

1 The Art and Science of Social Work

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KEY POINTS

- Social workers continually integrate different sources of knowledge into practice.
- The 'science' of social work practice relates to the knowledge base of evidence and theories that you draw on to understand human behaviour and the social environment, and the interventions required.
- The 'art' of social work practice refers to the ways in which you use these practice theories within the context of your own professional development and in the unique client situations in which you work.
- Critical reflection and reflexivity are vital integrative processes in your social work practice.

KEY TERMS

critical reflection
fields of practice
interpretative lens
personal-self
practice theory
praxis
professional-self
reflexivity
supervision

Introduction

From the personal to the professional sphere, and from the professional to the social sphere, many things influence the practising of social work. The notion that social work involves both art and science emerges from an awareness that social workers integrate the following into practice:

- theories about people and their environments
- evidence-based knowledge of particular populations and social problems or **fields of practice**, and the effectiveness of various resources and interventions in ameliorating these problems
- themselves as agents of change.

fields of practice:

Evidence-based knowledge of and practice with particular populations and social problems.

Social work requires the practitioner to integrate complex and evolving knowledge arising from evidence bases and practice theories, as well as personal, professional and cultural contexts. The ‘science’ dimensions of social work are encompassed by the available evidence bases derived from social science research and practice theories. The ‘art’ of social work comes about as social work practitioners weave together this scientific knowledge with personal strengths and skills, social and cultural experiences, professional knowledge and practice wisdom, and adapt these to the unique and particular situations in which we work. While this terminology runs the risk of separating knowledge as stemming from either research (science) or experience (art), it serves as a useful reminder of the complex interaction of knowledge and skills that social workers must engage with in practice.

personal-self:

How our personal views are constructed and influence our interpretations and actions.

professional-self:

How our professional experiences enrich our practice development.

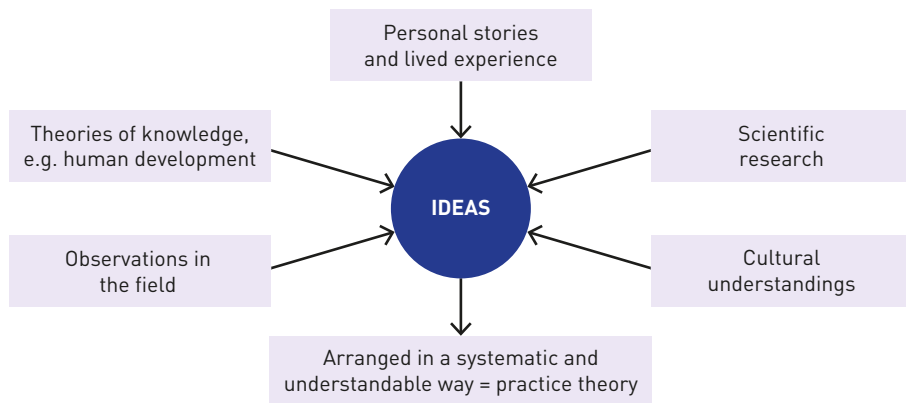
This chapter explores the ways in which social workers integrate understandings of their **personal-self** and **professional-self**. It explores the ways in which theory informs practice and how the worker’s personal and professional experiences enrich practice development. It argues that an understanding of the interaction between the worker’s personal and professional spheres is essential to practice that is reflective and responsive to the needs of social work clients in Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand communities.

Understanding theory: thinking about practice-in-situation

Practice theories are used to describe and explain the nature of people’s circumstances, and the nature of change. A theory can be described as a systematic ordering of ideas that have been drawn from a range of knowledge sources—for example, our observations, experiences, research, expert knowledge, cultural understandings, and the worker’s personal stories that are based on a lived experience (see Figure 1.1).

The English social work theorist Malcolm Payne (2005: 6), drawing on Sibeon (1990), identifies three types of social work theory—theories of what social work is, theories of how to do social work, and theories about the world of the client. In summary, social work practice theories seek to explain the nature of human troubles

FIGURE 1.1
The development of practice theory



and the processes of change. They provide, more or less, a complete perspective on how we might understand a particular client's situation. In explaining the roots of the problem (causality), a theory suggests an approach to practice (method) and will often supply techniques that are consistent with the theoretical explanation. Hence, theory unfolds into the practice approach, which translates into a technique. Some social workers have a purist approach to practice, in that they use a particular theory to explain the variety of problems with which clients present. Others have a more eclectic approach, either using different theories as they seem useful (theoretical eclecticism) or using differing techniques derived from differing theoretical frameworks as appropriate (technical eclecticism). For further discussion on using social work theory in **eclectic practice**, see Chapter 2, and Payne (2005).

