

An introduction to social work



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Introduction

This free course, *An introduction to social work*, will introduce you to the social work role and develop your understanding of some of the knowledge and theory associated with social work practice in the UK. You will begin by thinking about key ideas, values, the social work process and the skills needed for social work practice. You will then move on to look at social work with individuals, exploring the importance of biography. Finally, you will consider reflective practice. Reflective activities will enable you to apply learning from your own life and/or practice, as well as new learning from this course to your current situation.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [*K113 Foundations for social work practice*](#).

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- identify why biography is important
- understand how identity and attachment theory contribute to social work practice
- recognise what qualities service users/carers value in social workers
- understand what values are integral to a professional social worker's identity
- understand what it means to practise reflectively.

1 Key ideas in social work

This section will introduce you to what constitutes good social work practice. You will consider four basic elements of social work, and the values that underpin professional practice. You may be surprised at how much knowledge you already have, and how this can benefit social work practice.

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (BASW, 2012).

The model of the four components of good practice shown in Figure 1 acknowledges that learning about social work cannot just be about theoretical knowledge and academic learning, but that it has to be related to the application of this knowledge to the setting where social work is practised, the skills that are used and the value base implicit in direct work with people.

The four components of good practice are:

- knowledge
- values and ethics
- the social work process, including the legal and policy context
- skills.

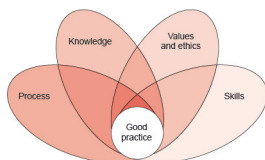


Figure 1 The four components of good practice in social work

Your practice and your reflections on what you learn about social work will be guided by your understanding and application of these four components of good practice.

1.1 Knowledge

What exactly is meant by knowledge and theory and how can it inform practice? This question is too wide-ranging to be fully answered here, but the following section maps out the kinds of knowledge that are relevant to practice. Hopefully you recognise that you possess a lot of 'knowledge', whatever your personal or working background.



Activity 1 What do I 'know' already?

Allow 10 minutes to complete

Make a list of the sorts of things you think you already know that might be useful to you if you were practising as a social worker.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Here are some example suggestions that might be similar to yours:

- I know about some of the services that are relevant and who these are aimed to support, for example there is a lunch club for older people in our street, my friend does fostering of disabled kids, there are schools and playgroups in our area. I work in a mental health team so know about services and the people who use them.
- I know how to work with people, for example, how to relate to teenagers; I know what to do if someone is angry or upset; I know how to be organised and get things done.
- I know some of the things about the law, for example at what age you can drink alcohol; the benefits system; deciding if someone has the mental capacity to make decisions for themselves.
- I know some theories and ideas from previous studies, for example about child development, healthy living, behavioural contracts and reward systems.
- I've used different services in health, education and social care and know what it feels like to be on the receiving end.

As the ideas from the activity above begin to demonstrate, you will probably already have a wide range of things you know that are relevant to social work – maybe more than you expected! The Social Care Institute of Excellence is an independent charity that has been established to provide advice and guidance in social work and social care. In 2003 the Institute undertook a review of the types of knowledge that were seen to be important to inform and think about social work practice. They identified:

- knowledge of organisations and services and their aims
- practice knowledge and experience working with people
- policy ideas and wider priorities of the community
- research and theoretical ideas
- user and care knowledge and perspectives gained from experience.

Activity 2 Exploring knowledge

Allow 15 minutes to complete

Ecological perspective

Look at this example of theoretical knowledge:

The ecological perspective... has become very influential in social work since its integration in the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families* (DOH, 2000, 2001). The ecological perspective sees the world as a highly complex web of interacting systems which are mutually dependent (perhaps the food chain is the best-known example). When applied to social work, human society is seen as a network, implying that intervention in one part can have dramatic effects on others.

The tendency to see such a network as concentric circles (with the individual in the middle and society around the outer ring) has led to the idea that intervening to help an individual requires attention at a broader, societal level. For example, helping a child who is truanting may require intervention at both the family and school levels.

Gordon Jack (2000) developed the ecological theory in the context of social work with children and families and suggested that the social and physical environment in which families live can be sources of both support and stresses. In addition, individuals respond differently to these environmental 'protective factors'. Jack breaks down protective factors into three areas:

1. social support
2. resilience
3. social capital.

