrate, the factual knowledge of law is a critical aspect in determining whether someone is able to access services and the course of action or intervention of the social worker. Legislation specifies the powers (what a social worker *can* do) and duties (what a social worker *must* do) of a social worker (or other helping professional) and often gives guidance on how to respond in certain situations. Although powers and duties are often specified, there are situations where the law does not give a definitive answer in response to what a social worker should do. In such situations, a social worker must take their initiative to research around the issue, explore legislation and policy guidance documents, research case law, and seek advice and guidance from supervisors, colleagues and legal experts. Two pieces of legislation that will cut across virtually all areas of social work practice are the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010.

The Human Rights Act of 1998 was implemented in 2000 and is based on the European Convention on Human Rights 1950. The primary purpose of the Act is to ensure that public bodies uphold the human rights principles, that Parliament ensures legislation are compatible with human rights principles, and to enable individuals to take cases where their human rights have been breached through the UK courts (Brayne and Carr, 2013). Individuals can only make claims that their human rights have been breached against “public authorities”, which is defined as “a body carrying out a governmental or public function” (Brayne and Carr, 2013, p. 84). In this sense, local authorities, social service organizations and private companies carrying out statutory functions are public authorities and must uphold the human rights principles. Case law has been critical in determining whether private companies that have mixed public and private functions have to adhere to the Human Rights Act 1998. The articles of the Human Rights Act 1998 that are relevant to social work are as follows:

- Article 2: Right to life
- Article 3: No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment
- Article 4: No slavery or forced labour
- Article 5: Right to liberty and security of person
- Article 6: Right to a fair hearing
- Article 7: No retrospective convictions
- Article 8: Right to respect for private and family life, home and correspondence
- Article 9: Right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion
- Article 10: Right to freedom of expression
- Article 11: Right to assembly and association

- Article 12: Right to marry and found a family
- Article 13: Right to an effective remedy for violation of Convention
- Article 14: No discrimination in applying Convention rights

The Equality Act 2010 consolidates nine main pieces of anti-discriminatory legislation, such as the Race Relations Act 1976 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, into one piece of legislation. The Act prohibits various forms of discrimination, including direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, discrimination arising from disability, failure to make reasonable adjustments for a disability, victimization and harassment, and places a duty on public authorities to promote racial and disability equality (Brayne and Carr, 2013). Section 4 of the Equality Act 2010 lists characteristics of individuals, which are protected under the law (protected characteristics), which include: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. The law specifies the certain types of discrimination towards someone with a protected characteristic that is deemed unlawful and also specifies when positive action should be upheld to ensure someone with a protected characteristics is able to be included and participate (Brayne and Carr, 2013).

Finally, *practice knowledge* overlaps with theoretical and factual knowledge and is influenced by our life and work experiences and how we use the theoretical and factual knowledge to inform and shape our practice (Trevithick, 2012). Practice knowledge is developed through reflection and critical analysis of our practice, forming hypotheses and problem-solving and judicious decision-making as well as intuition, practice wisdom and the use of self (Trevithick, 2012). Social workers particularly develop practice knowledge by using their theoretical and factual knowledge to inform the best course of action, or method, with one or more service users and then reflecting and critically analysing their

practice. The practice of critical reflection will involve asking oneself the following questions after (and during) a piece of work (Adams, 2009, p. 234):

- What happened?
- How did it compare with previous experience?
- How did I do?
- How well did I do?
- What could I have done better?
- What could I have done differently?

Asking oneself these questions allows the social worker to reflect on the situation and experience and begin to explore what was learnt and how practice will be modified and enhanced in the future. A critical incident analysis is a specific critical reflective tool that promotes reflection of an incident and an evaluation of the piece of work. Parris (2012, p. 39-40) provides a framework for completing a critical incident analysis, which consists of the following components:

- Describe the incident, what happened, who was involved, what your role was and what you did.
- Reflect on the event and explore the emotions and how you felt.
- How did you deal with the emotions which were evoked for you?
- What issues in terms of values and ethics were involved?
- What theories did you draw on?
- Reflecting back, what worked and what didn't work?
- What might you do differently with the benefit of hindsight?
- What did you learn from this incident?

