Social Work: A Comprehensive Helping Profession

The human services have become a central part of the fabric of U.S. society. Founded on the commitment to promote the general welfare of its people, society has gradually assumed increasing responsibility for ensuring that people have access to assistance in meeting their basic needs. This assistance takes the form of various social programs that are delivered by people who possess a variety of helping skills. The ability to help others is highly valued in all societies, whether provided to family and friends or others in one’s community. In highly developed societies, including the United States, much of this helping has become so complex that human services programs require highly trained professionals. It is within this context that social work was born.

What is perhaps the most basic form of helping has been termed natural helping. Before reaching a social worker or other professional helpers, clients often have been counseled or assisted in some way by family, friends, neighbors, or volunteers. Natural helping is based on a mutual relationship among equals, and the helper draws heavily on intuition and life experience to guide the helping process. The complexity of many social issues and the extensive knowledge and skill required to effectively provide some human services today exceed what natural helpers can typically accomplish. This has resulted in the emergence of several occupations, known as human services professions, that deliver more complicated services to people in need.

Professional helping is different from natural helping in that it is a disciplined approach focused on the needs of the client, and it requires specific knowledge, values, and skills to guide the helping activity. Both natural and professional helping are valid means of assisting people in resolving issues related to their social functioning. In fact, many helping professionals first became interested in these careers because they were successful natural helpers and found the experience rewarding. Social workers often work closely with natural helping networks (i.e., both family members and friends) during the change process and as a source of support after professional service is terminated. However, natural helpers are not a substitute for competent professional help in addressing serious problems or gaining access to needed services.

Social work is the most comprehensive of human service occupations and, through time, has become recognized as the profession that centers its attention on helping people
improve their social functioning. In simplest terms, social workers help people strengthen their interaction with various aspects of their world—their children, parents, spouse or other loved one, family, friends, coworkers, or even organizations and whole communities. Social work is also committed to changing factors in the society that diminish the quality of life for all people, but especially for those persons who are most vulnerable to social problems.

Social work’s mission of serving both people and the social environment is ambitious. To fulfill that mission, social workers must possess a broad range of knowledge about the functioning of people and social institutions, as well as have a variety of skills for facilitating change in how individuals, organizations, and other social structures operate. This comprehensive mission has made social work an often misunderstood profession. Like the fable of the blind men examining the elephant with each believing that the whole elephant is like the leg, trunk, or ear that he examined, too often people observe one example of social work and conclude that it represents the whole of professional activity. To appreciate the full scope of this profession, it is useful to examine its most fundamental characteristics—the themes that characterize social work.

The Central Themes Underpinning Social Work

Five themes capture the character of social work. No one theme is unique to this profession, but in combination they provide a foundation on which to build understanding of social workers and their practice.

A Commitment to Social Betterment

Belief in the fundamental importance of improving the quality of social interaction for all people, that is, social betterment, is a central value of the social worker. The social work profession has taken the position that all people should have the opportunity for assistance in meeting their social needs.

Social work has maintained an idealism about the ability and responsibility of this society to provide opportunities and resources that allow each person to lead a full and rewarding life. It has been particularly concerned with the underdog—the most vulnerable people in the society. This idealism must not be confused with naivete. Social workers are often the most knowledgeable people in the community about the plight of the poor, the abused, the lonely, and others who for a variety of reasons are out of the mainstream of society or experiencing social problems. When social workers express their desire for changes that contribute to the social betterment of people, it is often viewed as a threat by those who want to protect the status quo.

A Goal to Enhance Social Functioning

Social workers take the position that social betterment involves more than addressing problems—it also involves assisting those who want to improve some aspect of their lives, even though it may not be considered “a problem.” Social work, then, is concerned with
helping people enhance their social functioning, that is, the manner in which they interact with people and social institutions.

Social workers help people and social institutions change in relation to a rapidly changing world. The technology explosion, information explosion, population explosion, and even the threat of nuclear explosion dramatically affect people’s lives. Those who can readily adapt to these changes—and are not limited by discrimination because of race; cultural background; gender; age; or physical, emotional, or intellectual abilities—seldom use the services of social workers. Others who have become victims of this too rapidly changing world and its unstable social institutions, however, are likely to require professional help in dealing with this change.

**An Action Orientation**

Social work is a profession of doers. Social workers are not satisfied just to examine social issues. Rather, they take action to prevent problems from developing, attack problematic situations that can be changed, and help people deal with troublesome situations that cannot be changed. To do this, social workers provide services that include such activities as individual counseling, family and group therapy, linking people to the network of services in a community, fund raising, and even social action. Indeed, social work is an applied science.