Social support refers to supportive social relationships in the family or the community. Resilience refers to the individual's emotional resources which enable them to survive difficult experiences and learn from them. 'Social capital' is a term which Jack uses to explain the experience of a sense of belonging together with a feeling of wellbeing and pride in a community. This does not necessarily equate to wealth, although living in very disadvantaged circumstances with poor access to services is unlikely to create either the sense of belonging or wellbeing needed for social capital to develop.

How is it useful in social work?

An understanding of the ecological perspective takes social workers' understanding of systems beyond a recognition that people and the social systems around them are interdependent. It introduces the concept of individual coping mechanisms within such systems, as well as the concept of social capital, which is closely associated with ideas of social disadvantage. In addition it moves away from the idea that service users' problems are a consequence of either their own actions or inherent qualities (pathology), and towards the idea that their needs must be understood within a wider social/political context.

Now have a go at the following tasks:

- Summarise in your own words what you think ecological perspective theory is saying.
- Consider how the theory might apply to supporting people in the context of social work.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Below are some ideas you might have thought of:

- The theory indicated that it was better to think of people in networks or systems that were connected, rather than individuals who were isolated.
- A change in one part of the system would mean changes throughout (like ideas about the impact of change on the environment).
- The different parts of the system could create stress or be protective. Protective elements include social support, resilience (personal strength and attitude) and social capital (feeling of belonging).

An example of this might be an 89-year-old woman who remained living independently at home despite failing eyesight and numerous physical difficulties. This situation might be made possible through the woman's attitude and determination, the support of close neighbours and family, easy access to local shops and the doctor, and sufficient financial resources to maintain the house. Changes in any of these elements would mean that she might not be able to maintain her present lifestyle and might need more help.

1.2 Values, ethics and anti-oppressive practice

As a profession in the United Kingdom, social work requires a specific qualification and registration with a professional regulatory body. Without this, people cannot call themselves 'Social Workers'. Each of the four nations of the UK has a different regulatory body, each with its own set of standards and codes of practice/conduct that all registered social workers have to adhere to. In Wales, for example, social care workers must ensure their practice is informed by the [National Occupational Standards for social work](#) and underpinned by [Social Care Wales' Codes of Professional Practice](#)

To begin with, it is helpful to look at what 'values' are, where they come from, the context in which social work values have arisen and how they are being put into practice.

What are social work values?

Traditionally, the values that underpin social work have been central to its practice and what makes it distinctive among other professional groups. Maintaining behavioural codes and standards of practice/conduct aimed at protecting the public are undoubtedly essential, however, social work values are perceived to be more than adhering to a set of rules. Due to the types of situations social workers encounter and must deal with, they also have to explore personal aspects of their value base and be aware of how their values affect the work they do. In this way their professional identity and standards of professional integrity inform the complex and difficult situations they deal with (Wiles, 2012; Banks, 2010).

Banks (2010) suggested that in the education of social workers there needed to be consideration of:

- A commitment to a set of values, the content of which relates to what it means to be a 'good person in a professional role' and/or a 'good professional'.
- An awareness that the values are interrelated to each other and form a coherent whole and that their interrelationship is what constitutes the overarching goals or purpose of the profession.
- A capacity to make sense of professional values and their relationship to the practitioner's own personally held values.
- The ability to give a coherent account of beliefs and actions.
- Strength of purpose and the ability to implement these values.

Social work values are not then considered as a mechanistic adherence to rules and regulations but will involve the exploration of your personal value base and motivations to work with people who may be vulnerable or disadvantaged in some way. However, there are broad themes that are consistently felt to represent the value base of the profession. In 2012, the British Association of Social Workers issued a revised

[Code of Ethics for Social Work](#) that emphasised its commitment to three basic values:

Human rights – respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people as expressed in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Social justice – a responsibility to promote social justice, in relation to society generally, and in relation to the people with whom they work.

Professional integrity – a responsibility to respect and uphold the values and principles of the profession and act in a reliable, honest and trustworthy manner. ([BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work - Statement of Principles](#), p. 8).