The application of **practice theory** is also influenced by disciplinary beliefs and culture. So, for example, when social workers practise using a particular theoretical frame they interpret the ideas through a disciplinary lens that incorporates social work values, beliefs and knowledge (Connolly & Harms, 2015). This creates a distinctive disciplinary application of theory that will differ from, for example, the way a psychologist might apply the same theory. Practice theories that are typically used in social work are not necessarily the sole purview of the social work profession. Indeed, other professions use a similar set of theories. We would argue that it is the influence of the social work disciplinary lenses that turn them into *social work practice theories* (see Chapter 2). Teasing out the nature of our disciplinary interpretative lenses, Connolly and Harms (2012) identify four enduring and overlapping disciplinary attachments reflecting professional values, beliefs and understandings that influence, sometimes moderate and ideally always enhance the practice of theory:

- *The relational lens* reflects a commitment to relationship-based practice, and has been formative in the development of social work over time (Howe, 2009). Indeed Teater (2010) argues that building relationships in practice is a necessary component of effective social work. So from a social work perspective, no matter what theoretical framework is used, it is embedded in a relationship context of engaging with and listening to the client.
- *The social justice lens* intersects with the relational lens, providing a critical edge to social work—a reminder of the profession's commitment to social action: 'Embraced as an essential **interpretative lens**, a focus on social justice challenges individualistic responses that can negatively merge with notions of individual culpability, blame and stigmatization' (Connolly & Harms, 2015: 19). The social justice interpretative lens therefore challenges disadvantage, sharpens insight and injects a social action element into the theory practised.
- *The reflective lens* acknowledges the importance of understanding cultural thinking and the ways in which both personal and professional values and beliefs influence social work practice. It is something we will come back to later in the chapter. Like the first two interpretative prisms, relationship and social justice, the importance of reflection has featured prominently in social work thinking

eclectic practice:

Selecting aspects of different theories and using them in combination, or selecting the theory that most appropriately relates to the nature of the presenting problems of a client.

practice theory:

Social work theories that seek to explain the nature of human troubles and the processes of change.

interpretative lens:

A way of viewing a situation to make sense of it.

and practice and all have found their way into professional codes of ethical social work practice.

- *The lens of change* provides insight into what practices facilitate change in human systems. Although not as clearly articulated within the social work literature, over time social work has developed a set of practice conditions that promote positive change. These include focusing on the here-and-now; building on individual, family and wider system strengths; encouraging client participation and self-determination; and working at the client's pace, acknowledging that control over change rests with the client.

These disciplinary lenses influence the ways in which social workers interpret practice, policy and research. Indeed, we would argue that they also capture the essence of social work's unique contribution. One ongoing debate in social work both within Australasia and internationally is the extent to which scientific research endeavours should or indeed do drive and inform practice theory development and interventions (Webb 2001; Drisko & Grady, 2015). This debate has focused upon whether evidence in the form of positivist inquiry measuring the effectiveness of specific tools and interventions should be privileged over other forms of knowledge, such as observations in the field, cultural understandings and personal stories. In much the same way as the merits of qualitative and quantitative research were debated in the 1980s and 1990s, reference to the different types of knowledge that give rise to practice theory reinforce a different false dichotomy. This particular dichotomy is between a values-driven discourse informed by critical theory and social justice imperatives, and evidence-based practice theory and intervention informed by positivist research. As Figure 1.1 illustrates, practice theory development is derived from conceptual, empirical, personal *and* socio-political forms of knowledge. No one form of knowledge development needs privilege over another in terms of understanding practice theory, but together they provide the means for comprehensive analysis and application of theory.

Using theory to better understand the nature of people's problems is a challenge not only for students on placement, but also for experienced practitioners in the field. A good deal of time in social work is spent talking about the integration of theory and practice, and the extent to which this is possible or desirable. Social workers sometimes feel uncertain about the practical application of theoretical constructs—about whether their practice is, in fact, informed by theory, and if not, why not. Some of this has to do with our belief that theory is better suited to the academic discipline rather than the practical endeavour of social work. In addition, as outlined in Chapter 2, apart from the task-centred model developed by American social work academics, most practice theories are derived from disciplines other than our own. Further, most theories that seek to understand the nature of people and social problems have invariably been generated outside of Australasia, and questions have been raised as to their cultural relevance, particularly to indigenous peoples (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). There are, nevertheless, many sources of knowledge, and if social workers use the critical social work lenses in practices that support the betterment of their clients, then social work theory can be used to deepen our practice understanding and expertise.