**An Appreciation for Human Diversity**

To deal effectively with the wide range of change to which social work is committed, it has become a profession characterized by diversity—diversity of clientele, diversity of knowledge and skills, and diversity of services provided. In addition, social workers themselves come in all shapes, colors, ages, and descriptions.

Social workers view diversity as positive. They consider human difference desirable and appreciate the richness that can be offered to a society through the culture, language, and traditions of various ethnic, racial, and cultural groups. They value the unique perspectives of persons of different gender, sexual orientation, or age groups, and they recognize and develop the strengths of persons who have been disadvantaged. What’s more, social workers view their own diversity as an enriching quality that has created a dynamic profession that can respond to human needs in an ever-changing world.

**A Versatile Practice Perspective**

The wide range of human conditions with which social workers deal, the variety of settings in which they are employed, the extensive scope of services they provide, and the diverse populations they serve make it unrealistic to expect that a single practice approach could adequately support social work. Rather, the social worker must have a comprehensive repertoire of knowledge and techniques that can be used to meet the unique needs of individual clients and client groups.
The versatile social worker, then, must have a solid foundation of knowledge about the behavior of people and social institutions in order to understand clients’ situations. He or she also needs to understand that differing beliefs may affect the way people will interpret and react to those situations. And, finally, the social worker must have mastered a number of helping techniques from which he or she can imaginatively select to help individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities improve their social functioning.

How do these themes affect social work practice? The following case example* is just one of many situations where a social worker might help a client:

Karoline Truesdale, a school social worker, interviewed Kathy and Jim Swan in anticipation of the Swans’ oldest son, Danny, beginning school in the fall. The Swans responded to Ms. Truesdale’s invitation to the parents of all prospective kindergartners to talk over any concerns they might have about their children’s schooling. When making the appointment, Kathy Swan indicated that her son Danny was near the cut-off age for entering school and may not be ready yet for kindergarten. When questioned further, Kathy expressed considerable ambivalence indicating that having him in school would help to relieve other burdens at home but may be too much for Danny.

Karoline’s notes from the interview contained the following information:

Kathy Swan is 20 years old and about to deliver her third child. She indicates that they did not need another mouth to feed at this time, but “accidents happen” and she will attempt to cope with this additional child when the baby is born (although she already appears physically and emotionally depleted). Jim is 21 years old and holds a temporary job earning minimum wage. He moved the family to the city because “money in agriculture has gone to hell” and a maintenance job was available at a manufacturing plant here. However, he was laid off after three months when the plant’s workforce was reduced. Jim is angry that he moved the family for this job, yet the company felt no obligation to keep him on. He stated that “people in the country don’t treat others like that.” He is also worried that his temporary job will last only a few more weeks and commented that Kathy “spends money on those kids like it was going out of style.” Jim said in no uncertain terms that he did not want and they could not afford another baby, but Kathy had refused to even consider an abortion.

The children are quite active, and Danny pays little attention to Kathy’s constant requests that he calm down. When Jim attempts to control Danny, Kathy accuses him of being too physical in his discipline. When questioned about this, Jim reported that his dad “beat me plenty and that sure got results.” Kathy complains that Jim does not appreciate the difficulty of being home with the children all of the time, and she objects to the increasing amount of time he is away in the evenings. Jim replied rather pointedly that “it is not much fun being at home anymore.” Tension between Kathy and Jim was evident.

When questioned about their social contacts since moving to the city, both Kathy and Jim reported that it had been hard to make friends. They knew “everyone in town”

*Sonia Nornes and Bradford W. Sheafor originally developed this case material for the Fort Collins (Colorado) Family Support Alliance.
before they moved, but it is different now. With his changing employment, Jim has not made any real friends at work, and Kathy feels isolated at home since Jim takes the car to work each day, and the bus is her only means of transportation. She did indicate that one neighbor has been friendly, and they have met two couples they liked at church.

When asked specifically about Danny, Kathy reported that he has been ill frequently with colds and chronic ear infections. She hesitantly described his behavior as troublesome and hoped the school’s structure would help him. Kathy described a Sunday school teacher who called him hyperactive and suggested that she not take him to Sunday school anymore. Kathy wondered if there was some kind of treatment that would help Danny and allowed that she was “about at the end of her rope with that child.”

It was clear to Karoline that both Kathy and Jim wanted Danny to begin school. But was Danny ready for school—and would the school be ready for Danny? Would Danny’s entering school be best for him? Would it resolve the family’s problems? Are there other things that could be done to help this family and, perhaps, prevent other problems from emerging?

