

## Social Work and Family

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### ABSTRACT

Social work can be applied in all areas of human life, especially in the areas of social welfare, education, health, justice, local government, civil society, religious and humanitarian communities and other activities. Social workers are most often employed in public institutions, but increasingly in civil society organizations involved in working with individuals and groups experiencing various life difficulties. A social worker is an expert primarily concerned with the study and resolution of human social problems, such as living, nutrition and hygiene and material living and working conditions, as well as problems in interpersonal relationships and behavior of individuals (due to poverty, old age, illness, violence, addiction, crime, etc.). Social workers help people overcome social distress. These misfortunes can be caused by health and family problems, poverty, unemployment, crime, alcohol and drug addiction, as well as war or natural disasters. They seek direct counseling and specific information to help families and individuals identify their real problems, consider possible solutions and, first of all, come to their own end, or opportunities, with their own capabilities. Problems can be unemployment, reduction or loss of work skills, financial difficulties, problems arising from old age, illness, disability, unwanted pregnancy, asocial behavior, alcoholism or drug addiction - personal or family member.

**Keywords:** Social Work, Social Policy, Social Services, Health

### INTRODUCTION

Professional social worker inevitably will encounter diverse individuals, families, or communities affected by social/environmental and legal issues. Poverty, homelessness, parental divorce, exposure to family or community violence, and juvenile or criminal offending are just some of the hardships clients face [1]. Frontline social workers in a variety of settings (e.g., community-based child and family services, health care, education, child welfare, mental health, substance abuse, social services, juvenile justice, and criminal justice systems) interact daily with clients who have multiple problems, including legal ones. For example, a social worker may have a client who is a single father facing allegations of child neglect.

He knows little about the child welfare policies and laws affecting his family or how to navigate the court system. Thus, it is imperative that social workers supplement their specialized practice expertise with knowledge of the laws and policies that influence their client populations.

In the world of bereavement support, the role of the social worker varies from one institution to

another [2]. In some hospitals, social work is an active member of the team, while in others it is a resource for staff. Social workers bring a wealth of knowledge regarding community resources to the team. Moreover, the family sees them as someone they can talk to about personal/psychosocial issues. Their quiet presence and willingness to listen is evident at the bedside. They are also knowledgeable about how to help with other life stresses (such as financial concerns, family support, etc.). Social workers broaden support beyond traditional bereavement care.

Social work practice seeks to promote human well-being and to redress human suffering and injustice [3]. 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

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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.

### LEGAL RESEARCH

The increasing "legalization" of social services has contributed to the need for social workers to possess a firm grasp of how the law affects their daily practice [4]. The legal context of social services frames the conduct and decisions of social work professionals, and legal changes routinely shape the way services are likely to be delivered. A neglected but potentially important element in educating social workers about the law is the basic skill of legal research: finding statutes, regulations, and judicial opinions and using an array of available interpretive aids.

For social work professionals, legal research will typically involve searching for the legislative and regulatory context of their agency's services. These findings are only the beginning, however, as these legal rules must be understood in relation to associated judicial decisions. Legal processes are interdependent. Thus, both legislation and regulations are interpreted by courts, and these interpretations have practical consequences. The practitioner doing legal research, therefore, must also find and analyze relevant judicial opinions to ensure he or she has the most recent statutory or regulatory interpretation.

### LEGAL SYSTEM

The field of social work has been hesitant to become actively involved in the workings of the legal system [4]. As a result, the legal system has exerted enormous influence on the practice of social work. If social workers are to make the relationship with the law more reciprocal, they must be as vigilant about exerting influence on the law and the legal systems, as they have been in addressing legislative initiatives. When social workers understand the purpose of a proceeding, the roles of the attorneys and other legal professionals and prepare themselves for the specific roles they are assigned, there are opportunities to educate and thus influence the legal system.

The first step in legal involvement is for each member of the profession to have an adequate level of knowledge and skill to support competent involvement in the legal system. It is the responsibility of social work education to prepare students for practice in this regard. It

will take a commitment on the part of each school to see to it that the legal knowledge and skills of graduates prepare students to engage in a developing, reciprocal relationship with the law.