KEY PRACTICE QUESTIONS

- 1 What practice theories are you familiar with, and why do you find them useful?
 - 2 What might be some of the limitations of 'theory-free' social work practice?
 - 3 In what ways might the interpretative lenses outlined earlier influence practice?
 - 4 In what ways might you use research to inform what you do as a social work practitioner?
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Reflective and reflexive practice: grounded in lived-experience

According to the Canadian academic Peter Leonard (1994), a foundational belief of social work and social work education has been 'expert' knowledge and the existence of an objective professional knowledge base. As discussed earlier, this has encouraged us to strive towards a theory (or theories) of knowledge that adequately explain the nature of people's troubles. It has been assumed that social workers can objectively apply theory to work through human issues and that, once learnt, theory can be used successfully in a variety of client situations. Following this line of thinking, a social worker could learn the method or technique associated with a particular theory, and its application would look much the same as it would if it were being used by any other social worker. This idea of specialised, theoretically informed practice, offering a step-by-step process that might assist a sometimes bewildered social worker to stay on track, was a comforting option for neophyte social workers. But the applications of a theory to practice do not always look the same in different hands, nor can one theoretical framework manage to explain the diversity of all client situations. This statement is not intended to undermine the value of theory in social work—indeed, this chapter will argue the importance of theoretically informed practice. We nevertheless agree with Payne (2005) in recognising that theory can only take us so far.

Beyond this, the skilled practitioner needs to carefully and critically reflect on the application of theory in the context of practice. Through this application–reflection process, both the theory and the worker's practice are developed further. Drawing on the work of Jones and Joss (who adapted the model of experiential learning developed by the educational theorist David Kolb), Payne outlines this process of critical reflectivity:

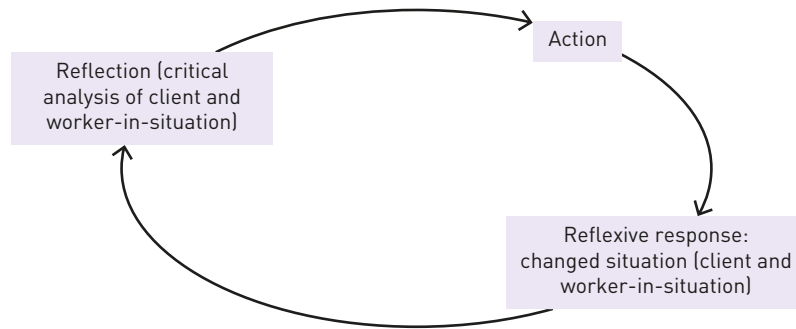
We have a concrete experience, which we observe and reflect on, construct new ideas about and then experiment, leading us to have a further concrete experience about which we can reflect. This model emphasises observation ... testing our reflection against what we see and experience, not allowing it to become divorced from, and indeed enabling it to build upon, the real world which we experience. (Payne, 1998: 122)

Sometimes reflective practice, as described above, is confused with the concept of reflexive practice. **Reflexivity** is the circular process by which our thinking influences our action, which then influences the situation, which in turn affects how we interpret, think and respond to the situation (see Figure 1.2). In this process there

reflexivity:

A circular process where our thinking influences our action, which then influences the situation, which then affects how we interpret, think and respond to the situation.

FIGURE 1.2
The circular
process of
reflexive practice



is a greater impact directly on the client and other external situations, and in turn on our interpreting, thinking and responding. Hence the process of reflexivity provides an opportunity to understand the way in which the worker's personal views and interpretation intersect with practice-in-situation.

The process of reflexivity then becomes a purposeful action. The worker, according to Rossiter (1995: 19), 'contributes to a new story that grows out of the client's perspective'. In this sense the work becomes a process of reciprocity, firmly grounded in the worker's experience with the client. Understanding the personal-self—how our personal views are constructed and influence our interpretations and actions—is important in this conscious process of reflexivity and will be discussed further later in this chapter. However, first we need to consider a process that is closely related to reflexivity: that of **praxis**.

Praxis builds on the notion of reflexivity by introducing ideology (Payne, 2005). Our ideology is the system of beliefs that influences our thinking, which in turn influences our behaviour. For example, if we have a developed feminist ideology, this will influence our interpretation of the world and how people interact. Through a feminist lens we would analyse the nature of women's oppression from a gender-based perspective and this would lead us to explore the impact of **androcentric** values on the lives of particular women. If our behaviour is integrated with our ideology, then this nexus will also influence our social work practice. We would explore women-centred ways of helping clients that are consistent with the principles and values of feminism.

Praxis is the process of ideologically strengthening our practice through **critical reflection** and reflexivity, challenging our values, ideology and beliefs, and creative rethinking of issues with a view to facilitating macro change. In this way, praxis has a practical element to it. Praxis can also involve a conscious process of discovery through the reflective questioning of practice-in-situation, which enables us to understand how we, as practitioners, impact on the lives of our clients and how this in turn impacts on the way in which we understand the world (Kondrat, 1999). Praxis seeks to integrate this evolving understanding with an ideologically strengthened practice. Figure 1.3 illustrates the process of development from action to praxis-oriented action.

praxis: Process of strengthening our practice through critical reflection and reflexivity, challenging our values, ideology and beliefs, leading to creative rethinking of issues.

androcentric: A perspective based on the assumption that a male viewpoint is the normal valid one.

critical reflection: Challenging our values, ideology and beliefs, and rethinking issues with a view to facilitating macro change.