Within the strict definition of her job, Karoline could assist the Swans in reaching a decision about school attendance and complete her service to this family. With her “social betterment” concern, however, resolution of only the question about Danny’s entering school would not be sufficient. As a social worker, Karoline would hope to help the Swan family address some of the more basic issues they face in order to improve the overall quality of their lives.

Social workers are not experts on all problems clients may experience. Karoline’s experience, for example, would not prepare her to make judgments about Danny’s health and the possible relationship between his chronic colds and ear infections and his behavior problems. She might refer the Swans to a low-cost medical clinic where a diagnosis of Danny’s health problems can be made. She is, however, an expert in “social functioning” and can help Jim and Kathy Swan work on their parenting skills, strengthen the quality of their communication, assist them in developing social relationships in the community, and, perhaps, help Jim obtain job training and stable employment. Karoline’s “action orientation” would not allow her to procrastinate. She would be anxious to engage this family in assessing the issues it faces and would support Kathy and Jim as they take action to resolve them.

The Swan family represents at least one form of “human diversity.” They are a rural family attempting to adapt to an urban environment. Karoline knows that it will take time and probably some help to make this adjustment. She will explore strengths that may have been derived from their rural background. Perhaps Jim’s skills in gardening and machinery repair would prove to be an asset in some lines of employment. Also, their rural friendliness may prove beneficial in establishing new social relationships, and they might be helped to build friendships through their church or neighborhood, or to use other resources where they can find informal sources of support (i.e., natural helping).

Service to the Swan family will require considerable practice “versatility.” Karoline will need to assist the family in problem solving around whether or not to send Danny to school. She will hopefully engage them in more in-depth family counseling. She might invite them to join a parents’ group she leads to discuss child-rearing practices,
link them with medical and psychological testing services for Danny, and help Mr. Swan obtain job training. If Danny does attend school next year, Karoline might work closely with his teacher and Mrs. Swan to monitor Danny’s progress and address any problems in his social functioning that may arise. If he does not attend school, an alternative program might be found where he can develop the socialization skills required in the classroom. Clearly, a wide range of practice activities would be needed, and Karoline must be versatile in her practice to apply them.

The Mission of Social Work

While social work practice requires considerable variation in activity, at a more abstract level the profession has consistently maintained that its fundamental mission is directly serving people in need and, at the same time, making social institutions more responsive to people. Although this unique mission has been steadfastly held for more than a century, it has been difficult to develop public understanding of its uniqueness among the helping professions. One way to understand this profession is to examine its three primary purposes: caring, counseling, and changing.

Caring

At times the best knowledge social workers can muster is inadequate to prevent or resolve the many problems encountered by the disabled, elderly, terminally ill, and other persons with limited capacity for social functioning. Social workers recognize that certain conditions in life cannot be corrected. Yet the victims of these conditions deserve not only humane but high-quality care.

Caring that makes people comfortable and helps them cope with their limitations is frequently the most valuable service a social worker can provide. Sometimes caring takes the form of arranging for meals to be delivered or for income to be supplemented, and ensuring that adequate housing is provided. At other times, the person and/or family may require help to better adjust to an unchangeable situation like a disability or terminal illness. There is also an important leadership role for social work in helping communities create the necessary services to provide such care. The fundamental intention of caring for those in need is a central purpose of social work practice.

Counseling

Another thrust of social work practice has been to provide treatment for individuals and families experiencing problems in social functioning. Depending on client needs, direct services ranging from psychosocial therapy to behavioral modification, reality therapy, crisis intervention, and various group and family therapy approaches are used by social workers. These approaches do not automatically cure social problems in the same way a physician might prescribe a medication to cure an infection. In fact, most social workers would argue that at best they can
only help clients find a way to resolve their issues. The contribution the social worker makes is the ability to engage the client in actively working toward change, to accurately assess the individual and societal factors that have created the need for change, to select appropriate techniques for a given client and situation, and to use these techniques effectively in conjunction with the clients to accomplish the desired results.

**Changing the Society**

Social change is the third primary purpose of social work. Social workers are committed to reforming existing laws, procedures, and attitudes until they are more responsive to human needs. Many pioneer social workers were reformers who worked to improve conditions in slums, hospitals, and poorhouses. Today, social workers actively influence social legislation in an effort to create new social programs or to change factors that contribute to damaging social conditions such as racism, sexism, and poverty.

Social workers also seek to change negative public attitudes about the more vulnerable members of society by providing public education and facilitating the empowerment of the affected members of the population to advocate for their own interests. Social workers, then, bring about change in the society by representing the interests of their clientele and/or helping clients persuade decision makers at the local, state, or national levels to respond to human needs.

