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PART I

Thinking about social work theory

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The Construction of Social Work Theory

What this chapter is about

How do social workers know what to do when they do social work?

At this moment, somewhere in the world, ‘clients’ are struggling into an office to meet with a ‘social worker’. Perhaps the worker is visiting the client’s home, or works with clients in groups, in residential or day care, or in community work. In most societies, this something called ‘social work’ goes on. It is widely enough spread for international associations of social workers and a shared language and literature of social work to exist, so people must assume that these social workers are doing something useful. Their agencies are tasked with the realities of life: with crisis and disaster and everyday human problems.

What they do emerges from expectations taken up from that society. In particular, people form or construct social work and its agencies by their demands and expectations, and therefore social workers and their agencies are influenced to change by their experiences with the people they serve. Clients and their experiences are the realities that social work has to deal with; they make social work what it is. Workers, clients and agencies contribute to some extent to any society’s expectations and its political and social processes by their own thinking and doing. That is a process of social construction in which people who do things together and as part of the same social organisations come to share common views of the world that they see as a social reality. It is a circular process, with each element – agency, client, social worker – influencing each other and all in the context of the social expectations that come from their wider social relations and the practical realities they all face. I explain more about social construction in Chapters 3 and 7.

This book is about the social work practice theory that claims to guide social workers in what to do when the social construction ‘social work’ interacts with the realities of life. The first part, Chapters 1–3, provides a general introduction to debates about theory in social work. Theory is a contested idea, that is, people argue about what a theory is or ought to be. This first chapter, therefore, examines practice theories, the focus of this book, and distinguishes them from other types of theory about social work. Among those theories are ideas about what social work is, because how we practise inevitably depends on what we think our aims are. So Chapter 1 goes on to discuss how social work is constructed as social workers, agencies and clients interact with the reality of the world around them.

Chapter 2 focuses on how theory may be used in a practical activity such as social work. Chapter 3 on 'issues in social work theory' identifies the range of social work practice theories and goes on to look at debate about how we assess them. Chapters 4–14 each discuss a group of theories that are current in social work at the time of writing. These show how particular theories are used in practice.

MAIN POINTS

- ▶ The main aim of the book is to review social work practice theories.
- ▶ All practice is influenced by formal and informal theories of what social work is, how to do social work and the client world.
- ▶ Practice theories participate in a politics, in which groups within the profession contend to gain influence over practice by achieving influence for particular theories.
- ▶ The discourse between three perspectives of social work (reflexive-therapeutic, socialist-collectivist and individualist-reformist) form the context in which social work theories are constructed as part of the politics.
- ▶ Social work is the product of modernist social organisation, in which the democratic state replaced the churches in providing welfare, and modernist assumptions about knowledge, in which science plays an important part.
- ▶ Practice theories are ways in which knowledge affects social work practice.
- ▶ Social work is socially constructed in three main arenas of debate and practice theories in the arena of relationships between clients, workers and social agencies.

Practice and practice theories

It is possible to think about social work in practical terms, for example as a sequence starting with assessment, moving on to intervention and then termination. To practice, you would follow practical guidelines perhaps based on research about effective ways to behave while carrying out activities of each kind, how to communicate for example. Defining social work through such processes can be mechanical (Morén, 1994). It takes for granted both our ideology about the aims of social work and also the practice theories that tell us what things it is important to assess, what we should intervene in and how, and when and how we should end the process. Even if guidelines tell you how best to interview someone, how would you know what to assess or how to intervene? If someone says: 'this is an effective way to interview', the next logical question is: 'effective for what purposes?' Simple 'do this, then that' guidelines conceal the theory and knowledge that underlies them. Social work practice is a process of deciding action from a variety of alternative positions (Berglind, 1992). We always have a theory that helps us decide why and how to choose between the alternatives, even if we hide it from ourselves (Howe, 1987).

Therefore, social workers need to have ideas that try to *explain* why and how we should make our practice decisions. I have three aims in this book in exploring these theories:

- To contribute to understanding how these theories and the distinctions between them may be used in practice.
- To identify different groups of theories and what they offer practitioners, making them more accessible for use in their practice.
- To contribute to understanding how theories are used in the discourse of social work practice and professional debate.

This book is a *review* of practice theories, not an attempt to construct a new theory. Therefore, I reflect what is available rather than extending it further. My focus is on *social work* and its *practice theories*, which try to explain, describe or justify what social workers do. I do not deal extensively with the wider social and psychological theories that connect to practice theories, but point to connections for you to explore.

Practice and other theory

A theory is an organised statement of ideas about the world. Fook (2002) argues that even putting names to things helps to provide explanation and understanding in practice. Many different ideas and ways of expressing them are relevant to practice. In Chapter 2, I suggest that using reflection and reflexivity as a consistent way of working through ideas as part of our work allows us to take ideas and apply them where they seem relevant. In social work, the term ‘theory’ covers three different possibilities:

- *Models* describe what happens during practice in a general way, in a wide range of situations and in a structured form, so that they extract certain principles and patterns of activity which give practice consistency. Models help you to structure and organise how you approach a complicated situation. A good example is task-centred practice (Chapter 5).
- *Perspectives* express values or views of the world which allow participants to order their minds sufficiently to be able to manage themselves while participating. Perspectives help you to think about what is happening in an organised way. Applying different perspectives can help you see situations from different points of view. Examples of perspectives are feminist (Chapter 12) or systems theories (Chapter 7).
- *Explanatory theory* accounts for why an action results in or causes particular consequences and identifies the circumstances in which it does so. Some writers reserve the word ‘theory’ to ideas that offer this causal explanation. To them, theories have to tell you ‘what works’. Cognitive-behavioural theory (Chapter 6) is an example of explanatory theory.

Perspective, theory and model are all necessary in a theory that is to be useful

in practice. Because social work is practical action in a complex world, a theory or perspective must offer a model of explicit guidance. Failure to do so often leads to criticism (as with early radical theory) or its rejection in daily practice (as with early cognitive theory). Yet action is not entirely pragmatic, it must be based on evidence about what is valid and effective, so a model should be backed by explanatory theory. Model and explanatory theory can only gain consistency over a wide range of social work and offer general usefulness if they offer a view of the world which allows us to transfer ideas between one situation and another and order a pattern of work, so they also need to have a perspective.

