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# Introducing social work: a starter kit

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# Contents

# Introduction and overview

## Introduction

This course is called a ‘starter kit’ because it assumes that the average learner will not have very much, or maybe will have no previous background, of formally studying about social work. It may be though that many starter kit learners will have previously acted in a helping capacity to other people in lots of different ways. It is likely therefore that many learners will bring to this course a wide range of hugely relevant practice-wisdom resulting from their own direct experience.

Whatever your background to date, hopefully this course will provide you with a series of new ideas and new ways of thinking about many of the key aspects of social work. By definition, starter kits get you up and running. They include a highly selected and slimmed-down collection of items that when constructed and used, provide a reasonably realistic working-model of what a more fully developed version may feel like. Hopefully, you will find that this starter kit does not have too many odd-looking levers and buttons to get in the way of you learning about some of the core elements of social work practice.

This course provides an excellent overview of the kinds of thinking and the styles of reflection that are required and take place ‘under the hood’ of professional social work today.

The course is split into four sessions:

**Session 1 What is social work?:** Here you will look at definitions of social work as well as social work roles and what social workers do.

**Session 2 What makes a good social worker?:** In this session you will explore the importance of communication, empathy and creating rapport in social work. You will also look at how to communicate with children and working with families.

**Session 3 Understanding social divisions and diversity:** In this session you’ll look at the subject of poverty, social exclusion and diversity, and why social workers need to appreciate the influence of these issues in their work.

**Session 4 Understanding human development:** The final session explores why a knowledge of human development is essential for working in social work and social care.

## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- appreciate in greater depth what professional social work is, and what it is not, and learn that on occasions you are able to ‘think like a social worker’
- identify some of the principal components of the communication skills applicable to social work and to understand that social work is based on a series of clear values and ethical principles to which professional social workers subscribe

- understand why social workers hold as central the direct involvement of service users in decision making regarding their lives
- appreciate the impact of oppression and social exclusion in the lives of individuals and communities, and why it is important for social workers to take these factors into account in their work
- understand some of the ways in which the patterns in human development offer important clues for understanding the nature of people's motivations, choices and behaviours.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course K832 *Developing social work practice*.

# 1 Moving around the course

In the ‘Summary’ at the end of each session, you will find a link to the next session. If at any time you want to return to the start of the course, click on ‘Full course description’. From here you can navigate to any part of the course.

It’s also good practice, if you access a link from within a course page, to open it in a new window or tab. That way you can easily return to where you’ve come from without having to use the back button on your browser.

You can now go to Session 1.

# Session 1: What is social work?

## Introduction

Legally in the UK, the term ‘Social Worker’ has been a protected title since 2005. Anyone using this title must be registered with their relevant UK nation-specific regulatory body and it is an offence to use the title of social worker without being qualified and registered. However, while it is certainly useful that the professional title is legally protected, the definition of what social work itself may be is far from clear cut and, internationally, the roles and tasks of ‘social work’ can vary significantly in their interpretation.

In this first session of the course you’ll look at how to define social work and what exactly being a social worker entails.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course K832 *Developing social work practice*.

# 2 The problem of defining social work

Figure 1

At the heart of social work exists the tension between, on the one hand, working with individuals to promote empowerment, independence, and at times protection; while on the other hand, working within a wider organisational and societal context where there are strong and often conflicting ideological, institutional and political forces. These forces can on occasions constrain and oppress individuals, groups and communities. As a consequence, social work is often involved in negotiating the space between whether individuals should be helped to adapt to society, or whether society itself should be held up for scrutiny and be judged as needing adjustment and repair. In this mix, in the UK at least, social work practice is almost always located in elite professional hierarchies, usually all with their own 'professional territorialism' (Hudson, 2017, p. 1960).

An individual worker may find it hard although not impossible to be both a practitioner working primarily with individuals and with families, while at the same time be a campaigning social reformer. However, by definition, professional social work embodies a reforming commitment to the development of social justice and anti-oppressive practice, and this is especially relevant because social work often engages with service users who are already in many ways likely to be vulnerable. However, social work exists in real-world three-dimensional social spaces, and while being passionate about social justice is highly desirable and indeed is a professional requirement, it may, as Wilson (2017, p. 1310) suggests, be 'impossible to act in the world without ever causing harm'. Therefore, perhaps social work is always work-in-progress, in which social workers are participants and active contributors in a much larger, longer-running and value-driven social drama.

Social work in the UK exists in a society that while in parts is highly diverse, remains as a Western European social democracy with a general assumption at law of the primacy of the individual. Internationally, other societies do not necessarily have such baselines, as noted by Reisch (2016, p. 39), who observed that 'many Islamic and Asian societies emphasize family and community well-being over individual rights, personal freedom and political democracy'; additionally, citing Japanese societies that tend to base the norms of distribution on principles of social obligation and solidarity.

Donovan et al. (2017, p. 2291) comment that 'Social work is a discipline innately engaged in and influenced by the political and social context in which it is practised'. It is important therefore when considering the definitions and the delivery systems of social work, in the UK and beyond, to always take fully into account the cultural context and the models of individual, family and social obligations that are valued and promoted in each context. All societies tend to have their own unique worldviews, and often these will be very different to UK or Western European perspectives. In their practice, therefore, social workers must anticipate these potential differences and work positively to address human needs and

rights, even though their practice base will reflect the cultural and legal norms of where they work, and be influenced strongly by the agencies in which they are employed.

Holland and Scourfield (2015, p. 9) report that most countries where social work exists have moved towards the professionalisation of social work, incorporating expectations of educational achievement for social workers and the regulation of professional boundaries. They observe, however, that while in many respects this is likely to be desirable, there is also the risk that professionalisation can promote a kind of 'occupational closure', marginalising and possibly devaluing other forms of social support and intervention. Holland and Scourfield nevertheless acknowledge that social work has a historic and continuing role in public health and protection, in counselling and community psychology, and in community development.

**Starter kit tip**

Social work has well-established principles based on human rights and social justice, but it is shaped by and takes place in a constantly changing social and political context.

# 3 Social work values and ethics

Figure 2

Values in social work practice relate to beliefs about what is considered worthy and valuable. Ethics are concerned with conduct, the 'good and bad qualities of character and responsibilities attached to relationships' (BASW, 2014, p. 17). Pasini (2016) suggests that social work is intrinsically ethical because social workers have the responsibility 'to act intentionally in difficult situations to pursue a "good" aim' (p. 377). This is not easy though, and ethical practice will always incorporate balancing personal values with employer and professional requirements and with the values of others, including the values of other professionals (Shardlow, 2013). It is common in the literature about social work values and ethics (Johns, 2016; Akhtar, 2013; Banks, 2012) to review essential elements of moral philosophy at an early point when learning about ethical practice, considering issues such as reason, duty, consequences and virtue. These elements are intimately woven into the psychology and personalities of every individual worker and service user, and they continually influence the perceptions, choices and responses of all concerned.

Professional codes of ethics and statements of required behaviours (BASW, 2014, for example) are mechanisms for translating and codifying professional philosophies into practical guidance for deployment and use. Calder (2015) argues that the hallmarks of ethical competence incorporate a knowledge of ethical codes, principles and rules, combined with a capacity to engage in dynamic reflection of the implications of each situation, with confidence, resilience, and with a sensitivity to context. Ethical competence, suggests Calder, includes understanding the rubrics of ethical principles, combined with having 'the orientation-based skills involved in satisfactory negotiation of real-life ethical challenges' (p. 310). Social work practice rarely includes unequivocal formulaic templates for ethical action. On the contrary, it is likely that '[ethical] problem solving is an interactional or dialogical process wherein discoveries are made' (Gray and Gibbons, 2007, p. 223). This approach is summarised by Lynch and Forde (2016) as preparing for moral distress in practice, by learning to recognise risks, by acknowledging moral dissonance, and by appreciating that all social work takes place in a policy context.

Banks (2012) draws a distinction between principles-based, and character and relationship-based approaches to the practice of social work ethics. In this context, principles are represented by over-arching commitments to act in ways congruent with human welfare, dignity and social justice; and character and relationship approaches highlight the qualities of the people involved, rather than their actions. Both aspects are necessary for effective ethical practice in social work.

Banks' (2016) concept of 'ethics work' provides a helpful framework for conceptualising the task of ethical development for social workers, indicating seven features that may be

attended to by practitioners developing as moral agents. Banks argues that ethics work is ‘an important antidote to the rules-based managerialism of much contemporary practice’ (p. 35).

### Ethics work

1. Framing the ethical elements of situations
2. Taking an ethical role
3. Building trust and responding to emotions
4. Working on one’s ethical identity
5. Making and being able to justify moral decisions
6. Developing relationship skills
7. Making aspects of this work visible and accountable to others.

(Banks, 2016, p. 35)

It can be contested whether social work values are uniformly shared and experienced. Clark, cited in Wilson and Ruch (2011), questions the notion that values can be fixed and captured in a set of rules to be applied in a universally interpreted and consistent way. Indeed, a diverse range of substantive beliefs, theories, religious outlooks, moral values, political principles and general world views can be found among social workers overall. Furthermore, social work values and political commitments have evolved over time to reflect wider changes in society. An example of this is the move away, in both social policy and in direct practice from universalist approaches, in favour of more personalised approaches towards service user need. However, while social work undoubtedly evolves and develops over time, on occasions reflecting and at other times challenging the surrounding social context, the profession embodies core ethical principles that social workers must own and promote, even though in practice the interpretation of some of those principles can be hard to unequivocally define. For example, what exactly is ‘risk’, ‘need’ or ‘vulnerability’?

# 4 Discrimination and anti-oppressive practice

It is important that social workers are knowledgeable about the law in relation to discrimination. The Equality Act 2010 makes it unlawful to discriminate against someone based on 'protected characteristics' – people's age; disability; gender reassignment; marital or civil partnership status; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. This includes, of course, being applicable to local authorities and governmental bodies, as well as to individuals, in the delivery of health and social care services. Being aware of the forces influencing and shaping social behaviour and cultural traditions is therefore essential, as these can impact directly on the ability to express and upon the means of expression of an individual's unique characteristics and choices.

Neil Thompson designed a model for addressing social disadvantage, including discrimination and poverty, known as the Personal/Cultural/Structural, 'PCS' analysis (Thompson, 1997, 2006, 2016). This has been influential in social work. Thompson suggests that individuals are affected by what he calls 'personal, cultural and structural influences' which come together to impact on how we fit into the social world. Individual 'personal' factors include our experiences of being parented, and our beliefs and values. Then, what Thompson calls 'cultural' influences encompass broader shared approaches – such as what is seen as acceptable behaviour. Finally, 'structural' issues refer to the 'bigger picture' of how society is organised and include aspects such as government policy and the shape of the welfare state. Thompson's PCS model for analysis is about action as well as thought. Social workers, Thompson argues, need to do more than understand how individuals are affected by social and other factors. They need to act on this understanding to challenge disadvantage and prejudice. The PCS analysis is set out in a diagrammatic form below, showing how the individual or personal experience is surrounded by cultural and structural influences.

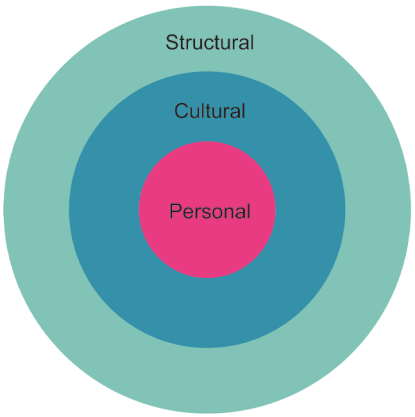



Figure 3 The PCS analysis

**Starter kit tip**

Value relates to core beliefs. Ethics are concerned with conduct.

# 5 What do social workers ‘do’?

Figure 4

Next, you’ll think about the range of activities in which social workers become involved. You will begin by noting what you understand currently about some of the common social work tasks.

## Activity 3 Social work tasks

From your current experience or knowledge, even if you have very limited direct experience to date, list some tasks that social workers and/or staff working in a social work setting might undertake. Note:

- five social work tasks or roles with adults
- five social work tasks or roles with children and families.

When you have completed your lists, reveal the suggestions in the answer below and see how many tasks on your lists are included on the lists you find in the comment box. Try to resist reading the answer until you have recorded your ideas!

*Provide your answer...*

### Answer

Here are some examples of typical social work tasks. They are not presented in any way as being complete or comprehensive, only as examples. You are of course very likely to have correctly identified some activities that are not included here.

Adults

1. Assessing and supporting the support and care needs of older people in the community.
2. Assessing and supporting the care needs of adults with physical and/or learning disabilities in the community.
3. Assessing and supporting the care needs of adults with mental health problems in the community.
4. Working in residential care homes for adults with physical and/or learning disabilities, and/or mental health problems, or with age-related support needs.
5. Hospital social work – especially assisting with community discharge arrangements and child protection.
6. Hospice care with patients and their families.

7. Social work with military personnel and their families.
8. Working with adults with visual and hearing impairments.
9. Working with adult offenders in the community and in prisons.
10. Supporting and assisting adults with drug/alcohol and substance misuse difficulties.
11. Supporting adults and young people experiencing homelessness.

Children

1. Assessing and supporting parents having difficulties raising or controlling their children, and where there is a risk of breakdown in relationships and care.
2. Assessing and supporting children who may have been or are being abused, physically, sexually, emotionally, or are being neglected and/or exploited.
3. Working with children and families experiencing poverty, social exclusion, domestic violence, or housing problems.
4. Working with other agencies and professionals, including psychologists, police, lawyers, and the courts, to provide alternative care for children at risk of remaining with their families.
5. Recruiting and supporting foster carers and adoptive parents.
6. Supporting children in foster and residential care, and in leaving care, either to return home, or onward into independent living.
7. Working with children experiencing difficulties engaging with or attending school.
8. Working in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) as family therapists, counsellors, and family support workers.
9. Working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and with asylum-seeking families.
10. Working with children and their families where children have physical and/or learning disabilities, both in the community and in residential care.
11. Working with young people who have committed offences and are on community orders, or in youth custody.

# 6 Social work roles

Figure 5

While social workers and social care staff undertake a wide range of different tasks, these are almost always approached in the context of a role or an approach, or a combination of roles and approaches. Beckett and Horner (2016, pp. 31–43) suggest that there are three principal areas of roles in this regard: Advocacy; Direct change agent; and Executive, as shown below.

> **Advocacy roles**
>
> Helping to give a service user a 'voice', either directly by speaking on their behalf, or indirectly by helping them to more effectively speak for themselves.
>
> **Direct Change agent roles**
>
> This involves the constructive use of the self by the social worker. This can include acting as a counsellor or therapist, as a mediator between various parties, or an educator, or as a catalyst.
>
> **Executive roles**
>
> These roles involve making things happen, in a practical sense, bringing about change but not necessarily because of direct personal interaction. This can involve being a gatekeeper, care manager, responsibility holder, control agent, co-ordinator, or service developer.
>
> (Beckett and Horner, 2016)

Rarely would a social worker operate exclusively in just one of these roles. More commonly they will be interchangeable on a continual basis. There is though likely to be a tendency towards a cluster of related roles for individual practitioners in specific practice settings.