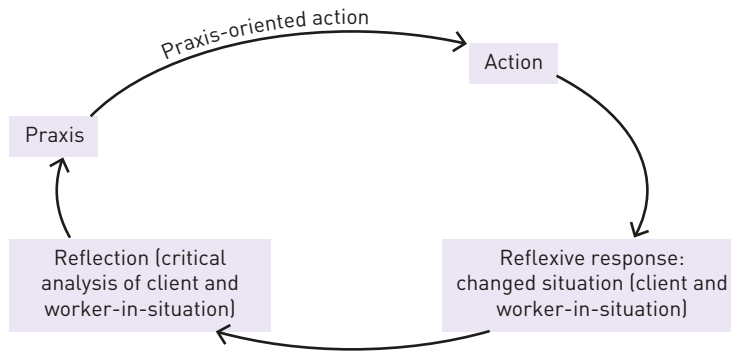


FIGURE 1.3
The development
of praxis-oriented
action

Interpreted in this way, the development of praxis-oriented action therefore depends on an overall process that involves both reflectivity and reflexivity. To establish this as a conscious process, an understanding of the personal-self (and how this personal-self influences interpretation) is particularly important. What we bring to a situation will depend on what we have learnt and experienced previously. What we bring is subjective and unique. Because each human being is unique, singular responses characterise our interactions with each other. The interpretation of a family situation may well differ between two social workers, because the factors that influence one person's thinking may be different from the things that influence another's perspective. Our perspectives are influenced by a complex interplay of factors—biological, social and cultural—and personal experiences are significant in terms of the way we understand the world. Experience as social work professionals helps shape the professional-self, which then intersects with the personal-self. This mix of personal and professional factors within the personal and professional spheres influences what kind of social work practitioner one becomes (see Figure 1.4).

Sometimes the things we learn within the sphere of the personal-self lead to us being more insightful practitioners, sometimes less so. Sometimes issues within the personal sphere conflict with those in the professional sphere. Values may be shared across the spheres and thus mutually reinforce our two selves, or our personal and professional values may be dissonant and result in uncertainty. Knowing what we bring into the practice arena, from both a personal and professional perspective, is an important step towards an understanding of how we act and respond as social workers. It increases our potential to be both reflective and reflexive practitioners.

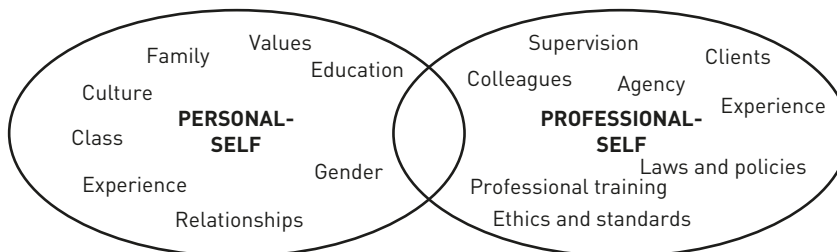


FIGURE 1.4
Personal and
professional
influences

Becoming more aware of the personal-self

As you can see from the discussion so far, one of the first areas of focus in your social work education will be on knowing and integrating your personal and professional selves. This ‘use of self’ in practice acknowledges that, in social work, change is brought about through relationships and dialogue, as well as by applying methods and techniques derived from particular theories of human experience and change (Harms, 2007). Yet self-knowledge can be difficult to develop and articulate, in part because it is constantly evolving. As individuals, we tend to experience fluid identities within different contexts, such as childhood, parenthood, employment, practice, collegiality and friendship. This is because so much of what we know is subtly transmitted and powerfully integrated throughout the entire span of our lives. Our experiences of class, gender, family values and culture all contribute to our understandings of the world, which can continually change depending upon how our lives unfold within dynamic contexts. Cultural views and attitudes are particularly powerful and contribute significantly to our sense of self—but often we are not fully aware of their influences.

explicit knowledge:

Cultural knowledge that we are conscious of, e.g., knowledge of rituals and protocols for marriage celebrations; customs relating to religious festivities, etc.

tacit knowledge:

Cultural knowledge that is often outside our awareness, e.g. not staring at other people; not feeling obliged to start a conversation with people next to us on public transport.

ethnocentric:

Assumption that a particular cultural viewpoint—usually that of the dominant culture—is the normal and valid one.