Ethics and accountability

In reading the statements of standards of professional values it may be hard to think of how they could be in any way problematic for you. It is likely you will think you are going to respect everyone you work with, or that you will always be reliable, honest and trustworthy. However, you will note that a BASW values statement is contained within the Code of Ethics. Ethics is one aspect of values, and one way of understanding the term is

that it is about the resolution of professional moral dilemmas. The BASW code, for example, also notes that social workers:

- have to work with conflicting interests and competing rights
- have a role to support, protect and empower people, as well as having statutory duties and other obligations that may be coercive and restrict people's freedoms
- are constrained by the availability of resources and institutional policies in society.

Social workers frequently play an important part in resolving such moral dilemmas, for example, when making decisions involving risk, protection and restriction of liberty. The way in which you act in these situations should be guided by something beyond your personal beliefs alone. You have to be aware of the publicly stated values of your agency and make skilful judgements based on your accumulated knowledge and experience. Ethical considerations are rarely the responsibility of one worker alone, however, and agencies' policies and structures of accountability offer both guidance and a standard against which your practice can be measured. Accountability, therefore, is the process through which employers and the public can judge the quality of individual workers' practice and hold them responsible for their decisions, actions and inactions.

Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice

Exploring personal and professional values for social work practice does not only relate to the individual ways in which service users are treated. Social work also has an inbuilt social perspective. This is an appreciation that opportunities and life chances are also influenced by wider factors than personal qualities of, for example, motivation or intelligence. By way of further example, if you were born into a poor family you would be more likely to remain poor and die earlier (Marmot, 2008). If you are a young Black or disabled person in your early twenties in the UK, you are more than twice as likely not to be in employment, education or training (NEET) as young white and non-disabled people (EHRC, 2010).

There are no straightforward explanations for these statistics; however, insofar as social workers work with people who appear to be largely disadvantaged by such societal forces, understanding how these forces may affect individuals becomes a key concern for social work. This understanding then becomes integral to an approach that seeks to be anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive.

1.3 The social work process

The social work process comprises a sequence of actions or tasks that draw on all of the components of practice discussed so far. Although its process is presented sequentially, it rarely follows a clear linear route and is more often a fluid, circular cycle whereby workers move from assessment through to implementation and evaluation and back to assessment again. Despite this fluidity, some parts of the process, such as assessment, have clearly defined procedures guided by law and local or national policy. Some tasks may be short and discrete, but many are longer term and more complex, such as assessments. You will also find that tasks often overlap and are revisited over a period of involvement with a service user. The tasks or stages of the social work process are shown in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2 The social work process

Developing an understanding and awareness of the social work process is one of the prerequisites for becoming a 'reflective' practitioner. Reflection refers to the ability to work in a thoughtful and systematic way. Practitioners need to be aware (and inform service users) of why they are engaged in particular tasks and to be able to justify their methods of working. Interventions should be meaningful and fit within an overall plan or strategy. Awareness of the different stages of the social work process can assist social workers to prepare for, carry out and evaluate their interventions in order to both be accountable for, and reflect on, their actions.

It is important that we consider the legal and policy context of social work. We must consider the implementation and interpretation of law, legislation specific to social work practice as applicable to our own national region. It is important that we understand our powers and duties and the supporting frameworks for implementing law, e.g. statutory guidance, legal documents etc. We must also understand the implications of non-compliance.

1.4 Skills

Social workers develop their skills largely in the course of their practice experiences. However, it is good to have a framework to help with your learning and understanding.



We use four categories of skill in our framework:

1. skills in thinking – analysing, managing, reflecting and valuing
2. skills in using the senses – listening and talking, observing, understanding and expressing feelings
3. skills combining thinking and using the senses – giving and receiving constructive feedback, interviewing, leading, negotiating, supporting
4. skills supporting your studies and practices – reflective writing, digital and information literacy skills, academic and professional writing skills.

Other skills social workers need to have include:

- reflective, professional and academic forms of writing, recording and sharing information
- thinking skills, such as reflection and analysis
- the ability to recognise and challenge discriminatory attitudes
- interpersonal and communication skills
- ICT skills and information literacy (collectively referred to as digital and information literacy).