# 7 Summary of Session 1

In this session you have learned that:

- social work is a legally protected term describing a community-based response to social need
- social work is based on principles of social justice, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity
- social work practice takes place in the continually contested space between apparently opposing views: that either individuals and communities must change to fit into society; or, that society itself must change, to more appropriately meet the needs of individuals and communities
- social work requires practitioners who can reflect upon and successfully balance their personal values and ethics with the values and ethics of the social work profession
- social work engages with service users who are often vulnerable, and who for many reasons, including personal choice and societal oppression, need assistance in managing their lives and their relationships for achieving more equitable balances of power and opportunity.

In the next session, now that you have a better understanding of what social work is, you'll explore the characteristics and qualities that are required for people working in professional social work.

You can now go to Session 2.

# Session 2: What makes a good social worker?

## Introduction

Figure 1

Like many other professions, alongside its core mission, social work is defined by the skillsets of its members. For example, social workers need a good knowledge of the law and of theories about people and society. They also need good critical skills to evaluate conflicting or confusing situations, and the ability to reflect on thought processes and feelings. This includes a well-developed emotional intelligence, described by Adams and Sheard (2017, p. 46) as, ‘an understanding of your own and others’ emotions and using that knowledge to direct your thinking and respond more appropriately’. Other skills, among many, include being able to communicate effectively, to respect confidentiality, and to be able to practice within legal and ethical professional boundaries (HCPC, 2017).

# 1 What would you prefer?

Figure 2

In this section, you'll examine the personal qualities and characteristics of social workers themselves.

## Activity 1 I would like my social worker to …

Imagine that you are a service user who is anticipating receiving a social work service. You might have a disability and be housebound, or you might have a mental health problem such as anxiety or depression and receive support because of the impact this is having on yourself and your family. Alternatively, any service user issue drawn from the tasks listed in Session 1, Activity 3, would be relevant for you to consider for this activity. Imagine also that so far, you have not met your social worker.

For the purposes of this activity in your imaginary role as service user, list some of the characteristics about your new social worker as a person, and about them as a professional helper for your problems and needs, that you hope they will have. What kind of 'person' do you think might be the most helpful for you as the stranger who is about to become your social worker?

Begin your list with the phrase:

'I would like my social worker to …'

When your list is complete, read the answer to discover some of the common responses of service users to being asked this kind of question.

*Provide your answer...*

### Answer

'I would like my social worker to …'

- be respectful and show courtesy
- be kind, caring and compassionate
- show empathy
- be warm and demonstrate flexibility
- have a good capacity for self-awareness
- be honest, especially if they are not able to help
- have good communication skills
- be well informed
- be reliable

- be able to explain things to me without being condescending
- really listen to me, and for me to feel listened to and heard
- act effectively on my behalf
- be able to make practical things happen
- be authentic
- be able to be informal with me, but remain professional
- show that they genuinely care about service users
- explain their role in a way that I can understand
- tell me about my rights and entitlements
- involve me in decision making about me
- be accountable for what they do and not to blame others unfairly.

(List drawn from Watters et al., 2016)

Service users are often vulnerable and likely to have had many previous experiences of being marginalised, where their strengths and qualities have been undervalued or ignored. It is reasonable therefore that they should expect social workers to present themselves and act in ways that are ethically sound, professional, and which demonstrate good levels of personal warmth. Social workers are unlikely to be saints – but service users have a right to expect high standards.

# 2 Communication skills

One of the foundational elements in social work is the ability for the social worker to have good communication skills. Seden (2005, p. 20) suggests that verbal and non-verbal methods in social work communication are used to:

- transmit and share information
- establish relationships
- exchange ideas and perceptions
- create change
- exchange attitudes, values and beliefs
- achieve service user and practitioner goals.

However, Seden points out that for effective communication, social workers need to be sensitive to the other person, their understandings, their interactions and their social context. All of us as individuals have our unique set of preconceptions, prejudices and cultural conditioning. Consequently, no one can claim to be wholly neutral in any particular encounter. The process of developing self-awareness and conscious control of our interpretations and reflections is, therefore, a primary requirement and ongoing professional responsibility for all people working in the helping professions, including social work.

Social workers are frequently involved in interviewing service users, other professionals and family members. Interviews will almost always have pre-existing objectives, and a skilled interviewer will have at their disposal a range of methods and responses that are practised and developed to maximise the relevance and quality of the interview content, as well as enabling the person being interviewed to feel as at ease and as safe as possible in each situation. These skills include listening and paying attention to the detail as well as to the themes or difficult to articulate elements; responding in a way that indicates to the other person that they have been accurately understood; and questioning, in ways that are respectful and wherever possible are in line with the service user's wishes and needs. Where it is evident that there are barriers present or emerging that may be preventing effective communication, it is the responsibility of the social worker to anticipate and manage these barriers and to minimise their negative effects.

Seden (2005, p. 14) identifies some of the communication skills required by social workers, as including the following:

- acceptance
- active listening
- attention giving
- challenging
- confronting
- genuineness
- goal setting
- immediacy
- linking ideas
- listening
- paraphrasing

- problem-solving
- appropriate prompts
- questioning and exploring
- reflecting back
- summarising
- use of empathy
- working on defences.

Gerard Egan (1994) suggests that generally, although never in a rigid or an artificial way, communication can be improved by facing the other person squarely, maintaining an open posture, leaning slightly towards them, maintaining eye contact, and trying to be relaxed. In his book *The Skilled Helper*, Egan presents a three-stage model for communicating effectively in a helping context. These stages are: Exploration; Identifying aims and goals; and Action planning. The three stages are shown in the diagram below:

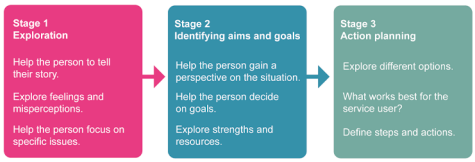



Figure 3

Egan highlights the need for Active Listening, requiring the helper to attend to the service user's non-verbal and verbal communications, paying attention not only to their words, but also to their body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. It is also important to convey empathy and acceptance, resisting any attempts to express your views or conclusions at too early a stage. Rather, it is important to gently paraphrase and summarise the service user's account to verify your own understanding, reflecting back and seeking clarification in a measured and sensitive way. This clarification will include helping to identify the aims and goals of the service user, as well as considering options for whether or how these goals may be achieved.

In addition, Lefevere (2010, p. 61) argues that effective communication not only requires the person in a helping capacity to have a good range of practical and theoretical knowledge, but they must also have good self-awareness and self-knowledge. This combination of skills is identified by Lefevere as the 'knowing-being-doing' model.

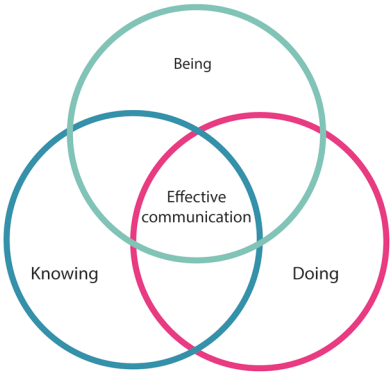



Figure 4

# 3 Creating rapport

Figure 5

Rapport describes a quality of relationship where communication is effective and where there is a high level of understanding of each other's feelings among the various individuals in communication. Empathy explains the capacity of someone to understand how another person is feeling from within the other person's frame of reference. That is, rather like the notion of being able to 'stand in their shoes'.

The capacity to build effective rapport with service users, colleagues, and with a wide range of other people, is a core social work skill and requirement. It is likely that it is easier for anyone to quickly build rapport with someone who is like them, who may share the same interests, and is motivated to build reciprocal rapport in return. Many encounters in social work, however, do not begin with these advantages, and it is part of the professional task to promote and facilitate effective communication. Sometimes this will involve using naturally acquired personal skills and tendencies, but also frequently, it will require the deployment of communication skills for rapport-building that have been consciously identified, learned, and practised.

The 'Skills You Need' organisation (2019) note the following elements as important components in building rapport:

1. Look at and listen to the other person.
2. When listening, nod and make encouraging sounds.
3. Try to ask the other person open-questions (those that don't have just a yes or no answer).
4. Avoid contentious and challenging topics of conversation when building rapport.
5. Use feedback to reflect and clarify with the person what you think they have said.
6. Talk about things that refer back to what the other person has said.
7. Build on the other person's ideas.
8. Where possible, show empathy.
9. Be non-judgemental, not expressing pre-conceived ideas based on stereotypes.
10. Admit when you don't know the answer.
11. If you disagree with the person, give the reason first, then say you disagree.
12. Offer compliments, avoid criticism and be polite.

# 4 Empathy

Empathy is one of the essential building blocks for understanding the experience of service users in order to help them more effectively. Sympathy expresses sorrow or compassion for another's misfortune or difficult circumstances, but it does not necessarily lead to shared understanding. By contrast, Egan (1986, p. 95) defines empathy as: 'The ability to enter into and understand the world of another person and to communicate this understanding to him or her'. Acquiring this kind of insight requires active listening, but more than this, Egan (1994, p. 106) observes: 'empathy that remains locked up in the helper contributes little to the helping process'.

You might consider that empathy is more of a personal quality than a skill – thinking back to Lefevre's (2010) knowing-being-doing model, perhaps it is more about 'being' than 'doing'. You might also assume that it is something that all aspiring and qualified social workers possess. Surprisingly, research by Forrester et al. (2008) revealed shortcomings in social workers' empathy skills when communicating with parents in child protection cases. This was of concern not only because empathy is a core skill but also because the study found that communicating empathy reduced resistance and enabled parents to share important information. Clearly it is worth exploring in greater depth how empathy, and the skill of demonstrating it, can be developed or improved. Social scientist Robert Carkhuff (cited in Koprowska, 2014) suggests that there are different levels of empathy, as can be seen in the figure below.

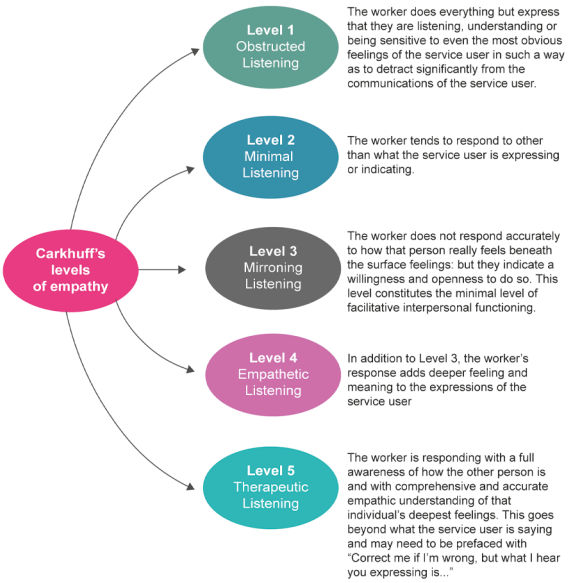



Figure 6

# 5 The social work relationship

Figure 7

Social work takes place within a professional relationship with service users as well as with colleagues from a range of professional backgrounds. In recent years, the concept of 'relationship-based social work' which places the relationship between service users and social workers at the core of practice has gained ground among employers, academics and policymakers. A focus on the social work relationship is not new, but after a long period of procedural policies and practice (Munro, 2011) its revival has been positively received.

Wilson et al. describe relationship-based social work like this:

> Relationship-based practice involves practitioners developing and sustaining supportive professional relationships in unique, complex and challenging situations. An important but not necessarily explicit implication arising from this model is the need to reconceptualise not only the nature and behaviour of service users but also of professionals. This model places equal importance … on the unique and complex nature of professionals and the rational and emotional dimensions of their behaviours. This is often referred to in social work literature as the professional 'use of self'. As a social worker one of the biggest challenges you will face is being able to simultaneously focus in professional encounters on what is happening for the service user and what is happening to you. By developing this ability to understand holistically the service user's and your own responses to a specific situation you will ensure you are acting in the service user's best interests.
>
> (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 9)

The use of self involves acknowledging your own emotions, values, identity and experiences, as a resource to help you interact emphatically with a service user's situation. Ruch et al. (2010, p. 48) argue that because a large proportion of the work of social workers involves experiencing a range of emotions which many others do not experience at work, or do not have to engage with and work with, there is also the additional factor for social workers that they also have to 'regard [these emotions] as material, as data – they are part of what is available for us to work with'.

Bernard Moss (2015) suggests the following, for what professional people-workers are not:

- [not] a friend to the other person – you will seek to be friendly towards them, but a friend often offers a far more comprehensive relationship than you can.
- [not] always and instantly available – you have responsibilities to other service users, clients or patients, as well as to other aspects of your organisation's work. You may

sometimes decide to ‘drop everything’ to respond to a particular crisis with someone, but normally you will work within a system of mutually agreed appointments.

- [not] offering general ‘chat’ sessions – there will always be a clear reason for meeting in the first place, a clear set of objectives to work towards and a clear understanding of when the relationship needs to end.
- [not] offering an open-ended relationship – your time with the person will be focused on agreed areas of work, and for an agreed length of time. In fact, in most cases, the end of the relationship will be in sight at the beginning.
- [not] physically close to the other person – we are much more aware these days of the difficult and at times compromising risks of physical contact between people-workers and those whom they are seeking to help. Physical contact can be misunderstood; people can be exploited when a sexual relationship develops between the worker and the other person. However mutually acceptable this may seem at the time, in fact it always constitutes a breach of the boundary of the professional relationship, and therefore is always wrong.

On the contrary, Moss suggests, the most important aspects of establishing a professional relationship are:

- [to] always be clear yourself and with the other person about why you are meeting and what you need to achieve,
- [to] always establish clear boundaries, so that each of you knows what is and is not acceptable.
- [to] always be clear that you are representing your agency, and that you are accountable to your manager for the work you do; explain that this may sometimes involve another colleague sharing in the work with you, or doing something on your behalf, or working with the person instead of you.
- [to] always be clear that the reward you will receive for your work will be in terms of satisfaction of a job well done. Receiving gifts from grateful service users should normally be tactfully declined – offers of money must always be refused.
- [to consider that] sometimes, however, you may feel that to refuse a modest gift of appreciation, such as a bunch of flowers or a small box of chocolates, would cause unnecessary hurt. This is a matter of professional judgement, of course, but if you do decide to accept, say that you will take the gift back to your office for other colleagues to enjoy too. On your return, make a written note on the file and copy it to your manager explaining what has been given to you, and that this has been left at the office for general, rather than your own personal, enjoyment. Do check with your manager, however, about the team or agency policy on such matters, as this can avoid embarrassment or more serious repercussions (such as allegations of accepting bribes).

**Starter kit tip**

Sympathy alone does not necessarily include a shared understanding. Empathy, however, is like ‘standing in someone else’s shoes’, and requires that you demonstrate that you have understood accurately.