The mission of social work is captured in the following three-part statement. Social work’s mission includes:

- Caring for those who must live with an unchangeable social problem
- Counseling people addressing their social problems by helping them change and/or attempt to change the condition that causes the problem
- Changing conditions in the society that make some people more vulnerable to social problems

This mission, however, does not in itself clearly distinguish social work from other helping-oriented occupations. To gain further clarity, one must examine definitions of social work.

**Defining Social Work**

Unfortunately, social work has been hard to define. Different dictionary definitions treat social work as a set of skills, a job title, or even an activity that might be performed by volunteers. None treat this as a profession with extensive academic and practice experience required for the work. These definitions typically fail to distinguish social workers from others who engage in similar activities. Therefore, it is informative to examine how social workers define themselves.
Three concerted efforts have been made by the social work profession to arrive at a clear definition of social work. The first occurred in the 1920s when the American Association of Social Workers convened a series of meetings of key agency executives in Milford, Pennsylvania. These representatives from a range of practice settings identified several factors that appeared to be common to all social work practice, but they could not agree on a concise definition of social work. However, the Milford Conference encouraged further efforts at articulating a definition of social work when it concluded that social work’s common features were more substantial than the differences.²

The 1950s brought a second surge of interest in developing a clear conception of social work. The merger of several specialized social work practice organizations and the more generic American Association of Social Workers into the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) was completed in 1955. For a time, a spirit of unity dominated the social work profession, and the effort to find a definition of social work that would reflect the commonality in diverse practice activities began in earnest. A critical step was the publication of the “Working Definition of Social Work Practice” in 1958. Although not yet providing a comprehensive definition of social work, the document established an important basis for subsequent definitions by identifying three common goals of social work practice:³

1. To assist individuals and groups to identify and resolve or minimize problems arising out of disequilibrium between themselves and their environment.
2. To identify potential areas of disequilibrium between individuals or groups and the environment in order to prevent the occurrence of disequilibrium.
3. To seek out, identify, and strengthen the maximum potential of individuals, groups, and communities.

Thus, the “Working Definition” established that social workers are concerned with curative or treatment goals, as well as emphasizing the importance of social change or prevention. In addition, the definition recognized the focus of social work on the interactions between people and their environments and the responsibility of social workers to provide services to people as individuals, as parts of various groups, and as members of communities.

Third, in the 1970s and 1980s, NASW published three special issues of its major journal, Social Work, that generated substantial debate and discussion about the nature of social work.⁴ This activity enhanced understanding of the central features that characterize social work but did not lead to a definitive description of this profession.

Although NASW has never formally adopted a definition of social work, a one-sentence definition developed by one of its committees has gained widespread acceptance.

Social work is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups, or communities enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and creating societal conditions favorable to that goal.⁵
This statement provides a clear and concise “dictionary definition” of the profession. It draws important boundaries around social work. First, social work is considered professional activity. Professional activity requires a particular body of knowledge, values, and skills, as well as a discrete purpose that guides one’s practice activities. When practice is judged professional, community sanction to perform these tasks is assumed to be present, and the profession, in turn, is expected to be accountable to the public for the quality of services provided.

Second, this definition captures a uniqueness of social work. It makes clear that social workers serve a range of client systems that include individuals, families or other household units, groups, organizations, neighborhoods, communities, and even larger units of society. For social work, the identification of one’s client is tricky because a client or target of practice activity may range from an individual to a state or nation. The unique activities of the social worker are directed toward helping all of those systems interact more effectively and therefore require professional education as preparation.

Finally, the last part of the definition concerns social work’s dual focus on person and environment. Social workers help people enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning. At the same time, they work to change societal conditions that may help or hinder people from improving their social functioning. Herein lies another uniqueness of social work. Whereas some professions focus on change in the person and others on changing the environment, social work’s attention is directed to the connections between person and environment.

When working with clients, social workers must take into consideration both the characteristics of the person and the impinging forces from the environment. In contrast, the physician is primarily prepared to treat physical aspects of the individual, and the attorney is largely concerned with the operation of the legal system in the larger environment (although both the physician and attorney should give secondary attention to other, related systems). Social work recognizes that each person brings to the helping situation a set of behaviors, needs, and beliefs that are the result of his or her unique experiences from birth. Yet it also recognizes that whatever is brought to the situation must be related to the world as that person confronts it. By focusing on transactions between the person and his or her environment, social interaction can be improved.