Culture, as described by Berger and his colleagues (1996), is learned and is a repository of values, knowledge and objects belonging to a particular group or society. Knowledge of our culturally based values and culture-mediated responses is essential to our emerging knowledge of our personal selves. According to Spradley (1994), there are two types of cultural knowledge: **explicit knowledge** and **tacit knowledge**. Our explicit cultural knowledge is the one we are most conscious of, for example our knowledge of rituals and protocols (e.g. marriage celebrations), customs (e.g. clothing, religious festivities), and the like. Tacit cultural knowledge is more complex, as it is often outside our awareness. For example, think about how we ought to behave on public transport. Somehow, we know what we ‘should’ do, but it is not necessarily within our conscious awareness (e.g. not staring at other people nor feeling obliged to start a conversation with those next to us). How we respond within a particular situation will depend on the complex matrix of cultural values and obligations. Our responses to situations are often automatic and deeply embedded. The values underpinning our culturally based views also reflect ways of thinking that may have been handed down over generations. Such cultural views influence our behaviours. For example, in Western culture, an emphasis on the Protestant work ethic—that individuals have a duty to work hard and they will be rewarded for doing so—can be seen within many of our society’s structures and systems. Within each society it is invariably the dominant culture that determines what the norms are, and decides what the rules of that society shall be. An **ethnocentric** viewpoint is one that is based on the assumption that a particular cultural viewpoint is the normal and valid one. Cultural ideas and values can be so deeply integrated into our personal-self that we may not even realise we have them. When we are confronted in our practice with cultural values and views that differ from our own, it can be particularly confusing and frustrating. In social work, the cultural values of both practitioners and clients are often subjected to challenge and evaluation.

We bring all of these subtle formative experiences, consciously or unconsciously held cultural values, and sometimes unacknowledged assumptions from our own

personal lives into our practice. The ways in which values in particular play a major role in our lives are explored further in Chapter 3. Occasionally, some practitioners attempt to use their social work practice as a therapeutic way of working through their own personal difficulties. Given that the practice of social work is often intense and emotionally charged, trying to work through your own issues by helping others is likely to end at worst disastrously, and at best unproductively.

Social work practice, however, is likely to trigger personal issues for most workers at different stages of their careers, and these need to be attended to as a normal part of practice. One way of working through personal and professional issues is by constructively using **supervision**.

Becoming a social worker and learning about the practice standards, values and vision of the profession will inevitably influence our thinking as well. This is where the developing professional-self begins to intersect with the personal-self.

supervision:

A regular, structured process in which one practitioner reviews and explores their social work practice with another.

KEY PRACTICE QUESTIONS

- 1 What are some of the experiences that influenced your decision to become a social worker?
- 2 How might androcentric and ethnocentric values influence the practice of social work?
- 3 How does praxis enhance the development of practice?
- 4 Why is it important to deepen our understandings of the roles of the personal-self and professional-self in social work and the interaction between them?

Developing the professional-self

Taking the first steps towards a professional career in social work can be a life-changing experience. As will be discussed in the next chapter, exposure to social work experience and training can challenge some deeply held values and raise awareness of a range of unsettling ideas. Undertaking professional studies exposes you to a range of theories, research findings and knowledge bases (some of which are covered later in this book) that will help you to better understand the ‘client-in-context’. It will also expose you to the body of knowledge and the interpretative lenses that support the profession in terms of its ethical code. Underpinning social work practice are ethical standards. The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) and the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), as the professional bodies for social workers, have articulated the ethical principles that ought to enlighten practice, which are based on those established by the International Federation of Social Workers (2005).

The two professional associations have also listed practice standards—guides to how practice ought to be conducted in a professional manner (ANZASW, 2014; AASW, 2013). These standards encompass a range of expectations including:

- what a client should expect from the social worker–client relationship
- the knowledge base that a competent social work should possess

- the appropriate use of personal attributes by social workers
- the processes of accountability
- the social worker's involvement in macro change effort (e.g. striving to make an organisation or community more humane or less discriminatory)
- the social work advocacy role for clients, which involves knowledge about resources and the ability to advocate for client access to them
- a commitment to ethical standards as well as competent practice.

In addition, depending on the country, the practice standards may expect:

- accountability to peers and clients
- awareness of and sensitivity to issues of racism and sexism
- a commitment to the philosophy of culturally sensitive or bicultural social work practice (ANZASW, 2008: 22)
- the development of culturally sensitive or bicultural practices by social work agencies.

In the New Zealand context, a commitment to the philosophy and development of bicultural practice is inextricably linked to engagement with the commonly accepted principles (partnership, consultation and participation) associated with the Treaty of Waitangi, which have become an organising construct for the profession and many agencies that provide social services. Inherent in this commitment is a recognition of the special status of Māori as *tangata whenua*—the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. The Treaty and its implications for social work are further discussed in Chapter 8. Here we raise it as a significant influence that shapes the profession and, therefore, shapes the practice of workers within it.