# 6 Service user involvement

Figure 8

It is important to engage and involve service users in a respectful and reciprocal way. In their book *Service User and Carer Involvement in Health and Social Care*, in the chapter 'Arts-based practice: learning from survivor artists' (Fawcett et al. 2018, p. 87–108), Dawn River explores with Tessa Lowe the significance of hearing and giving space within educational and training contexts, to the voice of the service user. Dawn is an author, survivor and academic; and Tessa is co-author, survivor and poet. Tessa's poem 'Accolade' (reproduced below) was written with reference to a university-based Survivor Arts exhibition. At this event, Dawn had created a space in which the University could be challenged to think more critically about its approach to Service User Involvement. In her poem, Tessa outlines just how vitally important it was to have her voice of protest heard (Fawcett et al., 2018, p. 96). While it might have initially appeared from the organisers' point of view, very positive and inclusive to provide certificates to every service user attending the event, this did not take into account the way in which this was done. Providing standard certificates to all did not appear to respect the unique contributions of individual attendees, especially on this occasion, for Tessa.

### 'Accolade' by Tessa Kate Lowe

I arrived

At half past nine

Just in time

To receive my glossy certificate of appreciation

For having made a valuable contribution

To the august ivory-tower event.

How perceptively clairvoyant

They must have been

To have seen

So far in advance

That I would make

Such a valuable contribution

To the Alice-in-Wonderland proceedings.

I could have been flattered
Had it not mattered
That every service user
Sorry,
Every person with ‘mental health experience’
Received one too!

What is a mentally healthy person to do
With such banal inanity
Such institutional insanity
Such seduction of one’s vanity?

Here’s a valuable contribution
To your striking unthinking -
We’re mad.
Not stupid!

# 7 Resistance to social work involvement

Figure 9

Many people using social work services would prefer not to have to use them, and some service users are compelled by law to experience contact and interventions that they may perceive as being serious and unwarranted intrusions into their lives. Also, social workers will often have to tell people things they don't want to hear, taking into account competing needs, interests and resources in the service users' environment. It is essential therefore that social workers anticipate resistance and develop and practise communication strategies for clearly hearing and understanding the various sources and reasons for resistance. They must develop flexible approaches for managing these, and wherever possible, to the service users' advantage.

On occasions, resistance can spill over into aggression. For example, when the resistant person does not feel listened to or is frightened. Susanne Koprowska (2014, pp. 174–5) clarifies that hostility and aggression include: shouting; swearing, using abusive language, verbally or physically threatening behaviour, physical assaults, invading personal space, or preventing someone from leaving. Ford et al. (2010) point out that some authors or organisations would define these behaviours as forms of violence.

# 8 Communicating with children

Communicating with children is a very important area in social work that must be undertaken with as much preparation as possible, to ensure that the attempts at discussion and sharing of information and feelings reflect fully the age, development, and the capacity of the child. Children's responses may have all sorts and layers of expectations, partial understandings, and divided loyalties, and therefore considerable skill is required to enable a child to feel safe enough to share their thoughts and feelings accurately.

## Activity 2 Working with children

Listen to this brief audio where Sophie, a social worker from Cornwall, talks about her work. In the audio you will hear that Sophie recognises that it takes time to understand a child's view. Her experience is that direct work provides opportunities over time to gain perspective on the child's account of their situation. Sophie makes an important point about the clear boundaries that are needed when building a relationship around direct work with a child or young person. Nevertheless, if a social worker negotiates and establishes these honestly and effectively, it is possible to develop an enhanced and meaningful professional relationship with a child.

Sophie explains that some sessions with children may be targeted, for example, around managing anger or life story work. This kind of approach can be directly therapeutic for the child, as well as potentially providing reliable information with which to form more realistic assessments of the needs of children and their families.

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 1

# 9 Language and power

Language, as the basis of interpersonal and social communication, is so ingrained in our day-to-day life that it tends to be taken for granted (Thompson, 2011). Cultural and linguistic studies of language, however, reveal that language is neither straightforward nor neutral. Thompson summarises the issues like this:

> Language is closely associated with power, with the way we make sense of our lives and of the social world, and even how we make sense of ourselves – that is, our identity … Language can be used to solve problems, to build positive and constructive relationships, to inspire and motivate and to liberate. However, it can also be used to create problems as well as solve them, to incite hatred and to create great pain and suffering.
>
> (Thompson, 2011, p. 63)


Figure 10

Vojak (2009) argues that organisational and professional language used to talk about people, their situations and services can have stigmatising effects and perpetuate inequality. It is important therefore for social workers to understand the relationship between language and social justice, so that they can take a more empowering approach. In some instances, social workers may need to help service users understand, for example, legal or medical terms that can cause confusion or anxiety. The same applies to social work 'jargon' – words such as 'dysfunctional' and 'chaotic' which can produce negative and labelling effects. Even the term 'mum', used in place of a parent's name, can sound very diminishing.

Social work practice can itself be shaped and constrained by the power of official language. Gregory and Holloway (2005, p. 46) point to the adoption of managerialist concepts and terminology since the 1990s. Social work discourse is now dominated by ‘a strong emphasis on managing “outcomes” – a word never before connected with the welfare services’, along with ‘[the] language of risk management and the language of consumerism’. At ground level, social work practitioners may need to take a critical stance about the use of pathologising language. For example, Duffy (2016) urges against the use of ageist professional shorthand (such as ‘frequent flyer’ or ‘bed blocker’) when working with older people.

# 10 Working with interpreters

Figure 11

It is important to consider how cultural differences might affect communication both on practical grounds (for example, will an interpreter be needed?) and with regard to the unwritten rules and taken-for-granted assumptions, such as the use of non-verbal language, gestures, greetings and touch. Writing about the connections between language use and power, Thompson (2011) suggests that certain modes of speech are seen as superior to others. Discrimination can occur due to prejudices about local dialects or the superiority of one language over another.

Unwin and Hogg (2012) note a number of suggestions for working with interpreters, including:

- Try to always use the first language of the family.
- Try to use an interpreter that can also understand and translate all written correspondence.
- When using an interpreter, allow more time that would be usual for a similar interview.
- Be aware of the varying cultural norms for some individuals. For example, in some countries, it may be highly unusual for the state to intervene in 'private family matters', especially in situations where there may be domestic violence. This may include a reluctance or refusal of a female family member to discuss issues with a male social worker.
- The interpreter must accept the confidentiality of their contact with the family, but some families may not trust an individual from their own country or community to maintain confidentiality, even if sincere assurances are provided by the interpreter.

**Starter kit tip**

Language can be used to help and to solve problems. But it can also be used negatively and on occasions it can be actively discriminatory.

# 11 Social work communication with a family group

Working with a family group can make challenging demands on social workers' communication skills. Sitting down with several family members at the same time involves multiple interactions, adding many layers of complexity to the use of empathic listening and responding, and it is not unusual for social workers to find themselves confronted by different or opposing views within a family group. Families are complex, and effective communication incorporates having an appreciation of diverse family forms and relationships. In the next activity, you will see how an experienced social worker handles a situation where she is required to make an assessment visit to a family, following a referral from a school. The school has expressed concerns about a teenage girl's behaviour, which may be putting her at risk.

The video you are about to watch is the recording of an unscripted and unrehearsed simulation, in which a real social worker, Victoria Cavalino, briefed only by basic written initial-referral information produced for the simulation task, conducts a family interview. The family members are played by actors. Victoria did not know, had not met, nor had she had any communication with the actors before the moment the actual recording commenced. In addition, the actors had not rehearsed or shared among themselves how they might respond or react in the interview, and the actors were only provided with a very basic outline of their individual storylines in advance. Much of the information brought into the interview by Victoria was genuine news to the actors, only being revealed for the first time during the recording. The interview was filmed in one 'take' with none of the dialogue repeated or rephrased. So, in this video, all of the reactions and responses are authentic and captured for the recording in real-time using multiple cameras.

**Note:** In this course, this activity is not addressing in detail the numerous elements relating to child protection practice and the legal issues raised by the story. Therefore, try to keep your focus primarily on the interactions and on the communication between the participants in the interview, remembering, of course, that the direction and the quality of the communication are being influenced directly by the facts and the content of the story as it unfolds.

## Activity 3 Working with families

### Part 1 Ellie and her family

Before you watch the video, read the information on Ellie Smith that Victoria received before the simulated meeting with Ellie and her family. Make brief notes about anything that you feel might potentially affect communication in Victoria's first visit to the family. What might Victoria have been concerned about and what might she have been looking out for, that might be difficult to raise or to talk about?

*Provide your answer...*

Answer

After providing the referral information to Victoria, she was asked to write down her initial thoughts before going into the video recording of the interview with the family in the simulated meeting. Read Victoria's initial thoughts. You may be interested to compare this with your own ideas.

## Part 2 Victoria's interview with Ellie and her family

Now watch the video below and make notes about what Victoria, the social worker, says and does to manage the meeting and communicate with the family. Remind yourself of what you have learned so far about the importance of demonstrating empathy and respect, initial contacts, and relationship-building.

The following prompts may help you:

- How does Victoria start the meeting and how do family members respond?
- What does Victoria do to try and engage each family member? How successful is this?
- What does she do when different perspectives and tensions surface? What is the result of this?
- How does she respond to Greg's behaviour and is this successful?
- How does Victoria enable Ellie to express her perspective?
- How does Victoria bring the interview to a conclusion?
- The video is quite powerful: what were your own emotions while watching it?

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1

Answer

Victoria seems to show empathy, skill and sensitivity in handling this challenging interview. Even though it was simulated, Victoria commented that it was realistic (except that she had to conduct the interview in a much shorter period than usual).

## Part 3 Victoria's reflections on the experience

Now listen to the audio below, in which Victoria reflects on what she was trying to achieve, on her performance in the interview, including the decisions she made about risk during the interview, and about how she might have wanted to work with the family in future were this a real family. Victoria refers to one of the theories that have influenced her practice: systemic family therapy, and in her preparation notes, Victoria mentions the concept of family scripts which is a concept used in the family therapy approach. These are underlying messages and expectations affecting how a child or adult thinks about themselves. Although Victoria does not mention an approach called solution-focused theory, she seems to use some of its techniques – for example, in the scaling questions, which provide a powerful insight into the self-perceived seriousness or intensity on an imaginary numerical scale of 1–10, of individual family members' feelings about specific issues raised in the interview.

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 2

# 12 Summary of Session 2

In this session you have learned the following:

- Good social workers have a thorough knowledge of people, the law, and about how society works. This will incorporate a commitment to continual learning and to on-going professional development.
- Good social workers have high levels of analytical skills and a good understanding of themselves, of their own strengths and weaknesses, and of their own vulnerabilities.
- Good social workers are good communicators. This especially includes listening and empathy and being able to communicate to others that they have heard them accurately and with the minimum of distortion.
- Good social workers fully appreciate the nature and the importance of the professional relationship, including the use of appropriate language and professional power. They know that not to respect their professional role is likely to harm service users and others.
- Good social workers, wherever safe and possible, involve service users fully in decisions that affect their lives. They actively and continually seek and incorporate service users' views, especially when working with children.
- Good social workers know that their work is dynamic and often unpredictable. They appreciate that they must be able to respond thoughtfully and at times quickly to unfolding and changing circumstances, holding the needs of the service users as central to their work.

Alongside communication skills and a facility to use professional relationships in an empowering way, social workers need to access and use a wide range of knowledge in their work. This includes knowledge about the law, safeguarding, human development, social policy and diversity, and many theories and methods relating to practice. In the next session you'll consider some of the baseline elements of knowledge that social workers need in relation to social divisions and diversity.

You can now go to Session 3.

# Session 3: Understanding social divisions and diversity

## Introduction

The allocation of resources and the access to opportunities in society have throughout human history been competitive and contradictory, at times being advantageous to some individuals and groups while being disadvantageous at times to others. Left to itself, this situation does not seem to change very much for the better, but as one of the many agencies designed and motivated to positively address these very familiar 'human' dilemmas, social work attempts to intervene proactively wherever possible.

Social work interventions and services are based on the values of social justice, the empowerment and liberation of human potential, and the assumption of universal human rights. However, in their direct work with service users, social workers encounter frequent examples where these socially orientated values and aspirations either go unacknowledged, are avoided, or are deliberately excluded. To prevent becoming part of the problem rather than part of the solution, therefore, social workers need a sophisticated understanding and critique of social systems and the forces that shape and sustain both positive and negative patterns of resource allocation and social opportunity. This includes the forces shaped and sustained by legal, political, community and group pressures.

These aspects of what social workers need to know are reflected in the five principal areas of this session:

1. Poverty
2. Social exclusion
3. Social work with communities
4. Social work and groups
5. Social work and the law

You will begin by considering poverty.

# 1 Poverty

Figure 1

Many, but by no means all, of the service users encountered by social workers will be poor or have very limited financial resources. Also, due to multiple factors, many service users will be subject to social exclusion where to some substantial extent their opportunities will be impaired or restricted. Therefore, social workers need to understand the causes and consequences of poverty and social exclusion. It is also important for social workers to appreciate the ways in which communities function and how community support may be mobilised. In addition, and at a more interpersonal level, social workers must appreciate and know how to work creatively with groups and group processes. Finally, social workers must know about how frameworks of law are influential in the management and amelioration of social divisions and in maximising the potential for positive change.

## 1.1 What is poverty?

Figure 2

> Poverty means not being able to heat your home, pay your rent, or buy essentials for your children. It means waking up every day facing insecurity, uncertainty, and impossible decisions about money. The constant stress it causes can overwhelm people, affecting them emotionally and depriving them of the chance to play a full part in society.
>
> (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016, p. 3)

In 2011 the Office for National Statistics (2013) reported that 22.7 per cent of the UK population was considered to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This is equivalent to 14 million people. The majority of service users that social workers work with experience some form of social exclusion and poverty. In order to support these service users effectively, it is necessary to identify factors that contribute to poverty and exclusion, and to appreciate the impact that this has on their lives. This includes developing an understanding not only of the problems associated with economic hardship and isolation

but also of the impact of the stigma and discrimination that service users may face. It is only then that social workers can adopt anti-discriminatory practices and approaches to enable them to work in partnership with service users to address the problems that are hard to manage in their lives. Understanding the impact of economic disadvantage is essential for social workers, as Cunningham and Cunningham (2014) explain:

> Poverty provides the context for other factors that can increase the likelihood of contact with social services. For example, unemployment, inadequate housing, low income and social isolation can be contributory factors in causing problems such as family break-up and conflict, poor health, stress and difficulties in caring for children and dependents. Similarly, poverty can increase the likelihood of children experiencing maltreatment and being looked after by care services; of older adults going into residential care; and of admission to a psychiatric ward.
>
> (Cunningham and Cunningham, 2014, p. 28)

The majority of individuals and families that social workers work with are among the most impoverished in the UK, and dependent in whole or in part on welfare benefits. Davis and Wainwright (2005) note how the growth of poverty since the late 1970s in Britain has led to an increase in demand for services. However, poverty is a contested concept and there are a number of ways in which it can be defined. For example:

> **Absolute poverty** describes the absence of what is needed to survive. People are seen to be in poverty if their income fails to provide them with the basic necessities of the minimum of food, clothing, and shelter to sustain their physical health. This definition takes no account of the prevailing living standards of a particular society. While such subsistence definitions are sometimes used at a global level, relative definitions are more commonly used in developed countries.
>
> **Relative poverty** is a concept used to describe the situation whereby people can have the basic resources to survive but still be regarded as being in poverty. The definition is relative to social context and therefore changes over time. People experience poverty if they lack the resources to have the kind of diet and living conditions, as well as the ability to participate in ordinary living patterns, customs and activities, of a given society. Social exclusion is often a feature of poverty, and the inability to participate in society by engaging in social, cultural and political life is an aspect and example of a relative definition of poverty.