Sibeon (1990) distinguishes between formal and informal theory, as shown in Table 1.1. Formal theory is written down and debated within the profession and academic work. Informal theory consists of wider theories and values that exist in society and constructions from practical experience; those everyday practices that I mentioned at the outset of this chapter. This may include ideas from formal theory.

You may need an explanation of the mention of informal theories ‘inductively derived’. *Induction* means generalising from particular examples, *deduction* means arriving at conclusions about the particular instance from a general theory. For example, perhaps you have worked with several dying people who get angry, then depressed then accepting about their approaching death. It is induction if you conclude from that experience that most people will go through this sequence. Your induction gives you an informal model of the progression of emotional reactions to impending death. If you then meet a dying person who is depressed, it is deduction from your general theory if you judge that they will shortly become accepting. Induction allows you to take ideas from a particular case or a small number of cases and test them to see if they apply to other circumstances. This enables us to transfer ideas from practice into more general theories. It allows social workers to contribute to theory from their own practice.

Sibeon (1990, p. 34) also distinguishes between three different types of theory, as shown in Table 1.1. Theories of *what social work is* are part of a

Table 1.1 Types of theory

Types of theory	‘Formal’ theory	‘Informal’ theory
Theories of <i>what social work is</i>	Formal written accounts defining the nature and purposes of welfare (e.g. personal pathology, liberal reform, Marxist, feminist)	Moral, political, cultural values drawn upon by practitioners for defining ‘functions’ of social work
Theories of <i>how to do social work</i>	Formal written theories of practice (e.g. casework, family therapy, groupwork); applied deductively; general ideas may be applied to particular situations	Theories inductively derived from particular situations; can be tested to see if they apply to particular situations; also unwritten practice theories constructed from experience
Theories of <i>the client world</i>	Formal written social science theories and empirical data (e.g. on personality, marriage, the family, race, class, gender)	Practitioners’ use of experience and general cultural meanings (e.g. the family as an institution, normal behaviour, good parenting)

Source: Adapted from Sibeon (1990); Fook (2002); Gilgun (1994a).

discourse about the meaning of social work: people do not agree about this. Such theories relate to the material considered briefly here in Chapter 1 and in Payne (1996a): that is, different views of social work which, when you put them together, construct its nature. Theories of *how to do social work* are the practice theories that are the focus of this book. Theories of *the client world* are about the phenomena, the problems, the social realities with which social workers deal. An example is attachment theory, discussed in Chapter 4, which came out of psychotherapeutic work with children and bereaved people and was developed to become a theory of practice. Theories of the client world are sometimes referred to as knowledge for social work (see Barker and Hardiker, 1981; Sutton, 1994). Much of this material is contested in the field it came from. For example, there is a literature on child development, the sociology of families and organisations, which is vigorously debated. It is useful to know about each of these, and much more, as we deal within social work agencies with children in their families. However, using this material in social work means that we must transfer it from its original discipline into social work practice, while being aware that it is not final knowledge because there will still be continuing disagreement about it. Also, agencies, child development and family sociology interact in a particular way in social work, because social workers need this information for their particular purposes, which are different from those of, say, doctors. How that interaction between different sets of knowledge from different disciplines takes place and produces social work practice is the province of the practice theories discussed in this book. Practice theories may, therefore, be seen as a device for transferring knowledge from other purposes to the purpose of assisting social work practice (see Chapter 2 on learning transfer).

The social construction of welfare and social work

People do not agree about what social work is, and different groups within social work argue for and against different views. Moreover, what they do everyday as social workers creates social work. We call it a social construction because it does not exist as a reality, but as ideas, and what it is emerges from our debates and actions.

The idea of *social construction* comes from the work of the sociologists Berger and Luckmann (1971). They maintain that, in social affairs as opposed to the natural world, 'reality' is social knowledge which guides our behaviour, but we all have different views of it. We arrive at shared views of reality by sharing our knowledge through various social processes which organise it and make it objective. Social activity becomes habitual, so we share assumptions about how things are. Also, we behave according to social conventions based on that shared knowledge. So we institutionalise these conventions as many people agree about understandings of that aspect of society. Then, these understandings become legitimised by a process that attaches 'meanings' that, in turn, integrate these ideas about reality into an organised and plausible system. Social understanding is, in this way, the product of human understandings. For those humans, it is also objective, because the knowledge of reality is widely shared. Since people grow up within those social understandings to accept their reality, they are in a sense the product of society. So there is a circular process, in which individuals

contribute through institutionalisation and legitimation to the creation of social meaning within the social structure of societies. In turn, societies through individuals' participation in their structures create the conventions by which people behave. We can see a spiral of constantly shifting influence, creating and recreating structures and these changing structures recreating the conventions by which people live within them.

Although Berger and Luckmann originated the term, recently it has been more widely used in social psychology to create a view of psychology critical of the traditional positivist psychology. Influential proponents of this view are Gergen and his colleagues (Gergen, 1994, 1999; Gergen and Gergen, 2003) and, in Britain, Parker (1998). To give you a flavour, this kind of psychology would cast doubt on the traditional view that there is a personality basic to our individual identity. This is because we all have the possibility of making changes, and then we become a different person. Traditional psychology emphasises the continuity of the person, and might lead a social worker to say that it is impossible to change someone's basic beliefs. Constructionist psychology emphasises the possibility of change, and might lead a social worker to be optimistic about the possibility of personality change.

Social construction creates a politics of theory (Payne, 1992, 1996b, 1997, 2002c). I refer to a *politics* of social work because particular theories have interest groups that try to gain our acceptance of theory within social work. This goes on in professions in the same way as in ordinary social life, as part of the constant interaction about what is reality. Groups seek influence in this way because it helps them shift our understanding of the nature and practice of social work and welfare in ways they think will be useful or which fit with their political and social beliefs. In this way, proponents and supporters for a particular point of view struggle for acceptance of it, and they use theories that support their premises to gain a greater contribution for it in the overall construction of social work. One of the ways in which they do this is to gain greater impact for it in workers' actions within social work as they daily construct it with their clients in their agency contexts. So in selecting a theory to use, workers contribute to how social work is constructed, because *what they do* in social work *is* or *becomes* social work through the process of social construction. Since, in this book, we are examining the different theories or parts of them that they might select, the choices that practitioners make between the theories in this book in part contribute to how they influence the future of social work.