### SOCIAL POLICY

Social policy studies not only the organization and delivery of state welfare services, but also how well-being can be promoted within society generally [5]. Well-being may be achieved through the satisfaction of individuals' socially defined needs. Although adequacy of food, shelter and clothing may seem to be an unambiguous measure of need, these needs are expressed differently by people from different cultures and societies. If we take into account people's psychological and emotional development, the issue becomes more complex and presents social policy with new challenges. If, for example, parents cannot leave their children to play safely in the street for fear of a car accident or abduction, their sense of wellbeing is affected. These questions require us to be clear at what level and to what extent the Welfare State can and should satisfy need.

At one level we can take a more inclusive view and include differences of culture, taste and the so-called higher emotional and psychological needs; or we can use a restrictive approach, which keeps the satisfaction of needs at a basic level, usually focusing on food, shelter and clothing. These questions move beyond the academic when we consider how far the state should satisfy the needs of specific individuals. How much, for example, should the state allocate in social security benefits to meet the needs of those unable to maintain themselves? Should the present basic level of income support be increased to meet the wider social and psychological needs of claimants? How much recognition of different needs between claimants should there be? Should the extra costs incurred in being a single parent/carer or a person with a physical disability be taken into account? By limiting benefit payment for these extra costs, those affected face significant barriers to participate fully in society.

The personal social services seek to assist populations with acute needs, including older people, physically and mentally disabled, children and dysfunctional families [6]. This area of government intervention was not included in the founding vision of the welfare state. While social work has since been integrated into welfare state provision (during

the 1960s), it differs from other social policy areas in several respects.

Like other areas of social policy, social services espouses universalistic principles. Social work philosophy invokes principles of social justice and love of humanity as its guiding ethos. In reality, the clients or users of social services come from a particular social category – the poor. And, unlike other social policy areas, the demand for social services does not arise from the potential recipients themselves, at least not in any straightforward sense. The pressures that lead to calls for social work come from anxieties of politicians and the public about child abuse or disturbances caused by aggressive, mentally ill persons. The majority of clients do not contact social service agencies willingly but are sent by courts or other welfare agencies. A significant aspect of the ‘protection’ function carried out by social workers is to protect themselves from legal, political, and professional challenges.

### SOCIAL SERVICES

Ideas, actions, interactions and so on do not fall naturally into neat categories – such categories are constructions, sets of representations that help us make sense of the social world [7]. While categorizing things certainly helps us make sense of complex matters, we must recognize that there are problems with sticking too rigidly to such categories. If we are genuinely to reach out to marginalized groups, then discipline boundaries have to become more permeable and we have to become more receptive to learning opportunities that arise from working with other professional groups in the human services.

One problem, however, can be that communicating across disciplines can lead to simplification of ideas, as people search for a common understanding. The important challenge is to understand and respect the other discipline without losing the distinctiveness of a disciplinary voice, which can have the effect of acknowledging each other’s perspective but also allowing one’s own to change and grow.

Social services staff, for example, can learn much from health practitioners’ use of reflective practice models and learning from research, while health professionals can learn from colleagues coming from a social work background about the value and importance of embracing an anti-discriminatory framework for practice. Both groups can learn from listening to service users.

Learning from each other, however, demands hard work and a commitment to learn. This is never easy as people coming together from different professions will inevitably bring with them the perspective of their own organization with its distinct culture, values and procedures. Added to that will be workers’ own values, judgements, ideas and uncertainties.

### Health

Once again reproduction of people and socialization cannot be separated from attending to the healthcare needs of family members [8]. Hence another role of the family is informal and unpaid healthcare. This has always taken place through the extensive range of tasks carried out on a daily basis by families. These include practical tasks such as shopping, cooking and cleaning as well as emotional support that naturally ensues from the mutual interdependence between family members. Although these tasks are usually taken for granted, they are essential for the maintenance of good health. There has been a greater emphasis on the family’s role in healthcare in recent years for several reasons. One is the expansion of public health which has meant that the family has more responsibility for the health education of its individual members. Recently, the health and well-being of children and young people specifically has ‘been the subject of unprecedented attention and scrutiny’ within this agenda. In addition, research has repeatedly highlighted the influence that the family has on the adoption of a healthy lifestyle by children and young people. This has led to the conclusion that ‘parents are the key to achieving the best physical and mental health and well-being outcomes for their children’ and an emphasis in initiatives on the role of the family in encouraging children to eat healthily and take exercise.