Participating in critically reflective exercises begins to build social workers' practice knowledge to where they are able to more accurately and effectively plan and

implement pieces of work in the future. The three overlapping domains of knowledge, theoretical, factual and practice, are informed by and inform research and the skills and interventions of social work practice.

Skills, standards of proficiency and capabilities for social work practice

Social workers are required to have a specific skill set in order to practice competently and effectively. Trevithick (2012, p. 44) has defined skills as follows:

A skill is an action with a specific goal that can be learnt, that involves actions performed in sequence, that can be organised in ways that involve economy of effort and evaluated in terms of its relevance and effectiveness. Although these characteristics have been described separately, they interweave and overlap.

Trevithick (2012) proposes that there are approximately 80 generalist skills and interventions in social work practice, which range from interpersonal and communication skills to presenting evidence in court and using humour.

According to The College of Social Work (TCSW, 2012), individuals interesting in studying to become a social worker must have an initial skill set where they: (1) communicate clearly, accurately and appropriately to the level of training applied for, in verbal and written forms; and (2) demonstrate an ability to engage with people with empathy. Once qualified, a beginning social worker must have skills in a wide range of verbal, non-verbal and written methods of communication, be able to engage, build, manage and sustain effective relationships, be able to identify and respond to needs, be able to plan, implement and review effective interventions, be able to share information, and be accountable as a professional (TCSW, 2012).

A skill set is only one standard of proficiency or capability needed to practice social work. Social work is a recognised profession that is regulated by the Health & Care

Professions Council (HCPC). The HCPC (2012) have identified 15 “standards of proficiency” that registrant social worker must meet. These include the following:

1. Be able to practise safely and effectively within their scope of practice
2. Be able to practise within the legal and ethical boundaries of their profession
3. Be able to maintain fitness to practise
4. Be able to practise as an autonomous professional, exercising their own professional judgement
5. Be aware of the impact of culture, equality and diversity on practice
6. Be able to practise in a non-discriminatory manner
7. Be able to maintain confidentiality
8. Be able to communicate effectively
9. Be able to work appropriately with others
10. Be able to maintain records appropriately
11. Be able to reflect on and review practice
12. Be able to assure the quality of their practice
13. Understand the key concepts of the knowledge base relevant to their profession
14. Be able to draw on appropriate knowledge and skills to inform practice
15. Be able to establish and maintain a safe practice environment

Alongside the HCPC, which is the registering and governing body for social work, is TCSW who has set standards, referred to as capabilities, at each level of the social work profession, which ranges from entry into a social work programme to first year of social work practice (referred to as the Assessed Year in Practice ASYE) through to the advanced and then strategic levels of social work. TCSW (2012) have developed the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), which consists of nine domains in which social workers must be competent based on the specific level of their practice. The

domains are: professionalism; values and ethics; diversity; rights, justice and economic wellbeing; knowledge; critical reflection and analysis; intervention and skills; contexts and organisations; and professional leadership.

Values and ethics for social work practice

The profession of social work is built upon a solid value base, which primarily consists of respect for the equality, worth and dignity of all people (IFSW, 2012). As discussed above, values and ethics are a necessary aspect of social work and social workers must demonstrate that they are adhering to the value base of social work within their practice. Additionally, students and social workers must continually reflect on their own values and attitudes and explore how their values, attitudes and ethical principles are impacting and influencing their practice. Values can be defined as the “beliefs that people hold about what is regarded as worthy or valuable” and ethics can be defined as “matters of right and wrong conduct, good and bad qualities or character and responsibilities attached to relationships” (British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2012, p. 17).

The values and ethical principles for social work are detailed BASW and include the main values of human rights, social justice and professional integrity. Table 1 lists the three values and the ethical principles for each.