Figure 1.1 presents three views (Payne, 1996a, 2000a, b) of social work at the corners of a triangle; the triangle represents a discourse between them. Discourses are interactions between what people or groups say or do that indicate important differences between them in the meanings they give to something. The important differences between these views of social work connect with different political views about how welfare should be provided:

- *Reflexive-therapeutic views.* Dominelli (2002c) calls these *therapeutic helping approaches*. These see social work as seeking the best possible well-being for individuals, groups and communities in society, by promoting and facilitating growth and self-fulfilment. A constant spiral of interaction between workers

and clients modifies clients' ideas and allows workers to influence them; in the same way, clients affect workers' understandings of their world as they gain experience of it. This process of mutual influence is what makes social work reflexive, so that it responds to the social concerns that workers find and gain understanding of as they practise. In these ways, clients gain power over their own feelings and way of life. Through this personal power, they are enabled to overcome or rise above suffering and disadvantage. This view expresses in social work the social democratic political philosophy – economic and social development should go hand in hand to achieve individual and social improvement. This view is basic to many ideas of the nature of social work, but the two other views modify and dispute it.

- *Socialist-collectivist views.* These see social work as seeking cooperation and mutual support in society so that the most oppressed and disadvantaged people can gain power over their own lives. Social work facilitates by empowering people to take part in a process of learning and cooperation which creates institutions which all can own and participate in. Elites accumulate and perpetuate power and resources in society for their own benefit. By doing so, they create oppression and disadvantage which social work tries to supplant with more egalitarian relationships in society. Dominelli (2002c) calls these *emancipatory approaches* because they free people from oppression. Others (for example Pease and Fook, 1999) call them *transformational*, because they seek to transform societies for the benefit of the poorest and most oppressed. Moreover, they imply that disadvantaged and oppressed people will never gain personal or social empowerment unless society makes these transformations. Value statements about social work, such as codes of ethics, represent this objective by proposing social justice as an important value of all social work. This view expresses the socialist political philosophy – planned economies and social provision promote equality and social justice.
- *Individualist-reformist views.* These see social work as an aspect of welfare services to individuals in societies. It meets individuals' needs and improves services of which it is a part, so that social work and the services can operate more effectively. Dominelli (2002c) calls these *maintenance approaches*, reflecting the term used by Davies (1994). They see social work as maintaining the *social order* and social fabric of society, and maintaining people during any period of difficulties they may be experiencing, so that they can recover stability again. This view expresses the liberal or rational economic political philosophy – that personal freedom in economic markets, supported by the rule of law, is the best way of organising societies.

Each view says something about the activities and purposes of social work in welfare provision in any society. Each criticises or seeks to modify the others. For example, seeking personal and social fulfilment, as in reflexive-therapeutic views, is impossible to socialist-collectivists because the interests of elites obstruct many possibilities for oppressed peoples, unless we achieve significant social change. They argue that merely accepting the social order, as reflexive-therapeutic and individualist-reformist views do, supports and enhances the interests of elites. To the socialist-collectivist, therefore, the alternative views obstruct the opportunities

of oppressed people who should be the main beneficiaries of social work. To take another example, individualist-reformists say that trying to change societies to make them more equal or create personal and social fulfilment through individual and community growth are unrealistic in everyday practice. This is because most practical objectives of social work activity refer to small-scale individual change, which cannot lead to major social and personal changes. Also, stakeholders in the social services who finance and give social approval to social work activities mainly want a better fit between society and individuals. They do not seek major changes. That is why individualist-reformists prefer their approach.

However, these different views also have affinities. For example, both reflexive-therapeutic and socialist-collective views are centrally about change and development. Also, reflexive-therapeutic and individualist-reformist views are about individual work rather than social objectives. Generally, therefore, most conceptions of social work include elements of each of these views. Alternatively, they sometimes acknowledge the validity of elements of the others. For example, socialist-collective views criticise unthinking acceptance of the present social order which is often taken for granted in individualist and therapeutic views. Nevertheless, most people who take this view of social work accept helping individuals to fulfil their potential within present social systems. They often see this as a stepping stone to a changed society by promoting a series of small changes aiming towards bigger ones.

So these different views fit together or compete with each other in social work practice. Looking at Figure 1.1, if you or your agency were positioned at A (very common especially for beginning social workers), your main focus might be providing services in a therapeutic, helping relationship, as a care manager (in managed care) or in child protection. You might do very little in the way of seeking to change the world, and by being part of an official or service system, you are accepting the pattern of welfare services as it is. However, in your individual work, what you do may well be guided by eventual change objectives. For example, if you believe that relationships between men and women should be more equal, your work in families will probably reflect your views. Position B might represent someone working in a refuge for women suffering domestic

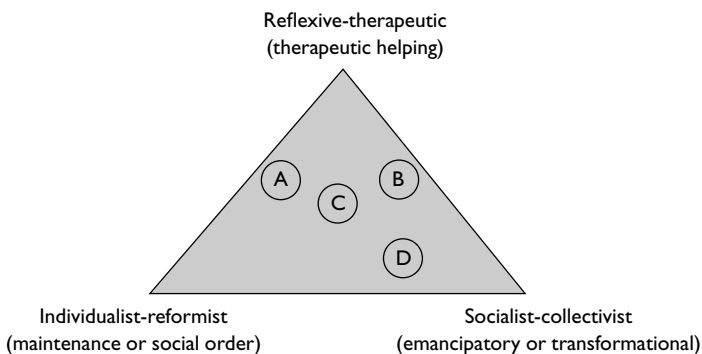


Figure 1.1 Discourse on the nature of social work

violence. Much of their work is helping therapeutically, but the very basis of their agency is changing attitudes towards women in society, and you might do some campaigning work as part of your helping role. Position C is equally balanced; some change, some service provision, some therapeutic helping. My present job is like that: to promote community development so that communities become more resilient about and respond better to people who are dying or bereaved, but I also provide help for individuals and I am responsible for liaison with other services so that our service system becomes more effective. Position D is mainly transformational but partly maintenance. This reflects the reality that seeking social change is not, in the social services, completely revolutionary, but will also seek to make the service system more effective. Many community workers, for example, are seeking quite major change in the lives of the people they serve by achieving better cooperation and sharing, but they may act by helping local groups make their area safe from crime, providing welfare rights advocacy or organising self-help playgroups in the school holidays.