As an absolute standard for measuring poverty in the developing world, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) applies $2 of income per day as a basic subsistence level for survival. This definition is used to compare the extent of poverty across different countries. In the UK, The Child Poverty Act 2010 employs a relative definition of poverty to describe a situation whereby a person's income is below 60 per cent of the median in the year it is measured. Poverty is also measured using various 'consensus' definitions. These have been used to determine the extent of relative poverty and are based on what the public consider to be the basic necessities for achieving a minimum standard of living.

## 1.2 Explanations for poverty

Figure 3

Many traditional explanations for poverty place emphasis on the characters of the individuals, citing the ‘underserving poor’ who are said to hold self-defeating attitudes, believing that they are unable to alter their circumstances. These were typically represented in a kind of ‘underclass (Murray, 1989) by ‘problem families’ caught in ‘cycles of deprivation’ (Backwith, 2015).

However, alternative explanations to these highly personalised and individualised accounts are provided by structural explanations for poverty. Structural forces in society are represented by the distribution of income and wealth and life opportunities, access to the labour market and to education, alongside the polarisation of political power, especially when favouring elites and privileged social groups. Such imbalances in the distribution of wealth in favour of enriching the wealthy, can result in social institutions and opportunities being far less accessible to the poor, thus reinforcing and sustaining their already disempowered state. These explanations are important for social work. Lishman (2002, p. 50) argues that ‘social workers should understand the structural dimensions of the societies in which they work [and] should in working with service users, challenge the world in which they live in order to change it for the better’.

## 1.3 The extent and forms of social disadvantage in society

Figure 4

The impact of inequalities relating to gender, ethnicity, disability or age is affected by poverty in particular ways, resulting in differences in people's experiences. For example:

- In 2013, 26 per cent of female employees were paid below the living wage compared to 16 per cent of male employees (MacInnes et al., 2014).
- Black African and Caribbean adults had (MacInnes et al., 2014) the highest unemployment of any ethnic group, at 12 per cent. This rate was twice as high as the unemployment rate for the whole population. When in employment, these groups were more likely to have lower rates of pay than white adults.
- Research in Scotland revealed that families with a disabled adult are nearly twice as likely to be in poverty as others (Kenway et al., 2015). A factor contributing to the risk of poverty that disabled people face is the extra costs they incur in most areas of their everyday life due to their additional needs.
- Experiences of poverty can also vary depending on a person's geographical location, their kind of neighbourhood and the access it provides to jobs and services such as education, transport and social care.

## 1.4 The gap between rich and poor

Figure 5

A person's status in society is related to life chances, including their mental and physical health and life span. In less equal societies, several 'social problems' such as crime and large prison populations, violence, drug abuse, and obesity are more prevalent. In societies characterised by high levels of economic inequality, there is also a lack of community life and the absence of basic values such as trust. However, it is not only those at the bottom of the social scale that suffer as a result of inequality. Inequality impacts on the quality of life of everyone in society, even the rich:

> We know that inequality affects so many outcomes, across so much of society … The transformation of our society is a project in which we all have a shared interest. Greater equality is the gateway to a society capable of improving the quality of life for all of us.
>
> (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010, p. 237)

## 1.5 The impact of poverty on people's lives

Some people are more able to withstand the impact of poverty than are others. This can often be linked with individual resilience, enhanced and sustained by informal support networks. But poor housing, poor nutrition, high local crime rates, childcare costs and overcrowding can take their toll on even the most resilient of individuals and families.

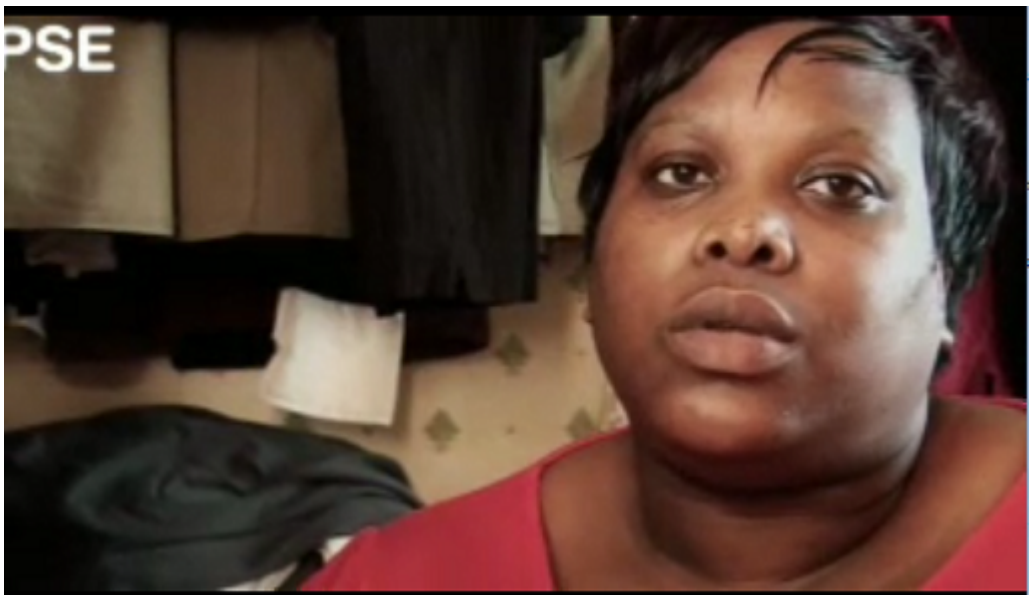
### Activity 1 Work, work, work

Watch this video where Renée describes the pressures on her working situation. Clearly Renée has many skills and is very resourceful, but her situation appears very fragile.

List some of the risk factors of individual and structural forces that potentially could prove very concerning for Renée. List these risks factors under two headings: 'Individual', and 'Structural'.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1




*Provide your answer...*

Answer

It is difficult to absolutely separate the individual influences and risks from the structural influences and risks. However, some possible suggestions are listed here:

Individual:

- Risks if there are health problems for the children's grandmother.
- Risks if there are health problems for Renée.
- Possibly having electricity and/or gas disconnected for non-payment.
- Working patterns for Renee mean that she has to use taxis to take her daughter to nursery, and she is already in arrears for these payments.
- Restricted social life outside of the family home, for Renee and for the children.

Structural

- Risks of further changes to the benefits system at a societal level, that may have a negative impact for Renee and her children.
- Risks of increases in nursery charges because of the commercial basis of nursery provision – it's like 'a mortgage'.
- After school clubs are expensive, especially when there is more than one child in a family. These are not included as mainstream provision educationally.
- Possibly because Renee is working, there is no financial help for school lunches or school uniforms.
- Lack of additional home-based educational materials such as books, and Renee is also concerned about the funding of longer-term education of her children.
- The demands on the support services for families living in a large city such as London.

**Starter kit tip**

‘Social problems’ such as crime and large prison populations, violence, drug abuse and obesity are more prevalent in societies characterised by high levels of economic inequality.

# 2 Social exclusion

Figure 6

Poverty is not just about having limited economic resources, but it also relates to a lack of opportunity to participate at a reasonable level in society, for example, with regard to education, leisure and employment. This lack of opportunity to participate is encapsulated in the concept of social exclusion. Sheppard (2006) points out that people can experience themselves as 'outsiders', through a range of possible factors, not just economic disadvantage but through, for example, ethnic group, health, disability, age, and many other factors. The implication for social work practice is to draw attention to the emotional and material impact that labelling and stigmatisation have on service users, and to challenge discriminatory practices wherever possible.

## 2.1 Approaches for social work practice

Figure 7

To assist in tackling social inclusion, social workers need to demonstrate 'cultural competence' about the individuals and communities with whom they work. In the case of exclusion brought about and reinforced by poverty, for example, this would involve listening carefully to the accounts of service users themselves and appreciating the subtlety of the impact of the various forces that led them to be and to remain in poverty. This knowledge can help in the development of services that are more nuanced and a better fit for specific individuals and groups. Social workers need to bring an awareness of poverty to the heart of their relationship with service users, including 'tackling micro aggressions […] using active mediation and advocacy' (Krumer-Nevo, 2015, p. 1796).

Poverty leads to the deprivation of certain capabilities, which can vary from the fulfilment of basic physical needs such as nourishment and shelter, to 'more complex social achievements such as taking part in the life of the community, being able to appear in public without shame' (Sen, 1995, p. 15, in Gupta, 2017, p. 459). It is important therefore for social workers when assessing the potential and capabilities of service users to develop fulfilling levels of independence, to carefully incorporate an understanding of the

impact of poverty on their lives, showing solidarity with service users and working in partnership to support their struggle against poverty and to address the exclusion that poverty can cause.

## 2.2 The impact of social attitudes on exclusion: disability

For a person with a disability, especially for those with a physical disability or impairment, the social environment can be especially challenging. Watch the next video now, to experience some aspects of what this may feel like.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 2


This video highlights the way the environment can restrict access and participation in society, which can be described as the Social Model for understanding the experience of disability. The social model was developed by disabled activists and presented as a challenge to the more traditional Medical Model, which 'individualises' disability and sees disability as a deficit in the person who is seen as needing treatment. This can also lead to a view that people with disabilities are responsible for inconveniences resulting from their impairments. The social model rejects the idea that people with disabilities need to adapt through treatments or therapies. The responsibility for the inconveniences and limitations on disabled people's lives is placed with society. This requires both a change in attitudes towards people with disabilities and also the removal of physical barriers that exclude or restrict people with disabilities.

In response to the social model, Oliver (2004) highlights the Citizenship Approach, which suggests that in practical terms service users should be supported to be able to exercise as much control over their lives as possible. In such a context they would define their own needs and choose how these are met. Services making provision for relevant legislation

would need to involve service users in discussions about strategies for practical implementation that would enhance their lives.

An understanding of the social model of disability is an important aspect of anti-oppressive practice. It encourages social workers to focus on the service user's own perception of their situation. A social worker using the social model would look, with the service user, at the physical and social barriers that are preventing them from leading the lifestyle that they desire. These barriers would be identified and ways of redressing them would be explored, rather than assuming that the person's disability makes these obstacles inevitable. People with disabilities may face stereotypical attitudes that categorise them as dependent, vulnerable and possibly passive. Social workers may not be able to change the discriminatory attitudes in society, although they have a role to play in challenging them. However, even if social workers can only bring about small changes to a service user's physical environment, the social model of disability provides a critique that promotes practice that takes account of service users' perspectives, resources and wishes.

## 2.3 Social exclusion: systemic and ecological perspectives

In social environments, to participate effectively and to achieve some measure of equilibrium, it is important for an individual to anticipate and take into account the effect that their behaviour and attitudes can have on others, and vice versa, as well as considering the multiple other reciprocal and interacting factors present in the social context. Trevithick (2012, p. 323) calls these various elements 'subsystems', within the analytical framework for understanding complex connections, known as systems theory.

An ecological perspective is a general form of systems theory. This is where in attempting to assess the needs of an individual person, it is helpful to consider the network of relationships within their family, their groups, and within the community networks in which they live, in the general 'ecology' of their lives. An ecological perspective provides an organising framework to assist in understanding and individuals' circumstances. In addition, social workers can also apply this way of thinking in evaluating and assessing the nature and quality of their relationships and contacts with other professionals and agencies in their professional systems.

Sometimes, it can be useful to illustrate examples of an individual's social ecology, with a diagram. You will see below a fictional example of an 'ecomap' of Sasha's family, showing the social worker's assessment of relative strength or weakness of Sasha's relationships with various key people in her life.

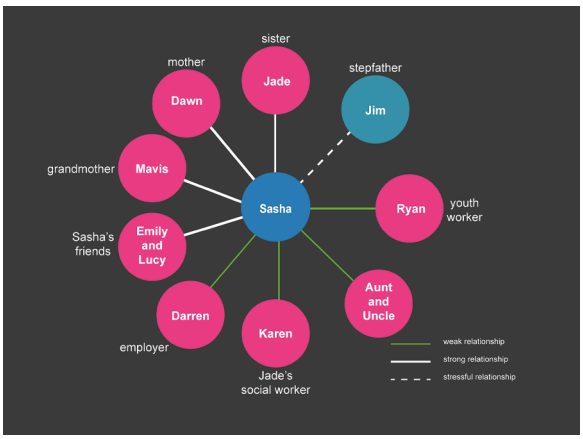



Figure 8

The concept of a social ecology can also be raised beyond the immediate context of the individual's family and community, to the political and structural decision-making sphere. Examples of these could be the system and ecology of macroeconomics; or choices about social housing and benefit levels; or the competing philosophies of social-democratic, right-wing, and developmental or punitive measures for the distribution of wealth in society. These policies also incorporate directly the type and the extent of social work services available and the levels of local discretion available to individual practitioners.

## 2.4 Social exclusion: the impact of social support

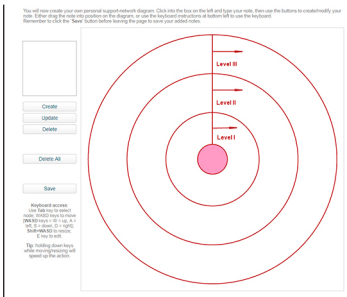
Social support networks can be described as the pattern of relationships and levels of support available to an individual or a family. The support provided and received within networks may include emotional support or practical help. In practical terms, this most likely refers to the locality or community where they live. However, personal social-support networks may also be geographically dispersed, with contact being maintained via the internet through email and social networking sites, and by telephone. A service user's network may include, for instance, relatives, friends, colleagues, neighbours, support groups, a local place of worship, volunteers, and health and social care provision. The composition and types of support available within support networks will change across a person's life course.

### Activity 2 Finding out about personal support networks

In this activity you will think about your own personal support network, and construct a basic social-network diagram, using a method adapted from the figure below, which provides an example of a personal support network for an older person, taken from Phillips et al. (2000, p. 842). For this activity you will focus on identifying the personal support networks you can draw on to support you as you study this course.

Click on the figure below or on 'View interactive version'.

Interactive content is not available in this format.




Using the interactive diagram, now create your own personal support network diagram.

1. Begin by writing ‘YOU’ on a Post-it and put it into the small circle at the centre.
2. Next, on individual Post-its, write the names (and their relationship to you) of those individuals without whose support you find it difficult to imagine successfully studying. Put these Post-its into the Level I circle.
3. In the Level II circle, in the same way as for Level I, add those people that you are ‘less close to’, but who are ‘still very important’.
4. Finally, in the Level III circle add any people who you have not already mentioned but who are important enough in your life to be included.