Figure 3.1 depicts this unique focus of social work. Social workers operate at the boundary between people and their environment. They are not prepared to deal with all boundary matters. Rather, they address those matters that are judged problematic or have been selected as a way to contribute to the enhancement of social functioning. In sum, social workers temporarily enter the lives of their clients to help them improve their transactions with important elements of their environment. To further understand social work, it is instructive to examine the approaches social workers use when assisting their clients or advocating for social change.
Arriving at a practice approach that is sufficiently flexible and encompassing to relate to this complex profession has proven difficult. In fact, social work might be characterized as a profession in search of a practice approach. That search began with the development of several distinct practice methods.

**Traditional Practice Methods**

The first practice method to develop, *social casework*, was described in the 1917 classic social work book, *Social Diagnosis*. In this book, Mary Richmond focused on the requirements for effective practice with individuals and families, regardless of the type of problem presented. The book filled an important void in social work by introducing a literature describing social work practice. The principles of social casework identified by Richmond were enthusiastically adopted by social workers, and the profession moved its primary focus to work with individuals and families. The popularity of Freudian psychology in the 1920s and 1930s also directed social work toward considering the
individual primarily responsible for his or her condition, rather than viewing problems in the structure of society as also contributing to people’s issues. Abbott noted that Richmond later expressed concern over this trend to overemphasize the person side of the person-environment mission of social work:

The good social worker, says Miss Richmond, doesn’t go on helping people out of a ditch. Pretty soon she begins to find out what ought to be done to get rid of the ditch.7

Social workers concerned with providing services to groups took longer to develop a set of guiding principles, partially because those social workers disagreed among themselves as to whether they should identify professionally with the emerging field of social work. This disagreement was resolved in the 1930s in favor of identifying with social work, and thus a second distinct method, social group work, evolved.

The third practice method to develop was community organization. With many social agencies and social programs being created in each community, their coordination and the evaluation of their effectiveness became important and, to meet that need, another distinct practice area emerged. Community organization became the practice method primarily concerned with coordinating the distribution of resources and building linkages among existing services.

In addition to using one of these three primary practice methods in their work, many social workers found themselves responsible for administering social agencies and conducting research on the effectiveness of social programs. By the late 1940s, administration and research had evolved as practice methods in social work. Viewed as secondary methods, they were seen as a supplement to a person’s ability as a case-worker, group worker, or community organizer.

Multimethod Practice Approach

Concurrent with the development of these five distinct practice approaches was the growing commitment to unifying social work as a single profession with a well-established practice method. A major study of social work and social work education, the Hollis–Taylor Report, was concluded in 1951. It recommended that, because the breadth of social work practice required social workers to intervene at more than one level of the client system, social work education should prepare students with a beginning level of competence in each of the five practice methods.8

The multimethod practice approach proved a good fit with the varied demands for social work practice but failed to yield the unifying practice theme the profession needed. Practitioners typically identified with a dominant method and used the others sparingly.

Generalist Practice Approach

Supported by concepts drawn from social systems theory, the generalist approach to practice began to emerge in the late 1960s. As Balinsky stated, “The complexity of human problems necessitates a broadly oriented practitioner with a versatile repertoire of methods and skills capable of interacting in any one of a number of systems.”9
The generalist model provided versatility and met the requirement for a flexible approach to social work practice demanded by the complexity and interrelatedness of human problems.

Generalist practice contains two fundamental components. First, it provides a perspective from which the social worker views the practice situation. Social systems theory helps the social worker to maintain a focus on the interaction between systems—that is, the person–environment transactions—and to continually look for ways to intervene in more than one relevant system. Second, rather than attempting to make the client’s situation fit the methodological orientation of the social worker, the situation is viewed as determining the practice approach to be used. Thus, the social worker is required to have a broad knowledge and skills and to have the ability to appropriately select from those basic competencies to meet the needs of clients.

Although many social workers contend that the generalist approach has been part of social work practice since its inception, only recently have there been analysis and explication of this practice approach. With the accreditation requirement that both baccalaureate- and master’s-level social workers be prepared as generalist practitioners, there has been a resurgence of activity aimed at clarifying the nature of generalist practice in recent years. In their article titled “Milford Redefined: A Model of Initial and Advanced Generalist Social Work,” Schatz, Jenkins, and Sheafor delineate the key elements of generalist social work at both the initial and advanced generalist levels.

This model recognizes that there is a generic foundation for all social work, whether generalist or specialist, that includes such factors as knowledge about the social work profession, social work values, the purpose of social work, ethnic/diversity sensitivity, basic communication skills, understanding of human relationships, and others.

The generalist perspective, according to this model, (1) is informed by sociobehavioral and ecosystems knowledge; (2) incorporates ideologies that include democracy, humanism, and empowerment; (3) requires a worker to be theoretically and methodologically open when approaching a practice situation; (4) is client centered and problem focused; (5) includes both direct and indirect interventions; and (6) is research-based.