Although both associations have a commitment to addressing oppression on the grounds of gender, disability, sexual orientation, economic status and age, this is not strongly articulated in the practice standards. Given that social work is a female-dominated profession, it is perhaps surprising that addressing gender-based oppression, in particular, does not receive greater attention in the expectations of the standards. Because gender socialisation is deeply embedded and views about the place of women within society are frequently entrenched, reinforcing a sexist process or colluding with sexism when it emerges in practice situations can be a trap for practitioners. Sometimes deeply held androcentric values that have been reinforced within the sphere of the personal-self can blind a worker to sexism in practice. While ethnocentrism is based on an assumption that a particular cultural view is the normal and valid one, androcentrism refers to a perspective that is based on a tacit assumption that a male viewpoint is the normal valid one. Androcentrism, most often in subtle forms, can be found within social service systems, university systems, social work literature—and even in research. If we are to meet our professional body's requirement of addressing sexism within social work, it is necessary for us to be vigilant of sexist actions and of our own potential blind spots.

KEY PRACTICE ISSUES

- Social action and attention to social justice issues are central to social work practice standards, and social work as a profession has a responsibility to maintain an emphasis on a macro change effort in the face of economic rationalisation.
 - In New Zealand, the principles associated with the Treaty of Waitangi have become an organising construct for social work practice. Operationalising the Treaty principles will continue to be an imperative for practice delivery.
 - Internationally, the UN Declaration of Human Rights can also be used as an organising construct for social work practice, as can be seen in the International Code of Ethics.
 - Social work as a profession has a continuing responsibility to address issues of sexism in Australian and New Zealand societies and to be vigilant of the influence of androcentrism on social work policies and practices.
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Our professional-self is also influenced by our practice experience within the field. The laws and policies that direct social work practice clearly influence the way the work is undertaken. For example, the way practitioners worked in child welfare changed significantly with the implementation of the 1989 *Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act* in New Zealand (discussed in detail in Chapter 16). Prior to the introduction of the legislation, decisions such as whether a child would be taken into the care of the state, or what kind of sanctions a young offender would face, were frequently made by the professionals. The new legislation changed practice by mandating an opportunity for the extended family to share in the decision-making with respect to the child or youth. This development necessitated a different role for social workers as facilitators rather than determiners of responses. In this way, the legislation reshaped the way social workers thought about family and the welfare role. Similarly, the introduction of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* in Victoria (Australia) is impacting profoundly upon the ways in which social workers and others within family services engage and work with families (Victorian Government, 2005).

In addition to law and policy, the philosophical and spiritual principles on which the mandate of an agency is based also shape professional practice. For example, in New Zealand the *kaupapa Māori* approach to the provision of welfare services, which is based on Māori principles, shapes the practice of some agencies, especially tribally based ones. The philosophy of the agency influences the way in which the professional social work role develops within that agency. For example, if the philosophy of an agency, such as a women's refuge, is explicitly based on feminist values, then the work undertaken will reflect this, and the worker role will also be shaped by it. The professional-self is also influenced by colleagues, supervisors, and the clients with whom we work.

It is this complex interplay of the personal and professional selves that fashions the kind of social work practitioner we become. Our personal and professional values, along with our developing practice interests and accumulated experiences, guide us

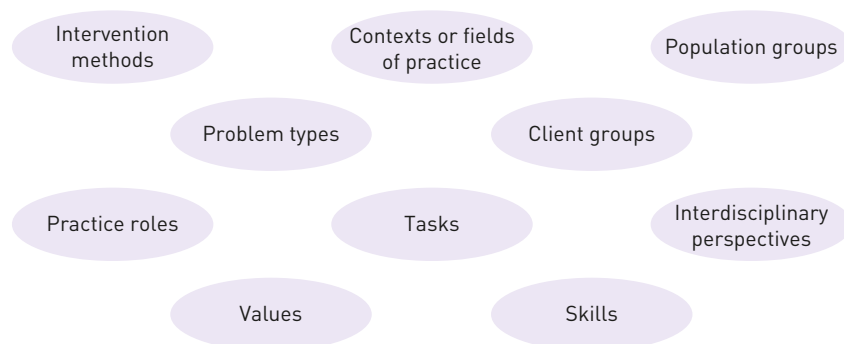
towards areas of social work that create a personal and professional fit. Practice fields in social work are diverse. Social workers interact with individuals and families, with groups and communities. They might work in the drug and alcohol field, or in child protection. They may be drawn to gerontology and social work with the elderly, or they may prefer work with adolescents. Working with sex offenders in a prison setting may be of great interest to one social worker, but may be the last place another would want to work. Where we choose to work is influenced by our personal and professional development, as well as our practice interests and experiences, and our knowledge of different fields of practice.

Finding your fields of practice

Social workers work in a range of fields of practice using distinctive methods with different client groups. Coulshed (1988) has put together a useful list that captures some of the possible organising constructs of social work (see Figure 1.5). She identifies contexts (fields of practice) within which social work can be found. These include, for example, statutory agencies, hospitals, not-for-profit agencies, and community and neighbourhood centres.