The activities in this course will introduce you to some of these skills.

2 Focusing on the individual

In this section you will be thinking about the individual people who are at the heart of the social work process – the service user and the social worker. Relationships between social workers and service users are integral to all social work interventions, whatever the area of social work practice. Being able to build relationships with service users, colleagues and other professionals, maintain them and reflect honestly on them are central to social work practice. In this section you will be exploring some aspects of what is meant by a 'relationship-based' approach to social work practice and considering some of the questions that this approach to social work throws up.

You will be exploring skills in the importance and use of empathy; you will also explore identity and will be introduced to reflective practice. These elements combine to form the foundation stones of social work practice.

2.1 Biography

To begin your exploration of biography you will be considering a very specific kind of knowledge; the kind of knowledge that for most of us remains private and is individual to each of us: our personal history and biography.



Your life story

Now, you are invited to think about the person whose life story you know best: yourself!

Activity 3 Your life story

Allow 20 minutes to complete

Below are five brief audio clips. Each clip focuses on a specific question, answered by Open University social work students and graduates from across the UK. Listen to each of the clips.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 1 What inspired you to train to become a social worker?

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 2 How does social work make a difference?

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 3 What are the biggest challenges facing social work today?

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 4 What advice would you give to someone thinking about becoming a social worker?

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 5 Why study social work at The Open University?

Provide your answer...

Biography as history

Earlier, you thought about your own life and some of your main influences. This process of self-reflection, if developed, could provide the basis of your life story. If you decided to 'tell your story', how would you structure it? You might well provide a chronological account of your life, from childhood to adulthood. The chances are that you would do this against the backdrop of the social and political events of the time, and you would illustrate it with historical details. You would probably develop a 'storyline' too, which made sense of your experiences through a linking commentary. This would then be your life story as told by you, or your autobiography, but it would also be a slice of lived history: an account of a historical era and set of events, as experienced first-hand by you.

The idea of the life story, or biography, can be applied to social work itself and can be used as a way to explore its history. In the next section, you will read the biography of a disabled child who experienced social work many years ago, to catch a glimpse of attitudes of that time and how they affected her.

Children with disabilities

A widely used approach in childcare, historically, was the 'curative' policy (Midwinter, 1994). This sought to treat those children and adults deemed deficient in some way in specially set up locations. These institutions were often forbidding places, offering a harsh 'cure' to those unfortunate enough to be admitted. This was the fate of many disabled children in the course of the twentieth century. Of particular relevance is *Out of Sight: The Experience of Disability 1900–1950* (Humphries and Gordon, 1992), which portrays the lives of 'ordinary' people with disabilities in the UK through their own eyes and in their own words, from childhood to adulthood.

Mary Baker, for example, recalls how, in 1935 when she was 12 years old, she was sent to Halliwick Hall for Crippled Girls, a Church of England institution for girls with physical and mental disabilities. Mary's particular disability was a dislocated hip, which meant that she walked with a limp. Until 1933 she had lived at home with her parents and three brothers. Their mother died that year, and the authorities decided that their father, who had been wounded in the First World War, would not be able to care for them. Consequently the children were sent to the workhouse at Wimborne Minster. From there Mary was separated from her brothers and sent to Halliwick Hall. This is her story.

Mary Baker



Figure 3 Halliwick Hall

When I first arrived at Halliwick the nurse took me off to the bathroom and she stripped me off completely. She cut my hair short right above the ears. And then I was deloused with powder of some description. Then they put me in a bath and scrubbed me down with carbolic soap. It was very degrading to me. And I felt as though the end of the world had come and so I cried, I sat in the bath and cried my eyes out. At any rate they told me it was no good crying and dried me down. They used such rough towels it felt like they were sandpapering me. Then I was dressed in the Halliwick uniform, navy blue socks, stockings and a gym slip and a serge jumper, and I was taken into the dormitory, a big, huge room it seemed, with about ten beds in it. I went in there and lay down on my new bed. I felt awful and I thought that nobody cared for me. Anyway, I don't think that I slept that night, I felt so lonely. I didn't know what to do, had no idea what I was going to do. But it was huge and it was lonely, the place. And I felt really lost and I thought, what am I going to do with no one to love me?