Political aims in welfare, views of social work and particular practice theories link in complex ways. The links between, say, liberal or rational political theory and individualist-reformist social work and task-centred practice are clear, but the devisors of task-centred practice (Chapter 5) did not identify themselves as political liberals, and seek to devise a theory that expressed their ideas about the nature of social work. They did research, came up with an approach that seemed to work, and presented it to social workers to use. When we set it alongside other theories, we can see that it meets some of the aims and philosophies of social work and not others. The connections and commentary parts of many of the chapters in Part II of this book draw attention to some of the links and disagreements between theories that express these philosophies of welfare and views of social work.

There will never be a final answer that says social work is one thing, but we can see by looking at the discourse the sort of areas in which it operates and the sort of issues that it faces. The answers vary according to the time, social conditions and cultures where we ask these questions, because these times, social conditions and cultures contribute to the construction of social work, as workers, clients and agencies interact with each other. Nonetheless, taking part in social work requires a view about your particular balance between these aims – your own construction which guides the actions you take. It includes values appropriate to doing social work, and theories about the nature of social work; for example, sociological theories about its role in society or its relationships with other occupational groups. This analysis helps social workers to think through their view in general, and also to see what balance of views they might take in a piece of work.

Practice theories fit into and support one or other of these views of social work. They appear to form alternatives which compete for attention, and exclude one another, competing for territory. However, part of this competition represents a politics of support for a view of welfare and social work which emphasises one or other of the views on social work. Critical, anti-oppressive, feminist and empowerment perspectives, for example, implement – and exemplify the possibility of acting in – a socialist-collectivist frame of action. Existentialist, humanist and social psychological perspectives represent a more reflexive-

Table 1.2 Analysis of social work theories

Type of theory	Reflexive-therapeutic	Socialist-collectivist	Individualist-reformist
Perspective:			
Comprehensive	Psychodynamic	Critical	Social development
Inclusive	Humanist, existential	Anti-oppression	Systems
Theory	Construction	Feminist	Cognitive-behavioural
Model	Crisis	Empowerment	Task-centred

therapeutic emphasis. Task-centred and systems theories are more individualist-reformist in their assumptions. An analysis of the groups of theories discussed in this book along these lines is given in Table 1.2.

This table divides perspectives into comprehensive and inclusive categories. *Comprehensive* theories claim to offer a system of thought to cover all the practice that social workers might want to undertake. They do so by offering a view of the world that organises our thoughts and gives us priorities within the range of things that might be possible. These theories are more or less supported by an evidenced body of knowledge, and the extent to which this is so might be disputed. However, the literature about them contains a great deal of commentary, analysis and prescription that is able to form the basis of a social work practice on its own. *Inclusive* theories, while they are comprehensive in this way, also explicitly permit the inclusion within them of other theories and models, provided they are used consistently with the overall outlook of the perspective.

Before looking at trends and types of theory, I want to comment first on how I have allocated theories to different cells in Table 1.2. First, I must emphasise again that the ideas of discourse between views within social work and the need for all theories to have elements of perspective, theory and model within them means that no theory can be allocated wholly to any category. We are talking about centres of focus and strengths, not absolutes. On more specific points, I want to comment on the positioning of social development, critical and anti-oppressive groups of theories. I have placed social development theories as individualist-reformist because they are generally theories that accept the current social order. Some theories of development are socialist and seek social transformation, but, generally, social development practice theories seek reform or operate on individuals and small groups or communities, rather than seeking radical social change. Critical theories have increasingly become comprehensive, since some formulations do offer a worked-out practice model and in their own terms are based on a well-constructed and evidenced theory. However, some critical theory, for example Mullaly's (2003) structural social work, is very sketchy in its practice guidance, and leaves workers to include methodologies from anywhere provided they fit with the overall ideology. Also, it is more a well-constructed edifice of ideology than a theory evidenced from social science research. Anti-oppressive theory is supported by evidence of discriminatory social relations and provides a well-worked-out explanatory account, but has less evidence for its practice prescriptions. It seeks to be more a value base and approach to practice incorporating other practice methods and so leans towards being inclusive. Empowerment and advocacy have some

explanatory and ideological content, but increasingly seek to promote a practical way of doing social work within cotemporary society. This makes them, among socialist-collectivist ideas, an important explanatory base for action, even though the implications of the structuralist ideology drawn from it are disputed.

To comment more generally on Table 1.2, the three groupings of theories show how theories take different views of social work; I will remind you of this in the separate chapters of Part II. The reflexive-therapeutic column represents the ideas within social work which concern personal development and fulfilment, with an emphasis on emotions and interpersonal responses. It is concerned with personal change. The socialist-collectivist column represents the ideas within social work which focus on its social purposes. It is concerned with social change. The individualist-reformist column represents those ideas within social work which focus on its response to social and political demands for order. It is concerned with maintaining social order. If we work within a particular group, rather than take ideas from everywhere, this will have consequences for how we understand social work and what we are doing within it.

Are there paradigms of social work?

Sometimes, views of professions and areas of knowledge such as social work are called *paradigms* (pronounced ‘paradymes’). This concept means a pattern or template, something which is commonly reproduced in an activity. Kuhn (1970) uses ‘paradigm’ to describe a general view of the nature of physical or natural phenomena in science. His influential book on the history of science suggests that scientific activity (theory-making, experimentation, methods of research, debate and so on) always builds on a paradigm. Eventually, in a scientific revolution, a completely new world view of phenomena is constructed. This changes the conception of those phenomena and forms a new paradigm.