Within these fields a social worker might play a variety of practice roles, for example an advocate for services, a provider of services, and sometimes a protector of the vulnerable. They might be engaged in many tasks, including counselling, supervising, educating, monitoring and evaluating, but always bringing to these areas the values and skills of the profession. Networking is a strong feature of social work, with the social worker maintaining a liaison role between different services and often acting as the interdisciplinary linchpin. One of the assumptions about social work practice is that it occurs face to face with the client, the family, the group, the organisation or community in question, and historically this has been the case. Increasingly, however, many different forms of micro through to macro practice occur using telecommunication. Social work service delivery through call centres and other forms of digital technology are not uncommon in New Zealand (Hanna, 2011) and Australia (Trees, 2015), where telehealth services and different forms of social media are being routinely utilised for engagement with clients, assessment and

FIGURE 1.5
Organising
constructs for
social work



intervention, information giving, counselling, practitioner professional development and supervision (Adedoyin, 2016; Mattison, 2012). There are now also many examples of ways in which groups of people have used the online environment to politically organise for advocacy and to promote a policy change agenda. Social workers need to know how to work using both face to face and digital service delivery options.

A distinguishing feature of social work as one of the ‘helping professions’ is the emphasis on **micro change** and **macro change**. Not only is social work concerned with helping individuals or groups in particular situations (micro change), it is also concerned with changing systems that oppress or disadvantage individuals or groups (macro change). People coming into the profession quickly learn about this dual commitment to micro and macro change effort. The area in which social workers choose to work will depend not only on their strengths and interests, but also on their philosophical commitment and the emphasis it places on micro or macro change (see Figure 1.6). This may cause them to lean towards different areas of work. For example, a social worker may be more interested in clinical work with clients, providing specialist therapeutic or casework services. This may be with a particular population—for example, providing individualised therapeutic services for people affected by redundancy. These interests reflect a micro change effort orientation that explores the impact that unemployment may have on an individual and then seeks to help the person cope with these life changes. This may include working with other family members, as unemployment also has wider family consequences.

Alternatively, a social worker may be more interested in facilitating macro change using a community action-based approach. The practitioner may still work with people who are unemployed, but their approach is likely to be politically oriented and their work may be, for example, in the context of an unemployed workers’ union. The social worker is more likely to encourage a community response to the macro issue, making the personal political.

Social workers seeking macro change can productively engage in policy development and research to generate systemic change. Research can be used for ensuring client’s voices and views are collected and used for advocacy; funding secured for additional resourcing; community needs analysis completed to identify gaps in service; and evaluation of current programs completed to identify if these are still

micro change:

Helping individuals or groups in particular situations.

macro change:

Changing systems that oppress or disadvantage individuals or groups.

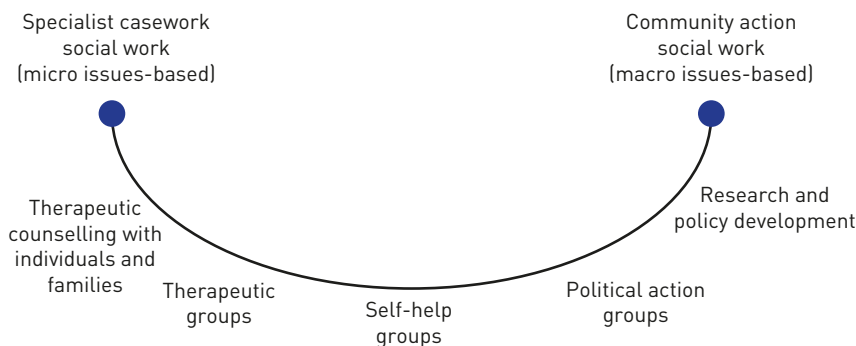


FIGURE 1.6
The continuum of
micro and macro
issues-based
social work

relevant and effective. Practice research in turn informs policy development. While social workers are ideally situated in agencies and professional bodies to promote policy development to effect macro change, they are often reluctant to do so because of the demands of day-to-day work and their lack of confidence in conducting and routinely using research (Maidment, Chilvers & Crichton-Hill, 2012). A challenge for social work education in Australasia is to ensure students develop a keen sense of confidence and competence in both using and conducting practice research and engaging in policy analysis to effect macro change.

The distinctions between different orientations between micro and macro practice are not always this clear. For example, a community social worker, while having an emphasis on social action and community development, may also do one-to-one work with an individual struggling to cope with unemployment. Further, a therapeutic group for people experiencing unemployment may turn political as collective issues become more apparent. Where social workers fit on the micro–macro change effort continuum will again depend on their interests and skills—as well as their values—and these may well change over time and throughout their careers. Social work certainly offers diverse possibilities, and this diversity requires multiskilled workers.