The different roles of the family in contemporary society and some of the changes in these roles indicate that the construction of the family can vary according to the needs of society at particular times. Implicit in such a conclusion is an acknowledgement of the politicization of the family and, indeed, such constructions vary according to political ideologies. While both the New Right and New Labour political discourses placed a strong emphasis on the value of stable family life and suggested that ‘two parents are better than one’, there are differences in their approaches to the family. The New Right placed more emphasis

on 'traditional family life' and appropriate sexuality whereas New Labour viewed families as being essential in the transmission of moral values to, and support of, their members. The family, whatever its structure, theoretical or political construction, plays a major role in maintaining its members' 'health' in the broadest sense of the word by ensuring their welfare and providing healthcare when they are ill and/or elderly. The former includes the physical and emotional care of family members, and the bringing up of the young members in an appropriate manner not only to ensure they fit into society but also to maximize their health and well-being. The latter incorporates the informal care of dependent members of the family, such as those who are elderly and sick. The importance of the family in the provision of healthcare has been widely acknowledged within the study of the social aspects of health. Indeed, while it is recognized that the state and the private and voluntary sectors are sources of healthcare, it is the healthcare provided by the family that is the most fundamental. Furthermore, it has been argued that state-provided healthcare cannot exist without the healthcare carried out within families.

### Children

The legal framework for social work practice with children in England and Wales is rooted in ideas about child welfare, child development and the prevention of juvenile delinquency [9]. In this framework, the State is required or enabled to step in where the private sphere of the family cannot or will not supply the necessary support, protection or control. Put another way, the general rule is non-interference by the State in the private sphere, but the State can and sometimes must intervene where a specified threshold of need or risk can be demonstrated. The core statute is the Children Act 1989 which lays down the parameters for the provision of support for children and families and for compulsory measures where necessary to protect children from significant harm. Human rights law, on the other hand, is predicated on the idea that all persons have inalienable rights and that governments not only must not violate those rights but must take positive action to ensure they are respected by everybody, whether State officials or private individuals. One formulation of these fundamental human rights, the ECHR (European Convention on Human Rights), has been given direct effect in UK law by means of the Human Rights Act 1998, and one of the

mechanisms employed by the HRA 1998 (Human Rights Act 1998) to do this is the imposition, by s. 6, of a duty on all public authorities to act compatibly with the ECHR. This duty applies to social workers exercising statutory functions in relation to children and families. No such provision as yet exists in relation to the leading text on children's rights, the UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), but in England and Wales the UNCRC is gaining prominence in case-law in the courts and, to a greater extent in Wales than in England, in broad statements of government policy. As explained later in this chapter, there are other international texts which also impact on social work practice with children and families.

Accordingly, social workers need to be able to negotiate a legally sound path, complying with both the requirements laid down in subject-specific legislation like the Children Act 1989 and with relevant provisions laid down in international law. Often this can be achieved by ensuring that the requirements of human rights law inform the way in which a specific statutory power or duty is exercised. This is an example of a judge saying that although the specific power in the law of England and Wales has not been changed, the way in which the power is used needs to change in order to ensure compliance with international law, in this instance the UNCRC.

The law relating to children has become increasingly important as a result of statutory developments and case law evolution, both of which have, at times, attracted significant media coverage [10]. The public law dimension has also been prominent, and there is often much press coverage as a result of the actions of social workers and local authorities who have the unenviable task of protecting vulnerable children against inappropriate adult attention, and in some cases against themselves. Travis Hirschi (American criminologist) proposed that delinquency is a result of weakened or broken bonds to society [11]. He proposed that there are four elements to a social bond; attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. Each of these elements is highly correlated with the others and as such, when one element is weakened it will result in the weakening of the others. Hirschi contends that if all of the elements of the social bond are intact, then the child will conform to the rules of society. However, if one or more of the elements of the social bond is weakened or missing,

delinquency will result. Hirschi proposed that individuals develop different types of bonds with society, including those to family, peers, and school. Certain bonds may become stronger protective factors during different periods of life. In the case of school aged children, school factors have been found to be consistently stronger protective factors than even ties to family. Social control theory, as defined by Hirschi, was one of the first theories which dealt with the development of school bonding and identified the lack of school bonds as a primary cause of delinquency.