Table 1: Values and Ethical Principles (BASW, 2012, p. 8-10)

Value	Ethical Principles
1. Human Rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Upholding and promoting human dignity and well-being - Respecting the right to self-determination - Promoting the right to participation - Treating each person as a whole - Identifying and developing strengths
2. Social Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Challenging discrimination - Recognising diversity - Distributing resources - Challenging unjust policies and practices - Working in solidarity
3. Professional Integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Upholding the values and reputation of the profession

- Being trustworthy
- Maintaining professional boundaries
- Making considered professional judgements
- Being professionally accountable

The social work role within the statutory and voluntary sectors

Social workers working within statutory and voluntary sectors will be required to have the knowledge, skills and values as discussed in this (and subsequent) chapters. As you will see throughout this book, social workers predominately work within statutory sectors, particularly in children and families settings or adult social care. Yet, social work is beginning to gain a stronger presence within the voluntary sector as well, particularly as local authorities commission services out to the voluntary and private sectors and are taking on more of a commissioning role versus being a provider of services.

Within statutory settings, social workers primarily provide statutory or “public” functions as defined by legislation and/or policy guidance. This most often involves completing assessment of need and/or risk, developing a case or support plan, linking the service user or carer to services to meet identified needs, and reviewing the plan. Social workers may collaborate with other professionals, such as teachers, police, nurses, general practitioners (GPs), occupational therapists (OTs), counsellors or therapists in order to complete assessments or to determine the most appropriate services for the service user or carer. Within voluntary settings, social workers will still require knowledge of legislation and statutory functions, but may not be administering statutory functions. Social workers will still need knowledge and skills in assessment and services, but may have more flexibility in designing and delivering services and may have more scope for building relationships and implementing social work theories and methods. Social workers within the voluntary sector will also collaborate with other professionals. This book covers social work settings across the statutory and voluntary sectors.

Summary and overview of the book

This book provides an overview of contemporary social work in order for the reader to gauge the wide range of areas in which social work is practiced as well as the specific knowledge, skills, and values necessary to practice effectively within each setting. The social work settings discussed within this book spans across the statutory and voluntary sectors, covers the main areas of social work practice, but is by no means an exhaustive list. There is, no doubt, other settings or situations where social workers may be present and where students may find themselves on placement.

The book is intended to provide a general introduction and overview and serve as a “handbook” or initial starting point for gaining information about a particular social work setting. Each chapter begins with an introduction and overview of the social work setting, which includes the role of the social worker, how service users gain access or entry into the social work service, the prevalence of services users or carers accessing (or not accessing) the service (where appropriate) and key issues, definitions or terms that are specific to that social work setting. Each chapter then provides an overview of the necessary legislation in relation to the social work setting as well as the theories, methods and best practice approaches commonly related or used in that setting. A case example will be provided to illustrate the application of the information within the chapter. Each chapter will then conclude with a discussion of the benefits and challenges within the social work settings, issues to consider when integrating anti-oppressive practice, and a further case study for the reader to explore in more depth. Although each chapter provides a comprehensive coverage of the social work setting, the information provided is by no means exhaustive. The authors intend for the readers to explore the areas in more depth and have provided a list of “further resources and suggested readings” and “websites” at the end of each chapter. The book includes a chapter on service user and carer

involvement and I recommend that this chapter be read in conjunction with the other areas of social work practice.

This book aims to illustrate how social work is a varied profession that works with individuals, families, groups and communities. As this chapter has discussed, social work has an aim of promoting human growth and development as well as promoting social justice. Such aims can only be met by considering and working with individuals, but equally with communities and within larger social, economic and political structures. In order to work competently and effectively, social workers must have knowledge of theories, methods and legislation, have skills to work with individuals, families, groups and communities, and adhere to the value and ethical principles of the profession. Therefore, the profession requires individuals who are competent, motivated and ready to take on the challenge of gaining the knowledge and skills and promoting the aims of the profession. I hope this book serves as a useful tool as you begin on this journey.

Further resources and suggested readings

Banks, S. (2012) *Ethics and Values in Social Work*, 4th edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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Parris, M. (2012) *An Introduction to Social Work Practice: A Practical Handbook*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Teater, B. (2010) *An Introduction to Applying Social Work Theories and Methods*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Trevithick, P. (2012) *Social Work Skills and Knowledge: A Practice Handbook*, 3rd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Websites

British Association of Social Workers (BASW) – www.basw.co.uk

Community Care - <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Home/>

Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC) - www.hpc-uk.org

International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) – www.ifsw.org

Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) - <http://www.scie.org.uk>

The College of Social Work (TCSW) - www.collegeofsocialwork.org

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