Some writers (such as Fischer, 1981) argue that such shifts in social work conceptions have occurred. Again, this is part of a politics claiming that their view of what social work should be like is replacing an older (and, it is implied, discredited) position. Kuhn questions (1970: 15) whether the social sciences are developed enough to have built a paradigm, let alone to have had a revolution. However, Kuhn (1970: 49) accepts that minor paradigms grow up in what he calls the ‘ramshackle structure of specialities’. He accepts that some people will want to claim these as paradigms before they have found wide agreement. This seems to me to be the status of the three views in social work. I think, therefore, that debates between theories which fall mainly within each view are debates between these ‘minor paradigms’.

Generally, though, seeing ‘paradigm’ as Kuhn mainly uses the term, I argue that there is one paradigm of social work, socially constructed in the discourse between the three views, the triangle of Figure 1.1. All current theory and practice fits into this paradigm. It is in practice accepted since most social workers do what most people would recognise as similar sorts of things with their clients. We accept that the different views are present within the social work discourse, because we debate them all the time.

If theoretical ideas all fit into one paradigm, they can be an important pillar of mutual understanding and identity among social workers. They would form an element in the *social*, that is, *shared*, construction of social work. One problem with this view is that the shared understanding derives from the wide influence of Western social work theories. There has been criticism since the 1970s (Yelaja, 1970; Midgley, 1981; Osei-Hwedie, 1990, 1993) about the way Western social work ideas have been used in other cultures, allowing the culture of Western countries, and in particular the USA, to dominate knowledge. The internationalist perspective in social work education (Payne, 2005) understands the development of social work as being one stream of progress, strongly influenced by American and other English-language perspectives.

The argument against this view has been that:

- value and cultural bases of different societies may be incompatible
- societies face different problems and issues
- concerns about cultural imperialism and the history of oppressive colonialism continue to be reflected in postcolonial social and cultural relationships between Western and non-Western countries, where domination is by cultural influence rather than physical force.

On the other hand:

- Many Western countries are culturally pluralist and there is interest in different ideas. However, criticisms of multiculturalism and ethnic sensitivity (see Chapter 13) suggest that this is sometimes tokenistic or shallow.
- Cultural hegemony (exercising power by influencing people through culture) does not only work in one direction, since different colonial powers operated in different ways and there was influence in both directions. Postcolonialism is the idea that colonial influence continues through economic and cultural dominance rather than political control; some people argue that its effect is exaggerated.
- Western cultural dominance is resisted, and the more there is interference, the more likely it is that alternatives will gain credence among non-Western cultures. Some people point to the growing influence of Islam as an example.

This debate suggests that we must be careful of assuming the shared understanding and shared theoretical base of social work. In this book, I have tried to introduce alternatives to Western social work theory, for example Gandhian social work from India, perspectives from China and Africa, and social pedagogy from Europe. I have inevitably used mainly literature produced in the West, because that is where I live and so it forms the perspective from which I am writing. However, I have looked for contributions from a range of Western countries, from Australia, Canada, and various European countries as well as Britain and the USA. My intention here is to draw attention to the issue that views of social work and practice theory vary in substance and application in different social and historical contexts. That is the consequence of social

construction engaging with different realities. While accepting that formal theory as currently written often originates in the single Western viewpoint, I want to raise awareness that it is widely adapted for other cultures, and that new ideas emerge from other cultures. The West can learn new possibilities from these adaptations and ideas.

In summary, then, we must be cautious about saying that social work has one paradigm or that the three views of social work are competing paradigms. This is because, as a social phenomenon, any act of social work, any organisation of an agency or any welfare system represent a mixture of elements of all these views in a different recipe, reflecting social expectations and cultures. So social work theory and how it is used is different in different countries and different agencies. Although everywhere it shares many of the same elements, the way they are put together to create social work practice in context always varies.

Is social work theory ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’?

I refer to ‘modern’ social work theory for two reasons. The first is that the social construction view is that a phenomenon such as social work can only be understood for a time and social context in which the understanding arises. People will inevitably reconstruct theories as they are affected by social changes. So only what is modern in the sense of ‘current’ will be fully relevant, although we can pick things up from older sets of ideas, and it is often helpful to understand where ideas come from historically.

The second reason for discussing ‘modern’ social work theory is because of the idea of the ‘postmodern’. This connects with the politics of social work theory, because postmodern ideas represent a particular view of knowledge. *Postmodernism* refers to changes in the way in which we think about our societies and the way in which we create and understand knowledge. One of Kuhn’s scientific revolutions was the shift in thinking in Europe during the Enlightenment in the 1700s and 1800s. Prior to this, we relied on the authority of religion and monarchs to tell us how to think. The Enlightenment led to an emphasis on the *scientific* method, the idea that we could develop knowledge by observing and experimenting with the real world. Each observation and experiment builds up a picture of what the real world is like, which gives us evidence for how to act. Eventually, this led to less reliance on absolute political authority, and the successive British, American and French revolutions led the way in rejecting monarchy in their different ways and promoting rational democratic authority. It also led to a decline in the social importance of religion in the West. This emphasis on rationality and scientific method has been economically and socially successful; it is called ‘modernist’, to distinguish it from ‘traditional’ reliance on authority, even though to people living now it is a fairly ancient development.

Social work is a product of *modernism*. This is because it is one of the secular replacements for the welfare role of the Christian churches in Western countries (Payne, 2005). It is also modernist because it is based on the idea that we can understand and study social problems and societies, and take rational action to deal with the problems we see. The very idea of social work theory is also modernist, because it says that we can reach a rational understanding of human

beings and society and decide how to act consistently to change both people and societies according to our knowledge. Having a theory that guides action is inherently modernist – it says that we can base our actions on evidence of the world around us.