I had entered a different life. My father was far back home and I thought that everyone had forsaken me. I think I cried most of the night. So this was my start. The next morning you were given a number and you had to remember it. My number was 29 and when I got up and went to wash, my towel and flannel had my number on them. Twenty-nine was engraved on all my hairbrushes and things with a big hot poker-like thing. Everything I owned had a marking of 29 on, so I can never forget that number. Our lockers in the playroom had the same number, and our clothes were marked with our numbers, so we knew what we had. We were hardly ever called by our first names, only by the other girls. And if Matron wanted you she called you by 29 or whatever number you had. We never had names, we were just numbers there. It was all very disciplined. I couldn't make it out at first, why we should all have numbers and not names. I felt a bit low about it. I couldn't really put my feelings into an expression, only that I felt very lonely about it.

(Quoted in Humphries and Gordon, 1992, pp. 68–70)

Mary's story illustrates the worst features of loss of home and family and admission to an institution. Here we see the 'clean break' from home and the loss of everyone and everything that mattered. She remembers her sense of total devastation, how she felt 'forsaken' and that 'nobody cared' about her. Her initiation commenced at once with the stripping and cleansing process, with the removal of her clothes and cutting of her hair, and the compulsory bath. She was no longer a person with a name, she had become simply 'number 29'.

This too is autobiography as history. We can see and feel, through Mary's first-hand experiences, the childcare practices of the time. Through her story we can also gain some insight into earlier attitudes to poor families and to children with disabilities and catch a glimpse of the awful dehumanising effects of institutionalisation.

Find out more

You can learn more in our free course, [Supporting children's mental health and wellbeing](#).

Placing biography in context

It's important to be cautious about generalising on the basis of a single biographical account, such as that of Mary Baker in the previous section. Not all children's homes were this brutal. But removing such young children from their families and taking them to settle in new homes would have been distressing experiences (Humphries and Gordon, 1992, pp. 71–2).

Thus, the biography (or autobiography) of an individual must be placed in context and evaluated carefully. But when it is used sensitively, the life story can contribute to our understanding of individual experience as well as history. Thus, it is central to social work practice.

Viewing policies in context

Although it is easy to condemn practices such as the institutionalisation of children with disabilities today, it is important to remember that social work policies and practices are still influenced by the social, economic and political priorities of the times. Policy responses in 2012 to the needs of children separated from their families and travelling alone to the UK as refugees or asylum seekers is one example of this. There is an inherent tension between the laws and policies relating to immigration and our expectations of policy and practices created to protect children.

The Coram Children's Legal Centre in 2012, exploring the experiences of child asylum seekers, noted:

At present, the lower-quality care received by those children is in part due to 'the government's limited funding for refugee children and negative attitudes to these children within some departments' and also the widespread misconception that immigration issues 'trump' welfare concerns. Despite calls for them

to be treated as children first and migrants second, the opposite approach is often seen in practice.

(Coram Children's Legal Centre, 2012, p. 6)



Figure 4 'There are more than 4,200 unaccompanied child asylum seekers in Britain, with most being supported in local authority social services homes' (Source: *The Guardian*, 2010).

Find out more

If you wish to find out more about child refugees you can listen to several children's stories on the [Refugee Council](#) website, or go to the [Welsh Refugee Council](#) or [Scottish Refugee Council](#) websites to find out about support for child refugees in Wales and Scotland.

Relationship-based social work

People's stories, or biographies, often influence their relationships throughout their lives. Being able to build, sustain and reflect on relationships is a core social work skill. You have started to reflect on your own biography and looked at a case study in history. The following reading sets out a theoretical approach to 'relationship-based social work', which is one approach to social work.

Take time to go through the reading in the next activity. You might wish to read it twice using the questions below to help guide you through it. Some of the ideas in the reading are slightly complex but rewarding!