Now think about the variety of support functions (emotional and practical) that the network members you have identified on your diagram provide, or receive, and put this information into the table below.

| Name | Emotional support | Practical support |
|---|---|---|
| *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* |
| *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* |
| *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* |
| *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* |
| *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* |
| *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* |

Answer

You have looked at the structure of your social support network that you may draw on while studying this course and considered its functions in terms of the kinds of support given and received. There may be friends, work colleagues, fellow students or family members, for example, whom you could rely on to offer emotional support if required. You may also have identified people who can sometimes provide you with practical support. For example, some people may have neighbours who might help with childcare on occasions.

Constructing a network diagram with a service user can provide a useful starting point from which to explore in greater detail the nature of support, the frequency of contact, and the level and support offered by the people included in the network.

People who are important to service users may not always be family members. Importance may be related to who keeps in closest contact and most frequently, or it may not. Many families today are spread over wide geographical areas, and regular telephone and internet contact may be useful substitutes for visits.

Social network diagrams and ecomaps can be useful tools for visualising and assessing a service user's social support.

## 2.5 Social exclusion: the nature of network support

Figure 9

Researchers have consistently found that social network support can impact on a person's health and wellbeing. Some (Wenger and Burholt, 2004; Stephens et al., 2011; Thiyagarajan et al., 2014; Leach, 2015) note that supportive relationships between family, friends and others can help affirm positive identity and protect people from stress.

Social workers frequently work with people who find themselves lonely and unsupported, having limited social network support. Intervention with these service users may involve exploring ways of extending support. Social workers also work with people who may not feel isolated, but the nature and quality of their network relationships nevertheless are a source of stress and conflict in some circumstances.

Recent policy in the UK concerning people requiring support for mental health difficulties has tended to place emphasis on broadening the social networks of mental health service users by encouraging participation in 'mainstream activities' with, for example, the development of welfare policies focusing on gaining employment. The focus here might be seen as correcting deficits in people to promote inclusion. There is criticism that this inclusion agenda may divert attention from focusing on the relationship between structural inequalities and levels of mental distress, creating barriers that may prevent people from

living lives that they will find satisfying. The argument here has parallels with the social model of disability.

However, guidance for practitioners implementing the Care Act (England) 2014, the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013, generally stress the importance of working in partnership with service users and adopting a strength-based approach. It is highlighted that care and support plans should enable people to decide how they wish to be supported to achieve the outcomes they desire. Emphasis is therefore placed on extending and strengthening service user networks beyond an individual-specific provision, by establishing links with mainstream activities/provision and organisations and where possible, with family and friends within the community.

**Starter kit tip**

The Citizenship Approach suggests that in practical terms service users should be supported to be able to exercise as much control over their lives as possible. In such a context they would be more able and more likely to define their own needs and to choose how their needs are met.

# 3 Social work with communities

Figure 10

Teater (2014) points out that understanding the concept of community is an important component when applying systems theory and an ecological perspective to social work practice. Using these approaches, social workers can explore ways in which communities help or hinder individual growth and development, and impact on wellbeing.

The term ‘community’ can refer to a group of people who share common interests or identity, or it may be used to describe people located within a particular geographical boundary.

## 3.1 Community development and the role of social work

Figure 11

> Community development can be seen as building or releasing social capital for collective benefit. It supports networks that foster mutual learning and develop shared commitments and a common vision so that people can work and live together in relatively stable communities.
>
> (Gilchrist, 2004, p. 11)

Since this period the role of community development workers has declined. However, the importance of understanding the needs and aspirations of people within geographic locations continues to be important for practice. Barr (2015) suggests that social work still makes a valuable contribution to community development in partnership-based initiatives, working with members of communities and colleagues from a range of professional and organisational backgrounds.

## 3.2 The policy context

Figure 12

Governments of all political persuasions devise and enact policies that reflect and express the primary discourses of the day about the distribution of wealth in society. Broadly speaking, in the period of 1997 to 2010, the Labour government's policies were said to be based on the 'redistributive' discourse, attempting to address both the structural and the behavioural explanations of community 'breakdown' (Cunningham and Cunningham, 2014). On the other hand, the 2010–2015 coalition government's approach to community policy appears to have contained a 'moral underclass' overtone, supported by statements which reflect concern about the 'morally corrupting nature of welfare'.

To build stronger communities, the redistributive discourse argues for greater income distribution, improved employment opportunities welfare benefits, and for encouraging community spirit rather than fostering individualism. Alternatively, the moral underclass

discourse seeks to reduce the de-motivating dependency of welfare, promoting self-help and volunteerism.

## 3.3 Asset-based approaches to community development

Figure 13

Whatever the current policy discourse, identifying the assets present in communities and working to build on these without overly focusing on the negative aspects, is the foundation of asset-based approaches. This requires identifying and building on:

- Personal assets: the knowledge, skills, talents and aspirations of individuals.
- Neighbourhood assets: physical places and buildings that contribute to health/ wellbeing, e.g. parks, libraries, leisure centres.
- Social assets: relationships and connections with friends, family and peers.
- Community assets: voluntary sector organisations and associations, clubs and community groups.

## 3.4 Community profiling

Figure 14

Community profiling is a tool and methodology for recording and measuring the resources and assets in a community, in order to ensure that assumptions about solutions and resource allocation are well-founded and targeted effectively. Hawtin and Percy-Smith (2007) define a ‘community profile’ as:

> A comprehensive description of the needs of a population that is defined, or defines itself, as a community, and the resources that exist within that community, carried out with the active involvement of the community itself, for the purpose of developing an action plan or other means of improving the quality of life of the community.

This process can help give voice to all sections of the community. It can identify underutilised and potential resources, identify social capital within the community, and contribute to the empowerment of a wide-range of individuals and groups.

Communities are often portrayed in a positive way, with an emphasis on the support that community members can give each other. Teater (2014) points out, however, that communities can also exclude and marginalise particular individuals and groups, with potentially damaging consequences for people's wellbeing and safety. Community work that is both anti-oppressive and inclusive provides a means of enabling community members to support each other to stay safe and connected.

Social workers and other professionals clearly have duties to prevent and respond to abuse and neglect. However, adult (and child) abuse is not only a professional responsibility – it is 'everybody's business' (Department of Health, 2016). Whatever communities we may live in or belong to, community members have responsibilities to one another. In this regard, the needs and skills of all members of the community are crucial elements in the overall profile of each community.

**Starter kit tip**

Governments of all political persuasions devise and enact policies that reflect and express the primary discourses of the day about the distribution of wealth in society.

# 4 Social work and groups

Social workers are frequently engaged in working with groups, whether these be family groups, groups within care living environments, or in the application of more formal groupwork approaches. All practitioners require a good understanding of how groups function and the opportunities they present for development, support, and for empowerment.

Lindsay and Orton (2011) note that being in groups is a normal part of the lives of most people and that those with similar life experiences, situations and problems can be a source of support to one another. They recognise that groupwork can be empowering, with opportunities for giving and receiving help, as well as for feedback and learning. In addition, they suggest that groups can be valuable as an economical way of helping and offering ways of reaching marginalised people, and for bringing hope and optimism at times. Lindsay and Orton pointed out though, that groups can also be strange, offer limited confidentiality and that, inevitably, individuals in groups are less likely to receive undivided attention. They also observed that 'groups can be complex and expensive to plan and implement' (p. 15); and for some individuals, groups can actually be harmful.

Mark Doel trained as a groupworker in the 1980s at what was then the National Institute for Social Work. He is a widely published and highly respected groupwork author, practitioner and teacher. First, watch this video where Mark summarises his understanding of the relevance of groups to social work.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 3

Much of current social work is directed towards intervention with individuals, and working with groups can be time-consuming and expensive to organise and to deliver. However, on occasions, there can be advantages to addressing some problems that are common to a number of individuals by meeting together in a group. In a group, individuals can extend awareness, provide mutual support, and investigate solutions that may be difficult or less efficient to work on alone. Sometimes groups are established and maintained by service

users themselves, and sometimes groups are set-up by professionals specifically trained and experienced in the theory and practice of groupwork.

For people leading a group, including for social workers, it is important to be aware of a number of guiding principles and features about groups. These are explored in the following sections.

## 4.1 Group processes

Whatever the specific task or 'reason' for the group's existence, for people to become able to work constructively together in a group usually takes time. These developmental aspects of group life are known as 'group process'. A popular and useful way of describing this was formulated by Tuckman (1965) in the sequence of stages known as 'forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning'. For example, group members must at first get used to one another (forming); then they usually test the boundaries of power in the group (storming); then they need to establish ground rules that work for them (norming); then they actually do the 'work' of the group (performing); and finally, they must negotiate the group's end (adjourning). Rarely does this happen in a neat and simple sequence, and often a number of stages are revisited and re-negotiated throughout. But as a conceptual framework, Tuckman's ideas have proved durable for describing the background and the often unconscious processes that occur in many groups. For the group leader, anticipating these stages can help support group members navigate through the various stages and transitions.

## 4.2 Planning is important

Figure 15

Knowing that groups can be damaging for some individuals, as well as being helpful for others, is essential for group leaders when establishing formal groups. Issues need to be anticipated and managed, such as group membership; location and duration of sessions; management of conflict; boundaries and realistic expectations for the utility and possibilities for success; the ethical, cultural, and anti-oppressive foundations for the behaviour of leaders and group members; and finally, how the ending of the group might impact differentially on each individual group member.

## 4.3 Group leaders need group ‘skills’

Figure 16

Some people seem naturally and intuitively to have well developed personal and interactional skills that are effective in groups. However, these skills can be learned in a structured way and improved upon, and they are essential in helping individuals maximise their group experiences and for protecting others who for periods of time may be vulnerable in the group context. Doel and Sawdon (1999) suggest that group skills and interactional techniques for leading groups include:

- attending to individuals and responding to feelings
- seeking information, and when required giving information
- negotiating, re-negotiating, and reinforcing the group agreement
- gatekeeping the boundaries and expectations of the group
- focusing the group to keep on task when necessary
- modelling appropriate behaviour, responses, and group membership
- rewarding individuals, if appropriate and when required
- confronting, challenging, and mediating
- summarising activity and group progress
- ending.

## 4.4 Some group behaviours can be problematic

Figure 17

Doel and Sawdon (1999) identify a range of behaviours that are likely to be common elements in the process of a group’s development, although they don’t necessarily apply to every group in the same way. Behaviours such as these can divert the group from its task, but they are not necessarily always ‘bad’ in themselves. However, when working with groups, group leaders need to be able to identify these behaviours and use them to assist individuals to maximise opportunities for change and to minimise negative influences where possible. These behaviours include:

- Monopolising: an individual taking a disproportionate amount of the group’s time.

- Leading from within: this can include inappropriate challenges to the leader's authority, although occasionally it can be supportive.
- Challenging: for individuals to challenge group norms and behaviour can promote growth and provide focus. However, group leaders need to assess and manage such challenges sensitively.
- Silence: Individuals who are silent can signal warm intimacy or cold distance. But silence is always an issue and a challenge for group leaders to assess and manage appropriately.
- Gatekeeping: When a group encounters something difficult, some individuals may attempt to divert discussion away, towards safer ground. Group leaders need to help the group manage the risks of such gatekeeping behaviours.
- Joking: This can be positive and can bond the group together, demonstrating and validating the common humanity of the group. But it can be problematic if it serves primarily as another form of gatekeeping, to avoid important although painful issues.
- Behaving differently: Someone whose behaviour or characteristics are markedly different, or a person who chooses to be markedly different from other group members, can either be a positive catalyst, or a significant inhibitor to group development. Group leaders need to manage these issues sensitively.
- Scapegoating: This is when a collection of strong feelings of hostility are directed to one or two members of the group on a regular basis. This behaviour can signal important issues for the group but can be very destructive if not dealt with quickly and responsibly. Group leaders must be careful not to inadvertently collude with one side or the other.

## 4.5 Examples of groups

- Social groups: These could include a gardening group in a mental health day-centre, a newspaper-reading group in a residential home for older people, or a general discussion group in a group-home for learning disabled adults.
- Educational groups: Managing money for young people leaving care, or a preparation group for individuals moving from a long-stay mental health hospital into the community.
- Casework/remedial groups: issues linked to offending such as victim awareness or drug-related crime; or a group for children who have witnessed domestic violence.
- Therapeutic groups: to help with anxiety and depression, self-esteem, bereavement, or identity problems.
- Self-help and community-based groups: Alcoholics Anonymous, diabetes, brain-injury, parent/toddler groups, lobby-groups for local service improvements such as homelessness or disability.

Finally, watch this short clip of Mark Doel summarising his views about groupwork

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 4

# 5 Social work and the law


Figure 18

Social workers have to act within the law and can be called upon to justify their actions to courts, and in hearings and tribunals, as well as to their managers and service users. The law, depending on the context, can also define social workers' accountability, at times framing their decision-making options in some detail.

Factual and detailed knowledge of legal provisions and options is essential, but in the practical use and implementation of the law, social workers must learn to view the legal options available through the lens of their assessment of the situations in which they are involved. This is, of course, true for other professions where law relates directly to the dynamic world of working with people, in policing or in medicine, for example. In social work, sometimes it is clear that intervention is needed, perhaps when there are serious concerns about the safety of a child or adult. More often, however, the social worker will have a number of legally viable choices about the best way forward and must work with service users and carers, exercising their professional judgement in order to decide on the best course of action.

## Safeguarding

Undoubtedly, social workers need to know about the legal and practical interpretations of risk and harm and how the rights and safety of individuals may be promoted and protected. This is a core aspect of social work practice, and like many other elements in the role of a social worker, is constantly under scrutiny. It is also where accountability is frequently contested by the courts, the public, the press, and by the social work profession itself.

The term 'safeguarding' is used to describe aspects of the social worker's role in protecting people from harm, and upholding their rights to be free from discrimination, neglect, abuse and other forms of harm.

Safeguarding also includes assessing and managing aspects of risk, although 'risk' in its broadest sense is not always harmful (think, for example, about 'taking a risk' in your own life, like applying for a new job, or moving home). In social work, responding to risk always involves making well-informed professional judgements, often in complex situations where people may have different understandings of what is 'safe' or 'dangerous'. There are always legal and ethical tensions between people's right to privacy and autonomy to make their own decisions about their lives, and the role of society and state in taking action to protect somebody who is at risk of harm.

### Human rights, asylum and immigration

Societal attitudes shape policy development and, ultimately, the legislative process and the introduction of new laws. Tracing the development of UK equality and human rights law reveals an increasing acceptance that people have rights not to experience discrimination based on, for example, their skin colour, disability or gender.

In the case of asylum seekers, it is highly likely that all will arrive from countries or regions where the rule of law is either absent or is highly discriminatory to particular targeted social or ethnic groups. Under the 1951 Geneva Convention, asylum is protection given by a country to someone who is fleeing persecution in their country. Asylum-seekers officially become 'refugees' if the government of the host country accepts that they have a well-founded fear of persecution should they return home.