Postmodernism suggests that there is an alternative way of thinking about knowledge and understanding. These ideas arose partly as a reaction to modernist thinking; this is why they are called ‘postmodern’. However, they reflect a set of ideas, ‘interpretivism’ (Chapter 3), that have always been present in debates about knowledge. Postmodernism points out that knowledge is always socially constructed, because the choice of which knowledge is developed is not neutral. For example, a scientist chooses to observe or experiment with particular aspects of the real world out of personal choice and because society at the time is interested in that particular area of knowledge. Another example is that people are often psychologically disturbed and socially disrupted by their experiences of war, so psychiatry and social policy develop as a result.

Another point is that when we observe or experiment in social matters, we are part of the society that creates what we are looking at, so it is difficult not to take for granted the social arrangements that we see all around us. For example, we are all part of families, and society has approved ways of forming a family, such as a man and a woman marrying and having children. So, is a couple of men a family, if they live together in a gay relationship? Would they be more of a family if they adopted or fostered children? This example draws attention to our language, to the word ‘family’. By using it, we often refer to the conventional model of the family, a heterosexual couple with children. That is how we ‘construct’ an idea of what a family is, and we compare it with other examples and think they are ‘not-family’. This then has consequences for behaviour: the gay couple and their children may resent not being constructed as a family; they feel excluded and calling their arrangement a ‘family’ is a political statement, which seeks to change other people’s views of what a family is and of them. Using this item of language is an example of a social action to try to achieve change by changing language use.

How social ideas are constructed changes. To follow the same example, twenty years ago, most people in Western countries would have taken it for granted that a gay couple was not a family and would not have children. Language also changes: they would probably have been called homosexual rather than gay, which also means cheerful, and was widely used in that way until the 1950s. In the early 2000s, some people would accept that they might be a family and might adopt children, while others feel strongly that this extends the idea of family too far and that their having children would be potentially damaging to the children. In the physical or medical sciences, once we have found something out and confirmed it in experiment, it is generally accepted as true, and we can build other knowledge on that fact. In social matters, we know that our language and knowledge will change, so it is hard to build a structure of knowledge upon it, because we cannot generalise from how it is at one time or in one place to other times and places. Also, how researchers use the term ‘family’ will imply something about their own views and will offend or gain the support of others who have their views. People with particular views try to use language to emphasise their views; people who dislike the views may resist this. Some people

resisted the appropriation of the word 'gay' to mean 'male homosexual', for example. Language therefore becomes part of the politics of discourse.

Postmodernism, then, taking it to the extreme, says that we cannot take for granted any social knowledge. There are no essentials or foundations for knowledge so postmodernism is *anti-essentialist* and *anti-foundationalist*. This is because all knowledge has the potential for change, and we must question it all the time. Of course, as we question it, we are using language in a way that raises the possibility of changing it. Postmodern knowledge must also rely on its historical and social context. It arises out of the social relationships in any society at any particular time. This has tremendous advantages for social workers for two main reasons. First, it emphasises that change is continuous and urges us to believe that we can achieve it through social interaction. Social work seeks to make personal and social changes through social interaction, so social construction ideas emphasise the possibility of effectiveness in social work. Also, social workers often have the job of finding out about people's personal and social histories to contribute to the work of other professions and official decision-making processes. Social construction ideas suggest why this is useful as a basis for understanding and action, because we cannot understand reality without understanding historical and social contexts. It also warns that how we use language in our report-writing may have a strong influence, for good or bad, on the outcome.

Social construction is a postmodernist idea, and so therefore my presentation of social work as a social construction accepts that it is ambiguous, contested and responds to social and cultural contexts. How, then, can we deal with producing practice guidance for a constantly changing activity? To understand this, we have to look more closely at how social work is constructed in particular societies.

Arenas of social work construction

Social construction in social work is a complex of social structures and individual participants influencing each other. I have suggested (Payne, 1999) that three arenas of social construction are important for social work, as set out in Figure 1.2. Each arena influences the others. One is the *political-social-ideological arena*, in which social and political debate forms the policy that guides agencies and the purposes that they are set or develop for themselves. Social workers engage in this through professional associations and other organisations, their involvement in social issues, as activists, voters or writers, and through the influence of their agencies. Another is the *agency-professional arena* in which employers and collective organisations of employees, such as trade unions and professional associations, engage in influencing each other about the more specific elements of how social work will operate. The third is the client-worker-agency arena, which I discuss more fully below, because it is the most important arena for the focus of this book on practice theory. Each of these arenas influences the others. People who are clients can, for example, influence the political-social-philosophical arena by their votes or by rioting and many other ways. They can affect the agency-professional arena by arriving at agencies in large numbers asking for service; this will lead to practical changes in policy and practice, even if it is to exclude them.

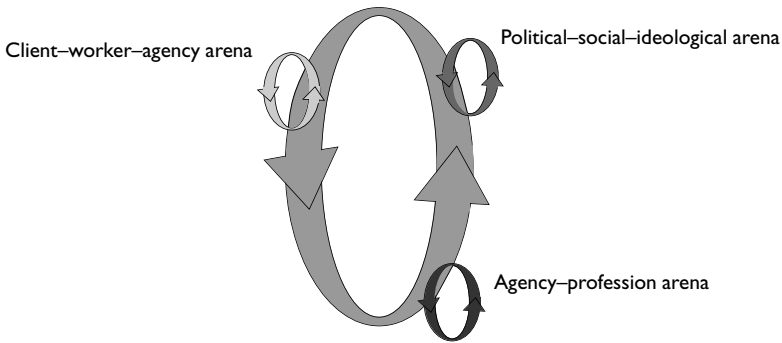


Figure 1.2 Arenas of social construction of social work

For example, in the 1980s, when HIV/AIDS first became evident, pressure groups and specialist agencies grew up to influence government and social debate. People with problems arising from HIV/AIDS came to social agencies and caused them to change their practice. These changes were negotiated in many different places, and these three arenas are only a limited selection, indicating important centres of influence.

Our focus, in this book, is on one aspect of the spiral of influences in social work, the theory that guides workers' practice: the client-worker-agency arena. At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that in spite of cultural and national differences, social work was always constructed from three elements: client, worker and agency. So, general statements about social work and its theory must reflect an understanding about how that construction takes place. Social construction takes place in interactions with reality within social contexts.