At the initial generalist level of practice, the social worker builds on the generic foundation and, using the generalist perspective, must at least be capable of (1) engaging effectively in interpersonal helping, (2) managing change processes, (3) selecting and utilizing multilevel intervention modes, (4) intervening in multiple-sized systems as determined by the practice situation, (5) performing varied practice roles, (6) assessing and examining one’s own practice, and (7) functioning successfully within an agency.

The advanced generalist social worker engages in more difficult practice tasks and, therefore, operates from an expanded knowledge base about individuals, groups, organizations, and communities that is developed in master’s degree programs. The advanced generalist must also develop increased skills to intervene in direct service provision with individuals, families, and groups at one end of the multiple-level practice spectrum and, at the other end, address more complex indirect practice situations such as supervision, administration, program evaluation, and policy development. Finally, the advanced generalist is expected to approach social work practice from an eclectic, but disciplined and systematic, stance and to simultaneously engage in both research and practice evaluation.
Specialist Practice Approaches

In contrast to the generalist, a number of specialized practice approaches have emerged. Specialist social work practice is characterized by the application of selected knowledge and skills to a narrowed area of practice based on practice setting, population served, social problems addressed, and/or practice intervention mode used. In other words, this practice approach begins with a preference about the knowledge and skill required for practice in that specialized area and serves clients whose needs fit into those more narrow, but in-depth, worker competencies.

While education for initial generalist practice is offered in baccalaureate programs or the early part of master’s-level programs, specialist education has increasingly become the emphasis of the latter part of a master’s degree. Master’s social work education programs sometimes offer the advanced generalist as their area of concentration but more typically build their curricula on one or more specialty areas. Although individual schools of social work usually focus on only a limited number of specialties, the following illustrates the range of specializations a school might offer.

**Fields of Practice:** for example, services to families, children, and youth; services to the elderly; health; mental health; developmental disabilities; education; business and industry; neighborhood and community development; income maintenance; employment.

**Problem Areas:** for example, crime and delinquency; substance abuse; developmental disabilities; family violence; mental illness; neighborhood deterioration; poverty; racism; sexism.

**Populations-at-Risk:** for example, children and youth; the aged; women; single parents; ethnic populations; persons in poverty; migrants; gay and lesbian persons; the chronically mentally ill.

**Intervention Methods or Roles:** for example, specific practice approaches with individuals, families, and groups; consultation; community organization; social planning; administration; case management; social policy formulation; research.

**Practice Contexts and Perspectives:** for example, industry; hospitals; schools; rural or urban areas.

Today social work embraces both generalist and specialist approaches to practice. The generalist viewpoint supports the commonality that unites social work into one profession; the specialist approach helps to delineate unique areas for in-depth social work practice.

Social Workers: Their Many Faces

How has the emergence of a profession concerned with helping people change conditions that affect their social functioning played out? First, a fairly specific career pattern has emerged, and, second, a substantial number of people have selected social work as a career.
Career Patterns of Social Workers

Varying career patterns have evolved as the practice of social work has changed over time. The early social workers were volunteers or paid staff who required no specific training or educational program to qualify for the work. When formal education programs were instituted at the turn of the twentieth century, they were training programs located in the larger social agencies. In fact, it was not until 1939 that accreditation standards required that all recognized social work education must be offered in institutions of higher education. There was also controversy over whether appropriate social work education could be offered at the baccalaureate level as well as at the more professionally respectable master’s level. The reorganization of social work into one professional association (the National Association of Social Workers, or NASW) and one professional education association (the Council on Social Work Education, or CSWE) in the 1950s yielded a single education-level profession. At that time, only the master’s degree from an accredited school of social work was considered “legitimate” social work preparation. Today, the Master of Social Work (MSW) degree still is considered the “terminal practice degree” in social work, but other professional practice levels are now recognized. In 2006, 173 of the 181 accredited programs reported their graduation statistics indicating that 17,209 persons received the MSW degree, making it the dominant qualification for social work practice.11

It was not until 1970 that the NASW recognized baccalaureate-level (BSW) social workers as fully professional social workers. The Council on Social Work Education subsequently created accreditation standards, and, by 2006, 433 of the 458 accredited schools throughout the United States reported graduating 12,845 persons with the BSW (at times this may be a BA or a BS degree).12 Another career level had indeed been established.