### Parents

The presence of young children in the household makes it necessary for working parents to find ways in which to combine professional responsibilities and care tasks [12]. The externalisation of household chores to the market frees time for parents to spend on their caring duties. Furthermore, public childcare allows for a further externalisation of care tasks and as such is supportive of working parents, because it also secures time for both parents. A childcare system that meets several conditions (universal access, all-day coverage, high quality and affordability) facilitates an adequate division by parents of their time between childcare and work. However, given the high public cost of an affordable and universally accessible childcare system for children under 6 years of age, some countries have found an alternative in a parental leave system. The state's involvement in parental leave schemes may also be related to the way a country conceives children's early socialisation: through private external care, through public facilities or through parental care. In many countries, parents are expected to be the primary caregivers when the child is very young. Be that as it may, if home parental care is privileged in a given country, it does not necessarily mean that the state intervenes in the family sphere to secure parents' work resumption or substantial replacement of income. Moreover, even if a state sets up legislative regulations to guarantee these two goals, a fact that in principle we would call parental employment supportiveness, it remains to be assessed whether these regulations lead to a gender unbalanced take-up or not, at the expense of mothers.

### CRIME PREVENTION

Social workers are, or should be, inherently interested in the causes of crime beyond the immediate decision to commit an offence,

whether these are located at the level of individual or family problems and difficulties or at a more structural level [13]. The opportunities social approaches to crime prevention present for social work are broadly of two kinds. Firstly, social workers can try to influence local crime prevention initiatives by bringing their particular perspectives, knowledge and values into discussions about strategies and priorities. Secondly but not less importantly, they can seek to provide or to promote direct services to those vulnerable to crime and/or victimisation which are outside the mainstream of statutory work with courts or in supervising court orders.

An early attempt to identify what specific contribution the probation service might make in crime prevention pointed to the close knowledge probation officers (and of course other social workers) often have of the problems associated with offending among those on their caseloads, and of pressures towards crime and deficits in legitimate opportunities within particular communities. The access they have to offenders' own perceptions, or those of their families, of local crime problems, means that they are well placed to identify particular issues for crime prevention: an important contribution, since preventive efforts are more likely to succeed if they have well defined and specific aims. Social workers are also more likely than any other official agencies to come across evidence of the extent to which offenders are themselves victims, a perspective which suggests the little-explored possibility of reducing crime among young people in particular by encouraging them to take sensible precautionary measures. The structural position of social work agencies in the criminal justice system should also enable them to take a broader view than other agencies of the range of problems associated with crime. The probation service (and, for young offenders, social services departments) have a unique range of responsibilities, from involvement in liaison with the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts before prosecution and sentence; through the serving of a sentence, whether in the community or in prison; to the provision of after-care for released prisoners. Other agencies, such as the police and prosecution, are concerned only with the process up to the point of sentence, and the prison service's responsibilities end when the sentence has been served. Social crime prevention thus covers a wide range of activities, and the list so far is by no means exhaustive. Supported accommodation

schemes, for example, is a well-established area of probation practice, and may be a vital part of the process of resettlement of people released from prison, and protective against reoffending in cases of homelessness. Taking crime prevention seriously also means that some types of work which risk being marginalised as 'non-core' activities, and therefore optional extras to the main business of 'tackling offending behaviour', should perhaps be seen as essential; it is, for reasons which should be clear by now, not a straightforward matter to define what kinds of intervention may be important in reducing the risk of offending. This consideration could apply, for example, to the maintenance of family ties during prison sentences and to work on improving employment opportunities.

### CONCLUSION

Social work is a profession based on humanist ideals and human rights as conceived in the most important international documents. Social work is a practically based profession and scientific discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment of people for their independent and free action. The realizing of social justice, respect for human rights, social responsibility and social diversity are key principles of social work. Social work practices involve working with people and social structures to address their challenges and increase their well-being. Social workers help with adverse circumstances such as difficult family conflicts, including child or spousal abuse. They are experts who have an insight into officially established forms of assistance, have an overview of relevant institutions, private and public services and associations, and know how certain forms can be realized.

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