In the UK, matters of asylum are managed by the Home Office, and social workers generally do not have direct input into their assessment and management. However, asylum-seeking individuals and families often need support locally, especially with matters such as housing, education, and with many of the multiple problems associated with their dislocation and need to adapt as best as they can in unfamiliar social and cultural contexts. This can, for example, include assisting when there appears to be some infringement of their Human Rights under the 1998 Human Rights Act, or in the protection of their rights under the Equality Act 2010, where race, religion, and belief are protected at law. However, asylum seekers to the UK have more limited legal rights than the vast majority of UK citizens, so it is essential that social workers in this field are fully aware of the legal provisions and of their applications in context.

The law in general:

1. The law indicates to social workers the nature and the extent of their powers and duties. A duty is something a local authority, for example, is obliged to do, although it may have some discretion as to how it proceeds. A 'power' is something that can lawfully be done, but where there is not necessarily an obligation to do so.
2. The law sets out clear lines of accountability which may include references to bodies that adjudicate when necessary. The courts, for example.
3. The law attempts to ensure that processes, whereby decisions are made, are fair.
4. The law may help clarify ethical practice issues.
5. The law through the court system makes decisions with advice from social work agencies on occasions, or ratifies decisions already made by social work agencies.
6. The law provides a framework within which social workers can act as an advocate, so long as there are no conflicts of interest for the social worker or for their employing agency.
7. The law can facilitate the self-empowerment of service users and their carers.

# 6 Summary of Session 3

In this session you have learned that social workers need to know about social divisions and diversity for the following reasons.

- Many of the people who use social work services are poor, and poverty can have a significant impact on people's life chances and wellbeing. Some people are poor because of unwise choices and limited skills. However, there are many other explanations for poverty, relating to structural, social and political forces that can disproportionately impact on poor people and make it much harder for them to achieve and sustain baseline levels of stability in health, education and social development. Social workers need to understand the complexity and impact of these issues, to avoid contributing to the social discourse of 'blame' where the poor are viewed as being fully responsible for causing and for resolving their circumstances.
- Not being able to participate at a reasonable level in society, that is, being subject to social exclusion, is damaging and is a denial of human rights and human potential. People who are members of certain groups or who perhaps have certain unusual characteristics are especially susceptible to social exclusion. This can include individuals with disabilities or health conditions, certain ethnic groups, older people, and many others. Social workers need to be fully aware of the persistent and changing nature of social exclusion, and work with people on the basis of equity and social justice, addressing positively wherever possible the causes and consequences of exclusion.
- Social work intervention and contact while generally useful is nevertheless transitory and time-limited. On the other hand, people spend the majority of their time living in their communities, which provide primary sources for identity, validation and support. It is important therefore that social workers acknowledge and contribute where possible to the development of community resources, promoting the creation and access to social capital for social development and community safeguarding.
- Individuals generally behave differently in groups than they might behave alone. This may be reasonably self-evident. However, social workers need to know about the patterns, dynamics, and triggers for group behaviour. An ability to work positively with these forces can help significantly when working with service users, and also when working with and within organisations.
- The law shapes much of the social welfare system, social work practice, and society generally, and professional intervention with individuals and families carries with it many legal duties and responsibilities. The law protects, and it also allows for rights and opportunities to be delivered, facilitating the management and healing of social divisions and the equitable enforcement of rights. However, the law is always 'work in progress' and it is unlikely to ever be fully fair or proportionate for all. Therefore, a full and continually updated knowledge of the law is a pre-requisite for effective and empowering social work practice.

Now that you have considered some of the social aspects that social workers need to engage with and understand in their work, in the next session you will look at various aspects of human development. Generally, this begins with the individual, and the numerous factors that may influence their capacity and potential.

You can now go to Session 4.

# Session 4: Understanding human development

## Introduction

Every individual is unique. They have their own genetic pathways and biological characteristics, their unique family histories, and their individual psychological experiences. For individuals these elements are theirs alone, driving their wishes, feelings and choices directly. Therefore, making assumptions and generalised predictions about people without carefully considering and consulting with them in advance can be notoriously error-prone, and can lead to conclusions that prove to be very wide of the mark. On occasions, it may lead to being actively discriminatory.

Figure 1

Nevertheless, alongside individual uniqueness, human physical and psychological development and social behaviour do frequently express themselves in recognisable and generally predictable patterns. These patterns offer a range of 'templates' for what it might be reasonable to expect at different ages and stages in the human life-span, or for what might be likely under certain typical sets of circumstances. These templates and patterns of what is known can occur, can usefully be described under the general heading of

'human development'. Consequently, social workers need to study and be aware of human development, as it can provide a series of measures against which to understand and to assess whether individuals and groups are progressing well in their physical and social development, offering useful if not necessarily always definitive threshold indicators for concern and intervention.

These aspects of what social workers need to know are reflected in the four principal areas of this session:

1. Developmental frameworks
2. Development and children
3. Development over a lifetime
4. Development in a social context

You'll begin by considering developmental frameworks.

# 1 Developmental frameworks

Figure 2

Human development comprises many relatively predictable patterns. A knowledge of these can suggest the possibility of various outcomes, providing on occasions opportunities for understanding and intervening to achieve certain desirable outcomes, or indicating the need to find ways of working to avoid outcomes that may be less desirable. These kinds of understandings and opportunities emerge regularly in social work practice with children and with adults. Interpretations and interventions incorporating knowledge of human development can be at an individual, family, community, and at a societal level. Social workers need to know about these elements and patterns so that their assessments and approaches are consciously considered and targeted, providing where possible enhanced levels of predictability based on an informed understanding of the subject. It is important to remember though, that as in all aspects of working with people, predictive ‘certainty’ is elusive, and some would say is rare. A knowledge of human development, therefore, is essential, but it is most useful as a guide to frame decisions, rather than as formulae and frameworks to rigidly or unquestioningly determine action.

# 1.1 Perspectives on human growth and development

Figure 3

There are many ways of describing and explaining the complex processes that exist in human development, but there are some perspectives that have particular relevance for social work.

A ‘perspective’ in this context generally embodies a set of connected ideas that can assist in understanding why people do certain things in certain ways. The absence of explanatory and interpretive perspectives would lead to very concrete assumptions that all people at every age simply choose to do things because they want to and that they are not subject to any other internal or external influences. Very few people are likely to take this somewhat absolutist position, and therefore it is likely that we all make assumptions about people’s motivations and choices based on our personal perspectives, conscious or otherwise, about what drives and influences them. It is common practice for social workers to be required to make assessments about the motivations, choices and potential of others, and therefore it is essential for social workers to reflect upon and engage wisely with how such assessments are made and upon what basis.

A perspective about human development is sometimes applicable to explain particular characteristics. For example, there would perhaps appear to be a clear biological explanation in the case of a person with a learning disability, where they may have very limited cognitive functioning as the result of an inherited and well documented genetic condition. However, most usually, perspectives about development are used in combination, providing more nuanced assessments together than might be possible individually.

These five perspectives about human development have proved to be enduring and useful for social workers:

- Biological and genetic: suggesting that development and behaviour are linked to physical, neurochemical and hormonal processes and genes.
- Psychodynamic: arguing that development and change are influenced by innate unconscious drives such as sex, aggression, id (a term first used by Freud in the 1920s – the part of the mind in which innate instinctive impulses and primary processes are manifest). This perspective also attributes aspects of development to the influence of social upbringing, e.g. Freud, Erikson.
- Cognitive: suggesting that cognitive development and learning is the result of innate mental structures such as schemas, memory and perception in combination with environmental influences and life experiences, e.g. Piaget, Vygotsky.

- Social/humanist: focusing on the role of parents, caretakers, siblings and other social influences and their effect on development via social engagement and support, e.g. Maslow, Rogers, Bowlby.
- Learning/behaviourist: suggesting that children are born tabula rasa (blank slate) and develop and learn from environmental conditioning (e.g. in response to rewards, reinforcement and stimulus) rather than any internal thoughts or feelings, e.g. Pavlov, Watson, Skinner.

## 1.2 Nature versus nurture

For everyone, development begins at the moment of conception, and probably few would argue with the possibility that a person's skills and character are significantly influenced and shaped by their parents and family during childhood. But, by how much? If the same child were to be brought up in a different family would not their skills and their character not have been pretty much the same in the long run? Questions such as these form the basis of what has become known as the 'nature versus nurture' debate.

Although knowledge can be shared between professionals, the knowledge base and the various associated theories of development have emerged from different academic disciplines, such as psychology and neuroscience. Academic debates concerning aspects of development exist both within and between different disciplines. For social workers, it is helpful to understand some of these debates and appreciate the extent to which development is viewed as an interaction between environmental, social, and hereditary influences. This reflects one of the fundamental debates concerning the extent to which human development is influenced by either nature (inherent characteristics) or nurture (the care given by others). At the simplest level this debate involves two separate explanations:

- Nature: people's development and their behaviours, qualities and identities can be explained by their biological or genetic make-up.
- Nurture: people's development and their behaviours, qualities and identities can be explained by the physical and emotional environments in which they grow up.

It is not useful to expect absolute or definitive answers to these kinds of questions. Not only are there varying degrees of certainty between academics, but there are also various professions that tend either to be based upon or are drawn towards one perspective or another. Social workers are not required to offer firm professional conclusions to these matters, but they frequently need to examine the balance of factors on both sides, and on occasions, they may be called upon to offer a professional view about the nature and the consequences of that balance in specific situations.

### Activity 1 Your development: nature or nurture?

Think of an activity you are good at (for example, a previous occupation or role as a family carer, an artistic or sporting skill). To what extent are the behaviours, qualities and identities associated with this activity the product of your genes or your environment? Reflect on how you might apply this knowledge to social work practice. Make notes in the table below.

| What I'm good at | Nature/nurture? | How this might help me as a social worker |
|---|---|---|
| For example, table tennis. | Nature (my mum was British champion) and nurture (she taught me from a young age). | Useful skill when doing direct work and relationship building with young people. |
| *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* | *Provide your answer...* |

Answer

In some cases people will cite very clear influences that side with one or other of the explanations within the nature/nurture debate.


Figure 4

While people's behaviours and qualities can on occasions be clearly linked to an aspect of nature or nurture, in most cases it is possible to attribute them to a complex interaction between many factors. This view is explained by Aldgate:

> … the relationship between nature, of which one example is genetic factors, cannot be disengaged from the influence of nurture or external influences on development. Rutter (1992), for example, suggests that environment can influence genetic endowment, as in the case of height. The genes that influence height in the UK have changed little in the last century but nutrition has changed and the next generation is on average taller than their parents. Knowledge and intervention are able to mediate the effects of genetically carried metabolic diseases such as phenylketonuria. However, factors that affect one child in a family are more influential than family-wide factors that impinge on everyone in the family. This helps explain why one child in a family may be singled out for abuse. This has important implications for the assessment of individual children who are being scapegoated. Conversely, infant irritability patterns may be influenced more by genetics than child rearing. Anti-social behaviour may run in families but be more as a result of environment than genes (Rutter, 1992).
>
> (Aldgate, 2006, p. 25)

It is also worth reflecting how some aspects of nurture are culturally specific and while proving strength and opportunities for wellbeing, they can sometimes also result in prejudice and discrimination from people and institutions encountered in wider society.

Aldgate goes on to argue that social workers and other professionals need to remain alert to new findings related to child development and to find ways to balance different knowledge about the influence of both ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ when assessing and providing services for children.

# 2 Development and children

Figure 5

All human beings change and develop over time. But in childhood the rate of development is usually much faster and children's vulnerabilities and need for well-informed and appropriate care is substantial. Social workers often engage with children and their families where the needs of the child are misunderstood, contested, or neglected in some way. It is essential therefore for social workers to have a clear appreciation of the full range of developmental baselines, from which to appraise each child's progress and needs, and on occasions, their degree of risk if left unaddressed.

## 2.1 Developmental needs of children

For social workers, a useful starting point for examining the breadth of knowledge considered important for child development is to examine the three 'domains' of the Department of Health (2000) assessment triangle. These demonstrate three areas for careful consideration when assessing children who may be in need, or at risk of harm:

1. the child's developmental needs, including whether they are suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm
2. parents' or carers' capacity to respond to those needs
3. the impact and influence of wider family, community and environmental circumstances.

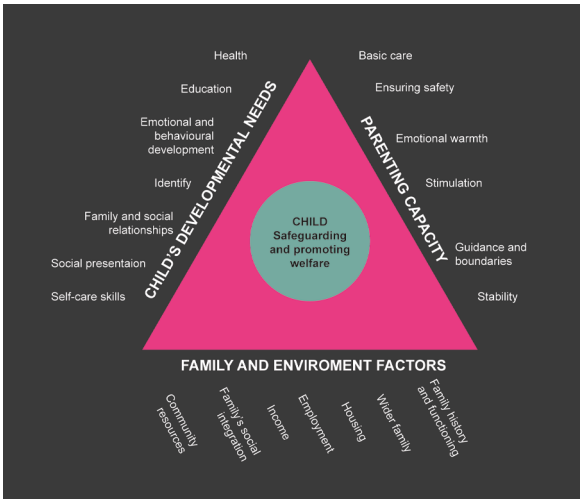



Figure 6

From the ‘child’s developmental needs’ left-side of the assessment triangle, an explanation of the seven items listed is as follows:

- Health: general health including dental; physical development; impact of disability; immunisations.
- Learning and education: understanding; reasoning and problem solving; attention span and concentration; progress and achievements; participation in learning, education and employment.
- Emotional development and behaviour: temperament; response to stress; appropriate self-control; coping strategies; lifestyle; antisocial behaviour.
- Identity and self-image: views and feelings about themselves; sense of belonging and acceptance by family; peers and wider society; experience of discrimination.
- Family and social relationships: quality of relationship with parents or carers and siblings; friendship patterns with peers and other significant people.
- Social presentation: understanding of how appearance, behaviour and any impairment are seen by others; appropriateness of dress for age, gender, culture and religion; personal hygiene.
- Self-care skills: acquisition of practical, emotional and communication skills necessary for increasing independence (taking account of the impact of any impairment).

There is no perfect measure for determining whether a child’s development may be delayed or impaired, either by innate genetic or biological influences or as a consequence of the quality or the amount of care the child has received. However, social workers observe and evaluate presenting behaviours and other reports about children’s difficulties, and then use their knowledge about what generally might reasonably be expected for children of a similar age, to assess whether there might be cause for concern about an individual child. Assessment almost always involves balancing a range of factors to reach an accurate and safe conclusion.

Next, you have the opportunity to attempt four quick questions, to be answered as either True or False, to help get you thinking a bit more about development.

### Activity 2 Quick quiz on developments

Answer the following questions.

Child development theory is only important if I am working in child protection.

- ☐ False
- ☐ True

#### Answer

There are many situations where social workers engage with children and young people, e.g. looked after care, fostering and adoption, children in need, safeguarding, mental health, disability and so on. An understanding of child development theory will help social workers in any role or task that involves assessment or direct engagement with children and young people. It is important to remember that social workers will work in partnership with other professionals (and parents or caretakers) to share expertise and perspectives and produce a holistic understanding of children's wellbeing and development.

Child development encompasses physical and neurological changes.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Answer

In fact, child development encompasses a broader range of changes. According to Mussen et al., 'development is defined as orderly and relatively enduring changes over time in physical and neurological structures, thought processes and behaviour' (2004, p. 4).