Increasingly, social workers are also completing doctoral degrees in social work, either the Doctor of Social Work (DSW) or the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.). In 2006, for example, 293 persons completed a doctorate in social work from the sixty-one reporting schools in the United States.13 In addition, a number of other social workers also complete doctorates in related disciplines. Most doctoral-level social workers are employed in teaching or research positions, but doctoral programs aimed at preparing people for direct social work are beginning to emerge. Doctoral programs, however, are not subject to accreditation by CSWE and are not recognized as professional practice preparation in social work. Thus, the MSW continues to be viewed as the terminal practice degree.

By 1981, NASW found it necessary to develop a classification system that would help to clarify the various entry points to social work and define the educational and practice requirements at each level. This system sorts out the career levels into four categories: basic professional (BSW), specialized professional (new MSW), independent professional (MSW plus at least two years experience), and advanced professional (doctorate or special practice proficiency).14 NASW’s classification scheme has several benefits. First, it identifies and clarifies the practice levels existing in social work and, in general terms, spells out the competencies that
both clients and employers can expect from workers at each level. Second, it
describes a continuum of social work practice with several entry points based on
education and experience. Finally, it suggests a basis for job classification that
can increasingly distinguish among the various levels of social work competence
and assist agencies in selecting appropriately prepared social workers to fill their
positions.

A Snapshot of Today’s Social Workers and Their Work

Who are the people who have elected a career in social work? It is difficult to
determine accurately the characteristics of today’s social workers because a sin-
gle source based on an agreed upon definition of social work does not exist. NASW
reports a membership of approximately 150,000, but given that more than
500,000 social workers graduated from CSWE accredited programs in the past
30 years, it is clear that only a fraction of the qualified social workers have elected
to join NASW. All social workers are not required to be licensed, but approx-
imately 310,000 hold a state license to practice social work. Based on positions
classified by employers as social work jobs, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)
estimates there are approximately 595,000 social workers in the United States.
Finally, the most current population survey in which people self-classify
their occupation estimates that there are 670,000 to 730,000 social workers. Each estimate is flawed, but it is likely that the BLS estimate is the most accu-
rate representation of the number of practicing social workers in the United
States today.

The most current and complete data set regarding social workers and their
practice activities was conducted by the NASW Center for Workforce Studies.
The 2004 study included a random sample of 10,650 licensed social workers
from 48 states and the District of Columbia with a 49.4 percent response rate.
Thus it can be considered a good representation of licensed social workers. The
social workers reporting in this study were 81 percent female and 86 percent non-
Hispanic white persons. One limitation is that a number of states have not
embraced the basic social worker (BSW) in their licensing, and many baccalaure-
ate social workers are not licensed—thus only 12 percent of the sample practices
at that level.

The data in Table 3.1 indicate that mental health, as a social worker’s primary
practice area, is almost twice as likely as any other focus of practice. Also, although
more than 80 percent of the social workers are employed in some form of organi-
zation or agency, the largest single practice setting was private practice. This
represents a substantial change over the past few decades in the ability of social
workers to attract clients to their independent entrepreneurial practice. Increas-
ingly, social workers must be able to manage their own small business, as well as
administer large social agencies. The primary work, or function, social workers
perform in these jobs is working directly with clients as individuals or in families
and groups.
Who are the clients of social workers? Table 3.2 indicates that social workers must be prepared to work with clients from all age groups—from young children to older adults. Even if a social worker works primarily with one age group, he or she inevitably works with family members and others across the age spectrum. The need for social workers to become culturally competent in working with all racial/ethnic groups is
Table 3.2

Characteristics of Social Workers’ Clients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Client Characteristic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client Age</td>
<td>51% or more of workload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescents</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older adults</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American/Alaska Native</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client Condition</td>
<td>Client issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial stressors</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical conditions (acute and chronic)</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-occurring conditions</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective conditions</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical disabilities</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental disabilities</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


evident from the data indicating that, although social workers may work primarily with persons of one background, they end up doing some work with persons from all groups. Finally, social workers deal with a wide variety of client conditions. More than two-thirds deal with clients experiencing psychosocial stressors as these are interrelated with other problems, but many social workers also deal with social issues related to medical conditions, mental illness, and many other conditions.