The social construction of practice theory

We create practice theory within social work out of an interaction with social work practice, which in turn interacts with wider social contexts. Three sets of forces construct social work: those that create and control social work as an occupation; those that create people as clients who seek or are sent for social work help; and those which create the social context in which social work is practised. Evans and Kearney (1996) describe these as the central triangular relationship between worker, client and agency. Social work is a special activity where people interact in special social roles as 'social worker' and 'client'. Those roles thus partly define its nature. Sometimes other forms of social work such as care management (managed care) create the special role 'service user' instead. Understanding social work involves examining the factors which establish the social positions of these actors in a complex of social relationships. These interact over time and in a power context. There are process outcomes (for example caring and trust between the participants) which make the interaction effective in achieving desired results. These desired results in many cases produce the outcomes of social services within which practice takes place.

In encounters with clients social workers are constructed by occupational

expectations, that is, the organised statements and understandings which say what a social worker is, and the social processes which define someone as a social worker. The various histories of social work, and its relationships with other occupational groups and social institutions, define its nature as an occupation. That nature changes, grows, perhaps declines in response to social changes. So, knowledge and ideas that workers use also respond to social changes.

Much professional writing ignores clients' influences on social work – they are merely the objects of an activity that theory has defined. In fact, I argue, they partly construct the activity through the process by which they become the special people called 'clients'. The client-making process is itself socially constructed, because it relies on general social understandings of the nature of social work. It is a slightly different process that would construct them as 'patients' or 'service users', if we prefer to call them that. As they bring the outside world with them into social work activity, clients change the nature of social work. In this sense, social work is a reflexive process in which clients change workers *and* the nature of social work *and* therefore also change the 'theory' of social work. Clienthood is not an invariable or absolute *state*, but is partly a matter of perception, so that if others see a person as a client, they may treat them as such. Such perceptions may be held by clients, workers, officials in the worker's agency, people in other agencies, the client's family or others in the client's social environment. Once we ascribe clienthood to someone, it often persists even if social work activity is intermittent or has stopped. Clienthood may be associated with certain sorts of people, for example those of a particular social class or living on a particular housing estate.

Since different people's perceptions of clienthood vary, we must see where those perceptions come from. This may be personal. For example, an Israeli study (Krumer-Nevo, 2003) identified three patterns of receiving help among women who lived in long-term social and economic deprivation:

- A calming pattern; help is perceived as an opportunity to escape, relax and calm down
- An empowerment pattern; help is perceived as a source of learning and strengthening
- A rebiohistory pattern; help is perceived as bringing a new self-awareness and personal development.

These patterns connect with the three views of social work, discussed above, being respectively individualist-reformist, socialist-collectivist and reflexive-therapeutic.

It is likely that the social institutions and their history that we examined as originators of the definition of a social worker are also influential in defining clienthood. Terms such as 'child in need' or 'vulnerable adult' in British social work gain official status through legislation or government guidance. However, 'child', 'adult', 'need' and 'vulnerable' are all words that might easily be interpreted differently in other societies, and in different agencies with varying priorities.

This brings us to defining clienthood as a process. Since clienthood is hard to understand as a state, understanding it as a *process* is more appropriate. People are becoming, acting as and moving away from being clients of social work (Payne, 1993). *The route to clienthood* only begins when someone becomes aware of some issues in their lives which need resolution. The definition of a problem, the social pressures, the route to the agency and options which were closed off on that route which led to the selection of this agency, all these may arise from general social perceptions about a problem and the agencies available. Becoming and being a client leads also to the process of ceasing to be one. This, again, involves recognising circumstances which lead to an impulsion – this time away from the agency. Understanding when it is appropriate to stop involvement with an agency is also an important factor. In any of these moves, clients are again affected by their own social understanding, information gained from the worker, legal pressures and knowledge and attitudes derived from the client's social circle.

Social work characteristically takes place in an organisational context of agencies, that is, associations of people constructed to achieve particular purposes. This is true even of private practice or working with self-help groups, which form simple, less structured agencies. Agencies are another set of social relations through which social constructions influence social work. They are formally controlled by management boards representing the communities served, by political election with government agencies, or through another nominating process with private or voluntary agencies. As organisations, they are subject to influences, whether economic, political, organisational, bureaucratic or theoretical, different from those affecting workers and clients. I have explored these points more fully elsewhere (Payne, 1996a).

The social construction view of social work that we are exploring presents the relationship between workers, clients and their agency context as *reflexive*; each affects and changes the others. A major feature of any acceptable model of social work theory, therefore, is the extent to which it can offer explanations of and guidance in dealing with the pressures put by clients on the perceptions of workers of their social circumstances. A theory which is inadequate in representing the real needs of clients as presented to agencies is likely to be only partially accepted or become supplanted.

So far, I have argued that social work *itself* is reflexive because it responds to people's demands on a service affecting workers. Theoretical development reflects this, because we reject or amend theories which fail to meet the demands actually made. So theory is constructed in an interaction between ideas and realities, mediated through the human beings involved. How clients experience their reality affects how workers think about their practice theories; agencies constrain and react to both and together they make some social work. The social work they make influences what social work is and how it is seen elsewhere.

A social work theory must therefore respond to the contemporary social construction of reality both by clients and workers and their social environments; if it fails to do so, it will be unsuccessful. The recognition of the need for theory to be reflexive like this is a feature of more modern social work theories such as ecological systems approaches, where the interaction with the environment is strongly recognised (see Chapter 7), and critical approaches (see Chapters 11–14).

According to this view of social work, its theory must be constantly changing in response to practice constructions by its participants. Therefore, accounts of its nature cannot be universal. Instead, it is a variety of activities which have common features in most social constructions of it. In saying this, we must remember Berger and Luckmann's (1971) view that a social construction is an (at least partially) *agreed* view of the world which is accepted within a social group as a 'reality'. That is, it is agreed to be at least a reasonable representation of the world which helps us to deal with things external to us. Since theory describes and explains what workers do, it must also respond to the realities of its social constructions, otherwise, we would reject or amend it. So theory is both flexible and allows us to change and develop it through practice, but it is also settled between us and changes and develops through a process of creating 'formal theory' as opposed to 'informal theory' (see Table 1.1).