There are also conflicting roles within social work that can influence the worker's positioning with respect to the continuum. The dilemma of support versus social control is particularly significant in this respect. Some social workers, particularly—but not exclusively—those working for statutory agencies, exercise considerable power over clients with whom they work. Many workers have a social control role that requires them to take action on behalf of the state to protect the interests of the community or vulnerable individuals within it. Take, for example, a situation of child abuse. A child protection worker may engage with a family by providing support and services. Over time, a positive casework relationship might develop between the parent and the practitioner, and the role of the social worker might be perceived as one of helper, reflecting the worker's supportive role. During this period, however, the social worker may become concerned again that the safety needs of the child are not being met, and may have to reopen an abuse enquiry. The social worker's social control role then has to coexist with the perceived helper role. There are many situations in which the support or control dilemma impacts on the work. Perhaps a probation officer is required to report an offender for failing to meet reporting requirements. Perhaps a youth worker who has developed a relationship with a youth gang feels compromised by information communicated about the gang's activities. All of these situations create dilemmas even for an experienced social worker, and it is the worker's task to prioritise different roles appropriately in each situation (Trotter, 1999).

Exercising professional judgment is, perhaps, a hallmark of effective social work. A considerable amount of social work depends upon the creative use of professional judgment. Such judgment is enhanced by the integration of social work knowledge, careful reflection of the client-in-situation, a developed understanding of what works with people, and the practice wisdom (Scott, 1990) of the experienced practitioner.



CASE STUDY

A social work student is talking with her supervisor about her first placement, which is with a child and family service agency. She finds the work personally very challenging, as she comes from a home in which there was no violence or experience of poverty. As a young parent herself, she feels overwhelmed by the impact of substance abuse on the parents that she sees, and their capacity to be good parents to their children. She questions the relevance of practice theory in the context in which she is working, and whether it is more that she is imposing her own worldview on the families with whom she works in the agency. In her work she wants to address the wider issues of poverty and oppression, particularly for women, that she sees as lying at the core of the daily practice ‘problems’ she encounters. ●

KEY PRACTICE QUESTIONS

- 1 How might the social work interpretative lenses increase the relevance of practice theories in the context of the student’s placement and aspirations?
- 2 How could engaging in critically reflective or reflexive processes help the student resolve her dilemmas?
- 3 How could this experience benefit the student’s professional development?
- 4 How might this student use research to inform her about working at both micro and macro levels in the field of substance abuse?

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered the ways in which you can integrate your skills and knowledge, both personal and professional, in your practice. Some specific processes—critical reflection, reflexivity and praxis—have been explored as offering ways of developing these connections.

Social work occurs in diverse political, cultural, social and economic contexts that also have the effect of shaping the way social work is practised. In this chapter we have begun to look at some of the personal and professional influences that shape our social work practice, including the unique social work disciplinary lenses. In the next chapter we will consider the influence of different practice theories on the development of our professional practice.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1 What is your understanding of the role of theory in practice?
- 2 What are some of the challenges inherent in reflective and reflexive practice?
- 3 What factors have already influenced the development of your professional-self?
- 4 What dimensions of your personal-self are likely to influence your practice the most, and why?
- 5 At this stage of your social work career, what fields of practice appeal to you and why?

FURTHER READING

Chenowith, L. & McAuliffe, D. (2012). *The Road to Social Work and Human Service Practice: An Introductory Text*, 3rd edn. Southbank: Thomson.

This text provides an accessible overview of the theory and practice of social work and human service practice in Australia.

Connolly, M., Crichton-Hill, Y. & Ward, T. (2006). Culturally reflexive responses in abuse work. Chapter 2 in their *Culture and Child Protection: Reflexive Responses*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

This chapter provides a useful analysis of the ways in which cultural thinking shapes and impacts on practice.

Drisko, J. & Grady, M. (2015). Evidence-based practice in social work: A contemporary perspective. *Clinical Social Work Journal* 43: 274–282 doi:10.1007/s10615–015–0548-z

This article provides a good definition of evidence-based practice and a comprehensive overview of what this terminology means for decision-making in practice.

Fook, J. (2012). *Social Work: A Critical Approach to Practice*. London: Sage.

This text provides a comprehensive overview of critical theories and the related skills for social work practice.

Harms, L. (2015). *Working with People: Communication Skills for Reflective Practice*, 2nd edn. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

This Australian text provides an introduction to communication skills for human service practitioners in a wide range of settings.

Nash, M., Munford, R. & O'Donoghue, K. (eds) (2005). *Social Work Theories in Action*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

This New Zealand book provides a wide-ranging collection of essays that offer insights into the practical application of social work theories.

Trevithick, P. (2012). *Social Work Skills and Knowledge: A Practice Handbook*, 3rd edn, Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.

This British book provides a comprehensive overview of theories for practice, and their application as part of a social work skill set.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.anzasw.nz

ANZASW is the website of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, which provides many resources for professional social work members in Aotearoa New Zealand, including resources for registration, ethics and standards, and accreditation.

www.aasw.asn.au

AASW is the website of Australian Association of Social Workers. It provides many resources for professional social work members in Australia, including national resources for registration, ethics and standards, and accreditation.