A 2004 member salary survey conducted by NASW helps to provide a picture of the earning power of social workers. The median annual income for social workers
in that membership sample was $51,900 for full-time social workers during the calendar year 2003.\textsuperscript{19} Previous membership studies indicated that social workers begin at a lower salary level upon completing the professional degree and then reach the median salary at around 15 years of experience. Prior data also indicate that the typical person with a BSW degree earns about $1,000 per month less than the person with an MSW degree, and a person with a doctorate earns about $1,000 per month more than the MSW graduate.\textsuperscript{20}

These salary levels are not sufficient in themselves to draw top-quality professionals to this demanding work. While social work wages are considered “high” by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (i.e., in the second highest quartile of earnings for all occupations),\textsuperscript{21} social work salaries are relatively low for positions requiring professional preparation. Other rewards from the work must therefore be considered more important than earning power to maintain a competent labor force of social workers. In a substantial analysis of the labor market for social workers, Michael Barth concludes that social workers’ “taste” for providing their services is exceptionally strong. Barth indicates that, from an economist’s perspective, a strong taste for a profession implies that the worker would seek that work even if it conveys greater risk of low pay and despite the potential of the worker to earn greater pay elsewhere.\textsuperscript{22} In short, social workers appear to be more attracted to the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of people than to select a profession that will result in high earning power.

Since its inception more than a century ago, social work has emerged as a comprehensive helping profession. From the beginning, social workers sought that elusive common denominator that would depict this profession as clearly as possible and help social work form into a cohesive entity. The characteristic of working simultaneously with both people and their environments to improve social functioning has consistently served as social work’s primary mission and thus differentiates social work from the other helping professions. In addition to helping people deal with their environments, social workers also consider it their mission to bring about social change in order to prevent problems or to make social institutions more responsive to the needs of people—especially the most vulnerable members of the society. With this person and environment focus, social workers provide a combination of caring, counseling, and changing activities that help people improve the quality of their lives and, therefore, help the society accomplish its goal of promoting the general welfare. In Box 3.1, the practice activities of Demetria (see Chapter 1), illustrate how her social work orientation plays out in her work with the Miles family.

Data in Table 3.1 indicate that social workers today are employed in a wide range of practice areas, from mental health to addictions; work mostly within the context of some form of agency or organization; and mostly work directly with clients to address
social issues. Table 3.2 also reinforces social work’s claim to be especially concerned with the persons in society who are most vulnerable to social problems. They work with people of all ages and races or ethnic groups, and they address a wide range of client conditions.

Social work has evolved a career ladder that recognizes professionals at four levels: basic, specialized, independent, and advanced. This classification scheme recognizes that at each of the four levels somewhat different job activities occur. The two entry levels (i.e., basic and specialized professional levels) require that the worker complete the requisite educational preparation represented in the accreditation standards of the Council on Social Work Education. At the latter two levels, additional practice experience and expertise and/or advanced education warrant the recognition.

Box 3.1

Demetria’s Social Work Orientation

The case in Chapter 1 revealed a social worker’s approach to investigating and beginning service when addressing a possible child abuse or neglect complaint. Demetria, the social worker, had just completed her social work degree, and the report from the school related to Joseph Miles was her first “solo” case. Of course, she had the backup of her supervisor, but nevertheless she was understandably apprehensive about being able to do a good job. Clearly the demands for knowledge and skill were beyond that expected of a natural helper or volunteer. Complex human issues such as this require a well-equipped professional helper, in this case, a professional social worker.

Demetria’s work clearly demonstrated a commitment to social betterment as she carried her assessment beyond the minimum required to establish or reject the suspected child abuse. She sought to understand and address the multiple issues that were combining to affect Joseph; was versatile in her practice approach by addressing individual, family, and community issues; and did something about what she found (an action orientation). Because none of the issues in this case were unchangeable, the work did not fall into the caring aspect of social work’s mission. Most of the effort involved the counseling and changing functions that social workers address. Fitting Demetria’s work into the NASW definition of social work, the paraphrasing might read “Demetria’s practice was the professional activity of helping Joseph and the Miles family restore their capacity for social functioning and creating a more supportive societal resource for those needing employment assistance.”

In the NASW classification of levels of professional social work practice, Demetria was a basic social worker, having just completed her BSW preparation, and her supervisor was probably an independent or advanced social worker according to that classification system. Demetria’s practice approach was that of an initial generalist. She did not try to fit Joseph and his mom into a specialized method or practice approach. Instead, she started by identifying their issues and drawing on multiple approaches to resolve those issues, such as individual counseling (for Joseph and his mother); involvement in a peer group (for Joseph); referral to other needed resources in the community; and a consideration of social action to improve the community resources.
KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS

Natural and professional helping  Dual focus on person and environment
Social betterment                      Generalist social work practice
Social functioning                  Specialist social work practice
Human diversity                        Traditional practice methods
Caring/Counseling/Changing            NASW classification of practice levels
“Working Definition” of social work (basic, specialized, independent, advanced)
“NASW Definition” of social work

SUGGESTED INFORMATION SOURCES


ENDNOTES

12. Ibid., pp. 4, 12.
13. Ibid., pp. 4, 17.