Development ends when a child reaches adulthood.

- ☐ False
- ☐ True

Answer

Development is a feature found across the life course although it may be interrupted and may not always progress in a linear fashion. Generally, the first 20 years of a person's life is a remarkable period of developmental activity. It is a period when most developmental changes, according to Mussen et al., 'result in new, improved ways of reacting - that is behaviour that is healthier, better organised, more complex, more stable, more competent or more efficient' (2004, p. 4). Of course, there are exceptions, for example, where perhaps due to a disability a child experiences a delay to their growth or development. Beyond the period of childhood and youth development, change continues but without the same intensity and noticeable outcomes.

Child development is defined in legislation.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Answer

The Children Act 1989 defines 'development' as physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural development and 'health' as physical or mental health. In determining and defining which children are in need of services the Children Act 1989 has at its heart (in section 17) the child's right to achieve and maintain a reasonable standard of health or development. This provision is mirrored in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (s.22). A child's development must also be taken into account when a family court considers making a care or supervision order where the child's development is 'compared with that which could reasonably be expected of a similar child'. This comparison with a 'similar child' requires familiarity with the range of development any child might demonstrate. It also requires balancing the norms of development with the needs of the individual child (Daniel et al., 2010).

## 2.2 Observing children's development

Theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient when assessing children's development. There is also a need to undertake real-world observations of children and relate what is seen to the knowledge and theory appropriate to the child and their context. When observing children it may be possible to determine the extent to which they are developing in line with established norms. It may also be possible to identify delays or problems

associated with development. Social workers should be able to identify when a child is at risk from failure to develop and be able to evidence the contributory factors. Practitioners in adult's services, when working with families where there are children, also need to identify when a child's developmental needs are not being met in order to make sure that they make referrals to other professionals who can provide support or take action.

There are different types of observation used by social workers: those carried out directly, for example when they come into contact with a family, and those carried out by other professionals in health, education or social care settings attended by the child. Information based on observations from parents, caretakers and family members can also be relevant. Childcare and education professionals are usually well trained in observing and assessing age-appropriate development. Parents and caretakers often know a child better than anyone else and are well placed to notice significant changes in behaviour.

The validity and reliability of observations should always be a primary consideration. For example, a social worker might ask the following questions:

- Observer effects (in research this is called the 'Hawthorne effect'): has the observed child modified their behaviour in response to the presence of the observer?
- Context: what impact is the environment where the observation takes place likely to have on the child?
- The child: when the observation took place, was the child tired, ill or anxious? If so, how might these states impact on the observed behaviour?
- The observer: who is observing? When relying on reported observation, have the skills, knowledge and reliability of the observer been considered? Is the report of their observation influenced by personal bias or prejudice?
- Frequency: is one observation sufficient to make a judgement about a child's developmental needs, or would it be helpful to observe the child more than once or in a different context?

These are all useful questions to ask when using evidence drawn from observations. Ultimately, social workers will make judgements based on a breadth of evidence that includes different perspectives, observations and different types of knowledge.

### Activity 3 Observing children

In K832, the larger Open University course from which this Starter Kit is drawn, there are several video examples of children at play, incorporating activities for learning about the complex skills required for accurately observing their behaviour. In this activity here, however, you will watch a very brief summary clip of this material, where the identity of the children has been anonymised. The activity is based on an exercise where three professionals are asked to watch the video clips and comment upon the children's developmental behaviour. In the background of the video is a blurred image of the clip upon which the professionals are commenting.

The three professionals are Mary Bonomaulley (Health Visitor); Margaret Williams (Foster Carer); and Di Dallyn (Social Worker).

As you listen to the comments, bear in mind the following general points:

- Each child is unique and develops at his or her own rate.
- Children of this age are ready to learn – they are active not passive.
- Learning in the different areas of development overlaps and blends together.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 1


## 2.3 Attachment theory

Figure 7

Attachment theory is particularly associated with very young children's development but also contributes to understanding and assessing the behaviour and needs of older children and adults. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1969; Ainsworth and Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1988) has been influential in focusing attention on behaviours and emotions present in relationships between children and their primary parents or caregivers. It has been specifically used to examine and explain how children use a significant relationship to cope with stress or the fear of danger. Children's attachment behaviour under such circumstances involves 'seeking the proximity of another (usually an adult but it might be another child) who is perceived as stronger and wiser and who will be able to make them feel safe' (Aldgate and Gibson, 2015, p. 82).

Secure attachment is considered an important prerequisite of social development. It supports children's ability to manage their feelings and behaviours and the way they develop expectations about themselves and form relationships with others (Ainsworth, 1989). Insecure attachments as the result of deprivation, separation and unresolved grief can, in contrast, lead to both short- and long-term psychological

problems (Guidano, 1987; Guidano and Liotti, 1983). It is recognised that early attachment patterns will influence how children develop relationships with non-caregiving adults, siblings and parents. Attachment patterns have also been closely linked to a number of specific policy and service provision goals. For example, children with secure attachments are considered to be better prepared to enter formal schooling and to have a better chance of succeeding within the education systems (Commodari, 2013; Geddes, 2006). Some early intervention strategies consequently seek to help caregivers support the development of secure attachment patterns. Attachment is therefore an important consideration to be combined with cultural and social context when assessing the current and future wellbeing of children.

Ainsworth has been responsible for moving Bowlby's attachment theory forward and producing classifications of attachment that can be applied by social workers in different tasks such as safeguarding, parenting assessment or planning support for children within the 'looked after' care system. The following summary of attachment patterns classifications is offered by Howe (2001, pp. 201–2) cited in Aldgate and Gibson (2015, p. 86).

- **Secure** attachment patterns: children experience their caregiver as available and experience themselves positively.
- **Ambivalent** patterns: children experience their caregiver as inconsistently responsive, and themselves as dependent and poorly valued.
- **Avoidant patterns:** children experience their caregivers as consistently rejecting, and themselves as insecure but compulsively self-reliant.
- **Disorganised patterns:** often associated with children who have suffered severe maltreatment; children experience their caregivers as either frightening or frightened, and themselves as helpless, angry and unworthy.

With regard to attachment, but also in many other aspects of social work with children, as part of the decision-making and assessment process it is important that social workers observe children, draw on the expertise of other professionals, consult with parents and caretakers and combine this knowledge with appropriate theory. Professional judgement also requires social workers to critically reflect on their own experiences and knowledge, and understand the limitations and strengths of different theories and perspectives.

**Starter kit tip**

It is essential to check the validity and reliability of observations of children's development.

# 3 Development over a lifetime

Figure 8

Human development is not fully complete when the child reaches the legal age of maturity, most usually at the age of 18 years. Far from it. This section considers some of the ways in which the patterns and processes of ageing and development emerge through adolescence and beyond, in adulthood.

## 3.1 Life span theory

Figure 9

Terms such as ‘the life course’ and ‘life span theory’ are both used widely in the literature on development and change. These terms challenge common assumptions that individuals follow a fixed linear life cycle and that only children and young people experience development. Although there may be some confusion surrounding the difference between life course and life span, these theoretical perspectives are complementary and can be used together to understand development and growth as being lifelong, multidimensional, contextual and dynamic.

Life span theory acknowledges that, across the life course, humans are influenced by many different social structures, relationships and experiences, leading to continuities and discontinuities in development. This was an extension of a prevailing early twentieth-century view that human development occurred exclusively during childhood and youth. In the late twentieth century, it was acknowledged that existing theories provided an inadequate explanation of adult lives:

> New and difficult questions were raised about continuity and change in adult lives over time, about social settings that structure movement through these years, about connections between lives, time, and place, and how to handle these complexities in theory and research.
>
> (Settersten, 2003, in Alwin, 2012, p. 209)

Life span theory as developed by Baltes (1987) covers the period from conception to death. It perceives development as a continuous and dynamic process involving transitions during which individuals adapt to new contexts and circumstance. For example, it considers the influence of culture, socio-economic circumstances and history.

## 3.2 The life course perspective

Figure 10

A life course perspective agrees with Baltes' theory that development is lifelong, multidirectional and influenced by contextual factors. The life course perspective has been particularly influential in the 1990s, especially as part of a growing interest in the study of ageing. The perspective grew out of longitudinal childhood research by Elder (1974) in the USA. He noticed how individual and family pathways had been greatly impacted upon by the Great Depression. He concluded that a development theory was needed that took a person's historic context into consideration. In his later work, Elder identified more principles of a life course approach.

Elder's principles have been summarised by Alwin (2012) and include:

- life span development – that is, human development and ageing are lifelong processes
- agency – individuals construct their own lives through the choices and actions they take within social structures (i.e. the opportunities and constraints of social arrangements) and historical circumstances
- time and place – the lives of people are embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over time
- timing – the developmental consequences of events and transitions are conditional on their timing in people's lives
- linked lives – people's lives are lived interdependently and sociohistorical influences are expressed through networks of shared relationships.

# 3.3 Stage theories and the life course

Figure 11

Erikson (1965, 1968, 1980) is one of the few theorists who provide a stage theory illustrating how development is moulded as a continuous process encompassing the whole life span. His theory proposes that at different points in their life, individuals have demands placed upon them that provoke conflict or crisis. Confronting and resolving each conflict provides the individual with strength that can be carried and used in the future. Erikson (1965, 1968, 1980) also proposes that individuals who have difficulty resolving a particular conflict may be stuck. In some cases social workers may help people who have yet to resolve a developmental conflict.

The following table illustrates the ages/stages in Erikson's (1965) theory. The columns on the right of the table indicate important events at each stage, and the likely positive outcomes if the stage is negotiated and achieved successfully.

**Table 1 The ages/stages in Erikson's theory**

| Age | Stage/ conflict | Important events | Positive outcome |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Infancy | Trust v mistrust | Feeding, physical affection | Child has feelings of goodness that leads to development of trust |
| 2 Preschool | Autonomy v shame and doubt | Muscle control, toilet training, exploration | Agreed (parents and child) understanding of boundaries |
| 3 Ages 4–6 | Initiative v guilt | Beginning to reason and deduce | Child initiates some events |
| 4 Primary school 6–11 | Industry v inferiority | School and home life, widening relationships | Successfully balances competing demands |
| 5 Adolescence | Identity v role confusion | Loosening of attachments | Developing a sense of self/ testing out others |
| 6 Young adulthood | Intimacy v isolation | Intimate and trusting relationships | Feeling useful and a sense of achievement |
| 7 Middle adulthood | Generativity v stagnation | Creating and nurturing the next generation | Feelings of accomplishment, avoidance of stagnation |
| 8 Maturity | Ego integrity v despair | Reflecting on past accepting one's individual self, fear of death | Sense of fulfilment and wisdom |

However, while the stage theory is helpful in encompassing the entire life span based on your own experience, you might want to reflect on its applicability to real life. It is a theory that may be very difficult to test out in the real world and it sheds no light on how or why

development occurs between the stages. The eight stages when linked to specific ages may not necessarily fit with the norms and practices found across all cultures.

Nevertheless, for social workers engaging with people at different points in the life course it may prompt them to empathise and reflect on the types of issue that may be significant. The theory is particularly helpful at highlighting how problems encountered by a person in the later stages may be attributable to unresolved conflicts and issues during earlier stages of the life course. When, for example, a social worker is seeking information about a person's life history, the stages in Erikson's theory could serve as useful prompts.

## 3.4 Risk, safety and young people

Figure 12

Stage theories of development identify adolescence as a distinctive phase. This can help social workers think about how they engage with young people and provide support. Social workers can also use stage theories to reflect on the impact of adolescence when working with people during adulthood and later life.

Bailey (2006) identifies how risk-taking is common behaviour associated with adolescence. It fits closely with this period as a time when experimentation, independence and non-conformity prevails. Social workers may meet young people who smoke, have eating disorders, misuse drugs, self-harm, run away or are involved in offending behaviour (Cooper and Hester, 2011). Some of these activities may not result in long-term harm but some teenagers' behaviours do lead to damage that continues into adult life.

An accumulation of different risks, or specific kinds of risk involving safeguarding concerns, can result in situations where a young person is at risk of harm to their wellbeing. Social workers are likely to be involved in situations where young people's risk-taking behaviours reach this point. It is important in such circumstances that they build effective relationships with the young person and their caretakers and fully assess the risks both for this young person and other young people.

Depending on the type and severity of risk, different options are open to social workers enabling them to support young people – these include statutory powers, family support, direct work or referral to other specialist professionals and agencies. In very extreme cases, secure accommodation may be an option for some young people. Secure accommodation is a form of residential care for the small number of children who have been assessed as being at significant risk to themselves or others in the community.

Taking away the liberty of a young person in the interests of safeguarding their welfare is a decision made only when other options are not suitable. In England and Wales this is governed by a legal framework laid out in the Children Act 1989 and is protective in nature; the welfare of the child is relevant but not paramount. A child can be kept in secure accommodation without an order of the court for a total of seventy-two hours.

A child who is being 'looked after' by a local authority by being provided with accommodation cannot, under Section 20 of the Children Act, be placed or kept in accommodation which has the purpose of restricting the child's liberty unless the requirements of Section 25 are met.

These requirements are:

> that the child has a history of running away and is likely to run away from accommodation which isn't secure; and, if he/she runs away, he/she is likely to suffer significant harm; or
>
> if the child isn't in secure accommodation, he/she is likely to injure himself/herself or someone else.

If the court makes an order, the first order can be made for an initial maximum period of three months and after that for further periods of up to six months (Regulations 11 and 12). Time starts running from the date of the order. A child who is under 13 years of age cannot be placed in secure accommodation in a community home, without the prior approval of the Secretary of State. Under Regulation 15, a local authority looking after a child in secure accommodation must appoint at least three persons – at least one of whom must not be employed by the local authority or looking after the child on behalf of the local authority – to review the keeping of the child in secure accommodation within one month of the start of the placement and then at intervals not exceeding three months.

In Scotland, children and young people can be placed in secure accommodation by the children's hearing or the courts. Most children under 16 years old will be referred to the children's hearing system. If they are deemed as being at risk, or a risk to others, they may be placed on a Compulsory Supervision Order (s.83 Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011) with a secure accommodation authorisation. For children under 16 years old, and under 18 years old, on a compulsory supervision order, the focus of decision-making must be on the child's welfare, in line with the philosophy of 'needs not deeds'. 'Needs not deeds' refers to the underlying principle of the Children's Hearing System in Scotland that makes decisions that prioritise the assessed 'needs' of young people ahead of their alleged or proven offending behaviour (i.e. the 'deeds'). However, most 16- and 17-year-olds who have committed offences, as well as a very small number of under 16-year-olds who have committed serious offences, will enter the criminal justice system. The courts can then impose a custodial sentence in secure accommodation if the young person is under 18 years old and is deemed to pose a risk to the public.

## 3.5 Adult growth and development

Figure 13

Although adolescence is a transition that leads to adulthood, development and growth do not cease once the transition is achieved. In fact, human growth and development are

continuous and adults are likely to experience change and transitions throughout the reminder of their lives. As with childhood and adolescent development these are likely to be influenced by contextual factors.