CRITICAL PRACTICE FOCUS

The Gargery family

Mr Gargery, a migrant to the town from Africa, was admitted to the hospital intensive care unit following a coronary incident, received intensive treatment, then moved to an ordinary ward in the hospital, where, still being quite ill and with such a large family visiting, he was placed in his own room. The family had many teenage children, the room was always noisy, there were arguments, senior nurses had to break up a fight between two family members in the doorway of another patient's room, the television or music was often on and loud. Several members of the local church visited regularly and prayed and sang hymns for Mr Gargery's well-being, disturbing other patients. The multiprofessional team caring for Mr Gargery discussed the situation, and wondered about limiting visitors on health grounds, although this was not strictly necessary, and Mr Gargery appreciated having his family around him.

The social worker in the team has to carve out a role relevant to the team's wishes which also respects the social work role. To apply theory, the worker must select an aspect of the complicated situation. Looking at the three views of social work, you might see your role in maintaining the quiet peaceful 'social order' of the hospital for the benefit of other patients, you might be aware of the cultural and family strengths that Mr Gargery can call on and needs to maintain, you might see an opportunity for social learning or personal development for some of the younger children, whose distress at their father's illness is plain to see but is cheerfully downplayed by the senior members of the family.

Establishing your professional role in a multiprofessional situation, where the concerns are for a social institution, the hospital and Mr Gargery, the patient, is commonplace in present-day social work. You also have to accept the social work focus on the patient's interaction with his social environment and its cultural and structural effects on him and his family. What balance of approaches might you think appropriate?

What do you think the route to clienthood for Mr Gargery and his family might be? You would need to bear in mind the experience of migration and his being part

of a minority ethnic group. How will that route interact with the hospital and its policies, the requirements of social work ethics and practice? How will it interact with your route to being a social worker to construct your particular social work for and with this family? Thinking about another social worker you know, how would it be different constructing social work for him or her?

Conclusion

In summary, then, I have argued that social work is socially constructed through interactions with clients, because they themselves become defined as clients by social processes, through its formation as an occupation among a network of related occupations, and through the social forces which define it through its organisational, agency and social context.

Going on from these points, the social construction of social work suggests that its theory at any time is constructed by the same social forces that construct the activity. Theory for practice will inevitably respond to current social realities, so that present interests and concerns colour it. Yet it also reflects the histories of theoretical, occupational and service context. The strength of influence of those histories in constructing contemporary theory varies from time to place to person, but they are always there, alongside present social forces.

The implication of a social construction view is that social work theory should be seen as a representation of more or less agreed understandings within various social groupings within social work, presented through the medium of language in texts which contain accounts of those theories. The struggle between competing understandings and constructions of social work is manifested in the differing theoretical constructions and languages which form the theories discussed in this book. That struggle is a politics: people and groups seek influence over social constructions of social work and thus over the actions of workers in their profession by seeking broader professional acceptance of particular theories expressed as coherent, agreed forms of understanding. In turn, this may influence perceptions of social work within welfare services and the wider society, which will start the spiral of influence again as these perceptions will affect how social workers act within their work. I explore the politics of social work theory further in Chapter 3.

I have argued that these constructions become, as a context for present construction-making, a reality for the participants. These constructions react to a real world that affects these participants. Social work, then, is created from two realities, the one constructed as a context for our present activity and the real natural world that affects us all and on which our constructions build. Consistency and continuity in what social work is and how it may be done comes from the social and natural realities that underlie our constructions. Therefore, although I am concerned to recognise how social workers construct social work in their interactions, I am also concerned to show how there is a social work to be understood, known and researched. Social work theory is a construction, interacting with a real world of social relations, but because it is a construction,

we are able to adapt and develop it as we practise, just as we can help clients to develop and adapt by our practice. To do so, we need to have ideas to direct, manage and inform what we do. These ideas are the social work practice theories reviewed in Chapters 4–14 of this book. However, to use them, we have to be able to work in practice with those ideas, and this is the focus of Chapter 2.

FURTHER READING

Burr, V. (2003) *Social Constructionism*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge).

An accessible account of social construction theory in social psychology.

Jokinen, A., Juhila, K. and Pösö, T. (1999) *Constructing Social Work Practices* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

A useful collection of papers, many research-based, demonstrating how social construction ideas may be applied to social work, and how effective social construction research may be in researching practice.

Payne, M. (1996) *What is Professional Social Work?* (Birmingham: Venture).

An extended discussion of the points summarised in this chapter about the social construction of social work within three perspectives, and examining the construction of practice from ideas about social work, its values, its organisational setting and dealing with issues such as globalisation, power and professionalisation. An updated second edition is forthcoming from Policy Press in 2006, dealing particularly with the relationship between social work and social care, that is, social work as part of wider provision in the social and human services.

Payne, M. (2005) *The Origins of Social Work: Change and Continuity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

This book examines the development of social work and continuing themes in its social construction as a profession within different welfare regimes.

What is Professional Social Work? and *The Origins of Social Work: Change and Continuity* are related to the present book and its account of how practice theory constructs social work. Jointly, they give an extended account of the social construction of social work as a social phenomenon, a practice activity and a profession.

WEBSITES

<http://www.swap.ac.uk/>

The Social Work and Policy (SWAP) website has a comprehensive, searchable set of links to a wide range of social policy and social work websites, and gives a good picture of social work generally.

<http://www.elsc.org.uk/>

The Electronic Library of Social Care contains access to a wide range of resources included the Caredata searchable bibliography of recent social work literature.

<http://www.ifsw.org/>

The International Federation of Social Workers website provides access to national associations of social workers and codes of ethics across the world, many of which have

useful resources, and contains the international definition of social work and international codes of ethics.

<http://www.socialworksearch.com/>

<http://www.nyu.edu/socialwork/wwwrsw/>

'Social work search' and 'World Wide Web resources for social workers' are useful directories of websites relevant for social work, from American bases, but with reasonable world coverage.

<http://www.geocities.com/kieranodsw/index.html>

'Surfing social work' – a good New Zealand-based directory.

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