There are some important messages for social workers regarding these observations:

- Social workers need to understand how adulthood may well be influenced by experiences earlier in life. Insecure childhood attachments, for example, have been linked to psychological problems in later life.
- Individuals, given the right circumstances and support, have the capacity to change unless, as Trevithick (2005, p. 90) comments, there are 'biological or neurological conditions to impede the process'. This is encouraging for social workers whose daily practice can support and/or challenge people to make changes in their lives.
- There is a tendency to see the later years of life as a period of developmental decline. This is a view not supported by research, however, and social workers may need to support and challenge prejudice against older people influenced by this prevailing view.

Baltes (1987) and Trevithick (2005) suggest that developmental change is a continuous process that is present in adulthood. But this is a process to which some people are more resilient than others. An individual's mental capacity or health status may have a bearing on their ability to cope. It is also important to consider the impact of economic policy and social change, such as the rise in state pension age, austerity measures and increased longevity with reductions in resources.

## 3.6 Adjusting to change

Change can be beneficial and provide new opportunities but it can also be experienced as a source of stress. Some of the reasons for this include:

- Change can remove people from the comfort of what they know and who they know.
- Change can disrupt the equilibrium in people's lives.
- Change can leave individuals feeling out of control.
- Change can bring new expectations and pressures from others.
- When people change they may worry about how other people see them.
- Sometimes, by changing, people are vulnerable to stigmatisation, prejudice and discrimination.
- Change can use up a lot of time, physical effort and emotional energy.

Transitions and change are an integral feature of life, particularly when a person moves to a new place or location, or experiences failing health or mobility. Typical transitions a social worker might be involved with include:

- helping a person relocate into a residential social care setting
- planning for adoption
- adjusting to life at home after long-term hospital care
- supporting a recently disabled person to adjust to life using a personal support assistant.

Social workers need to address not only the practical and logistical issues but also help the individual make psychological and emotional adjustments to their new circumstances. According to Hopson and Adams (1976), stressful transitions are those which are unpredictable, involuntary, unfamiliar or of high magnitude or intensity. However, transitions are always an opportunity for growth and change. Hopson and Adams (1976, p. 13) produced a model based on psychology that has been commonly used to help practitioners to understand how changes of place and location impact on an individual's sense of wellbeing and self-esteem. They propose that individuals may experience similar patterns of feelings and emotions within the process of adjustment.

Hopson and Adams outline the following common stages of adjustment to self-esteem during periods of transition, and if successful, gradually rising over time:

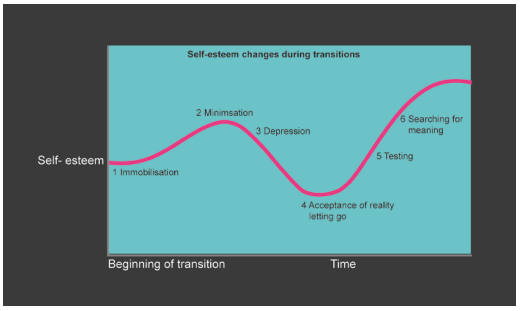



Figure 14

The explanation of the various stages is:

**Immobilisation:** A sense of being overwhelmed, unable to act. Unfamiliar transitions, and those of which we have negative expectations, tend to intensify this stage.

**Minimisation:** As a way of coping with the change it is common to deny that it is happening. This is a frequent reaction to a crisis that is too difficult to face.

**Depression:** People often get depressed when they face up to the implications of change.

**Accepting reality:** At this point the person begins to let go of their old state of being, accepting the reality of what is happening to them.

**Testing:** Having begun to accept the situation, then it becomes possible to test out new behaviours to cope with the new situation.

**Seeking meanings:** This is a reflective stage where people try to work out how and why things are different.

**Internalisation:** Finally, understandings of the situation and new meanings become internalised and accepted. They then become part of the person's behaviour.

(Adapted from Hopson and Adams, 1976, pp. 9–12)

**Starter kit tip**

When a social worker is seeking information about a person's life history, the stages in Erikson's theory could serve as useful prompts.

# 4 Development in a social context

Figure 15

Although many of the paths and manifestations of human development are influenced by, and at times are heavily determined by genetic factors, it is important to consider how the social and family context of an individual can allow for or inhibit the presence or absence of certain characteristics. This section looks at some of the social and environmental factors that can on occasions drive and influence development.

## 4.1 Social ecology

Social workers routinely apply their understanding of human development when assessing need and when providing support to service users. In this process, a social-ecological perspective can help social workers not only to acknowledge the unique developmental paths of individuals, but also can allow for the influences on the development of each individual's location, their family, community, and social and cultural contexts to be taken into account. This incorporates the impact on individuals of their social ecology, which itself is often subject to independent change, but is not usually subject to the rate and capacity for change of any individual living within that social context.

This perspective underpins many of the frameworks for assessment used by social workers across the UK. For example, as suggested in the Department of Health 'Assessment Triangle' shown in section 3(b).2(A).

**Brofenbrenner (1979)** outlined his social-ecological model (sometimes called a bioecological theory) as having four principal components: proximal process, person characteristics, context, and time. Sometimes abbreviated as PPCT, these four elements are defined as follows:

> **(a) Proximal processes** (influencing development)
>
> Transactions between an individual and the context (both spatial and temporal) in which they are located. Proximal processes are 'engines of development' (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000, p. 118) that either directly promote outcomes of competence or diminish the possibility of dysfunctional outcomes. Bronfenbrenner stressed that proximal processes actualise genetic potential and are more likely to do so in stable and advantageous environments and where individuals have strong emotional relationships (Rosa and Tudge, 2013).
>
> **(b) Person characteristics** (influencing development)
>
> Individual level variables, including temperament, age, gender, abilities and disabilities, play a part in initiating and influencing proximal processes.

**(c) Context** (influencing development)

This is the best known part of Bronfenbrenner's theory and originated in the early part of his career. Bronfenbrenner illustrates (see Figure below) how children develop within a number of contextual systems:

- **Microsystems** – for example, home, school or peer groups – have a big impact on child development.
- **Mesosystems** are the interactions between the microsystems. For example, how well do school and home communicate with each other?
- **Exosystems** do not contain the child but are external conditions – for example, the parents' employment – that may have an impact on parenting. This also relates to specific social policies that may impact on wellbeing and development.
- **Macrosystems** are the wider economic, social, cultural and political systems, ideologies and conditions within which the child is developing.

Later work (for example, Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) made clear that proximal processes, whether involving solitary interaction with objects or symbols or interaction with one or more other social partners, occur within microsystems, but that the other systems of context are also influential (Rosa and Tudge, 2013, p. 253).

**(d) Time** (influencing development)

Bronfenbrenner also stressed the importance of time and how development involves both continuity and change (Rosa and Tudge, 2013). Events and experiences both internal (such as entering puberty) and external (birth of a sibling) impact on development. In some cases these are expected (starting school) or unexpected (death of a parent). Bronfenbrenner, influenced by Elder (1974) and the life course perspective, also acknowledged the impact of historical events on development.

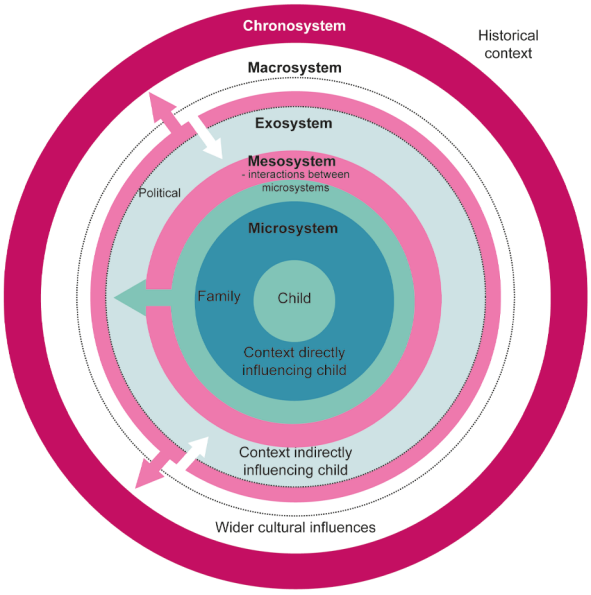



Figure 16

## 4.2 The social ecological perspective: advantages and limitations

**Advantages**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) wished to illustrate how human development is influenced through the mutual influences and simultaneous relationships within, and between, the different systems or environments, including the following:

- a child's own innate capabilities and their biological and genetic characteristics the stresses and supports of primary carers and extended family
- the stresses and supports of direct contacts (for example, schools) and indirect contacts (for example, a parent's workplace) within a neighbourhood and community
- the stresses and supports created through cultural beliefs, expectations and values at the societal level.

The social ecological perspective is useful for understanding relationships between children or young people, and for understanding the different systems listed above, including friendship networks, families, community organisations and services, cultures, national policies, and even globalisation. According to Stevenson (1998, p. 19), 'though it [social ecological perspective] is theoretical, it is very practical, it provides us with a kind of map to guide us through very confusing terrain'.

The social ecological perspective may assist practitioners when engaging with children and parents, because it reflects their realities, world views and explanations of their difficulties (Gill and Jack, 2007). It is a useful approach to support work with children, young people and families because it can act as a framework within which different and sometimes competing theories can be brought together (Seden, 2006). It is possible to look at practice problems from different perspectives and consider the impact of family, community, culture and societal processes both in causing problems and finding solutions (for example, resilience building). In particular, it reminds social workers about the diversity and uniqueness of children and service users and the importance of keeping them at the heart of their work.

**Limitations**

Bronfenbrenner developed his theory over several decades. Despite the fact that we have presented his latest PPCT model, his earlier version of theory is often the one mentioned in books, research studies and practice documents. Although compatible and relevant, the original model tends to down play personal characteristics and focus more attention on the context. The later version of the PPCT gives both equal relevance, and in addition it highlights the role of time.

The model is often presented using the metaphor of nested rings or Russian dolls. Rosa and Tudge (2013, p. 255) argue that 'This metaphor does not do adequate justice to Bronfenbrenner's position that each of the systems is interrelated. Moreover, the mesosystem is not a layer outside the microsystem but a relationship between or among microsystems'.

Although Bronfenbrenner's model is very useful, models are only representations of the real world and should always be considered alongside other knowledge and experiences. The social ecological perspective is indeed helpful for showing interrelationships. It is, however, not so good at showing the weighting between the different elements. For example, many children who grow up in poverty may still achieve positive outcomes – the

effects of poverty may be offset by other factors (for example, quality of parenting). The perspective often appears to overlook the day-to-day reality of practitioners. They might show the availability of support to a child from a social worker, yet the conditions under which the social worker is working (a large case load, conflicting priorities, personal development needs, etc.) are not necessarily visible within the model. Social workers are also 'nested' within their own social ecologies, and their practice is related to the different levels.

Although the ecological perspective has proposed a framework within which the development of children's lives can be viewed, it does not necessarily define what is good or bad for children. Social ecological models are often a snapshot and do not easily represent changes across time.

# 5 Summary of Session 4

In this session you have learned that social workers need to know about human development because:

- Social workers are frequently asked to make assessments regarding people's behaviour, motivations and potential, and therefore conceptual frameworks about human development provide a useful series of measures against which individuals may be reviewed. However, these frameworks are not absolute and unchanging, and they too like many aspects of working with people, are prone to subjective interpretation and selective appropriation. While essential, therefore, developmental frameworks should be handled with care and not applied without reference to the unique nature and context of each individual under consideration.
- Some of the explanations for people's choices, behaviour and lifestyles are determined by genetic influences, while some are determined by their prior experiences of receiving love and care. Social workers should always carefully consider the balance of these influences, the nature/nurture debate, and although rarely will there be absolute answers, social workers can never avoid engaging in the debate itself.
- Human development is life-long. Developmental processes that exist for children continue for adults, involving numerous transitions and more conscious choices over time. However, there are many other influences from social, environmental, and historical forces, and social workers need to think holistically and facilitate opportunities for continued development for service users and carers wherever possible.
- Social workers generally take an optimistic view of the potential for human development and for the realisation of human potential. However, it is essential for social workers to continually be aware of and refresh their knowledge about the reality of social systems and structures, and of the nature of human psychology and the ageing process. Optimism is dynamic and encouraging, but false optimism, or worse, denial of some of the major hurdles that might be present in society and in personal relationships, is not only unprofessional but is likely to be damaging for most service users.

Finally, you'll now consider some aspects of what it may mean for you, to 'think' like a social worker.

# 6 Thinking like a social worker

Figure 17

Social workers have a perspective on society that values human potential and human rights, alongside a belief that all people deserve to have, and are likely to benefit from having equal opportunities. However, social workers know from their daily engagement with what can usefully be referred to as, 'the real world', that rights and opportunities can be won and lost, and that social work staff are first-hand witnesses to the multiple and complex factors determining the capacity of people to cope and to flourish.

To think like a social worker is to have a rugged and continuing passion to help people, to promote fairness, and to address injustice. Social workers appreciate that people in distress value helpers who have a compassionate and practical understanding of some of the explanations for how and why unfairness and impaired capacities to cope can emerge and be sustained. To think like a social worker means being fully prepared to work alongside people in distress. This will include knowing how to provide insights and support, to be able to identify options and find solutions, and always being willing to build on people's innate strengths and potential. Social workers anticipate and embrace working to develop user-friendly systems, and welcome being creatively engaged in informing organisations and agencies with structural power about the needs of service users, and about the impact of social policy.

Individual and social progress is organic and evolutionary. Social workers join service users for parts of their journey, knowing that for many people life can often be unfair, and can almost always be difficult. But social workers, using their knowledge and experience of how people think and of how society works, strive hard to not become embroiled in endless cycles of inappropriate blame for the simple fact of being human. They recognise that balancing individual need against what may at times be the 'greater good' of society, requires maturity, humility, and lots and lots of stamina. Sometimes the job-satisfaction of social work can be found in helping people to 'beat the system'. But at a deeper level, social work can and often does contribute in many meaningful ways, to developing systems and communities that are more responsive, inclusive, and humane.

Finally, thinking like a social worker requires being alert to the ever-changing time and tides of social and political history. Remembering, of course, that while many sincerely held values will hold fast, many other things for people and for society can change, and almost certainly will.

# 7 End-of-course summary

Figure 18

Well done for reaching the end of this course. Hopefully, you have increased your awareness and understanding of some of the opportunities and hurdles in professional social work today. For some students currently working in health or social care settings, you may already have recognised, or experienced in your work, many examples and practical demonstrations of the ideas from this course. However, even if you don't have direct access to practice, it is likely that your appreciation of the issues in working with service users and of some of the ways in which these can be addressed will have been significantly enhanced by your studies here.

So, what's to become of the starter-kit now that you have actually 'started'. Well, as mentioned at the beginning of this course, starter-kits embody key elements and carefully selected components of full-scale versions. So, if you choose to continue your studies in social work, you will definitely find most of the things you have studied here included in some form or another, although of course, in more depth and variety.

We very much hope that you have enjoyed your studies. Social work is certainly not easy. But the need for compassionate, self-aware, and skilled social workers is not going away any time soon.

# 8 Where next?

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