Activity 4 Relationship-based practice

Allow 1 hour to complete

Read the following extract: [Relationship based practice-some fundamental principles](#), which is from *Social Work: An Introduction to Contemporary Practice* (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 809).

As you read note down answers to the following questions.

1. What do the authors suggest are the core characteristics of relationship-based practice?
2. How do they explain the 'use of self' in social work?
3. What do they suggest is one of the biggest challenges you will encounter in professional relationship-based social work practice?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Relationship-based social work, the authors suggest, is essentially about making relationships with service users and with colleagues, and understanding how they work.

The reading suggests the following:

- Each social work encounter is unique.
- Human behaviour is complex and has emotional and unconscious dimensions as well as rational and conscious ones.
- All individuals have 'internal worlds' through which they make sense of the world as well as 'external worlds'.
- The relationship between the social worker and the service user is integral to the intervention in social work.

In other words, the authors argue that social work is not just carried out by a series of 'technicians' but that the quality of the relationship between the social worker and the service user can have an impact on the outcome.

They suggest that thinking about 'use of self' is particularly important in relationship-based social work. This acknowledges that professionals, as well as service users, have rational and emotional dimensions to their behaviour.

One of the challenges in using relationship-based social work, the authors suggest, is for social workers to notice not only what is happening for service users at a given moment but also to keep in mind their own thoughts, feelings and responses to professional encounters.

Key points

- Sensitivity to biography and life story is both a way of understanding individual lives and a first step to becoming a reflective practitioner.
- Biography can be applied to individual lives and can also be a way of exploring history.
- Biography and life story can be particularly valuable as a basis for understanding and validating the lives of marginalised and disadvantaged people in our society.

2.2 Identity and identities

In the previous section you considered the importance of people's individual biographies to an understanding of who they are. Such biographies play an important part in making us who we are. In this section you will explore some of the ideas that have contributed to social workers' understanding of the concept and importance of 'identity'. These ideas are all examples of the kind of knowledge or theory that informs social work practice.

Self-identity

Thinking about your own life story and those of other people can make you realise that we are not just interested in people's experiences, but in what it is those experiences *mean* to them and how they affect their lives. After all, some events will seem more important than others; we all highlight some experiences as more significant than others. In this way, we build up a picture of ourselves that we call 'our identity'. But what do we mean by 'identity'? A useful definition might start with defining self-identity as 'the way in which I see, describe or define myself'. Yet there is more to the concept of identity than this definition suggests. In this section you will be asked to consider both self-identity and 'ascribed' identity. In addition to different ideas about identity, you will explore the ways in which these can impact on and affect social work.



Figure 5 It's all about *me*...

You will have noticed that this section is called 'Identity and identities', and you might consider that a little odd. However, it draws attention to an important debate about ourselves: are we essentially the same person, with a fairly constant idea of ourselves, which changes little in different situations? Or is our identity complex and changing, transformed by the way in which we respond to similarities and differences between ourselves and those around us? The view that identities are constantly changing (O'Hagan, 2001) helps to remind us that, for many people, their identities are in a constant process of transformation, as they make new allegiances and are subject to pressures, challenges and changes in how they see themselves and their world. This can have important implications for social workers and service users, as O'Hagan makes clear:

Professionals in health and social care, particularly in mental health, know only too well that the process of identity change can constitute a major crisis for their clients. That process is often risk laden, heightening alienation and vulnerability, and necessitates much understanding and empathy.

(O'Hagan, 2001, p. 29)

Complex identities

This more complex perspective on identity has been developed by Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist who has argued that identity is not simply given or fixed, 'it is a matter of "becoming" as well as of being' (1990). He suggests that identity is something that is never complete, and that it is more helpful to think about 'identification' as a process rather than 'identity' as a fixed state (Hall, 1990, p. 51). Hall's ideas suggest that 'who we are' is strongly determined by feeling an affinity with 'people like us' or people with whom we share ideas, values, beliefs or experiences.

Many people will share these similarities with people who surrounded them as they grow up (family, friends and communities), but Hall's ideas of identity also allow for individuals being strongly influenced by experiences and relationships later in life, which can have equally profound influences on how we see ourselves. In the context of social work, examples could be a person becoming familiar with their birth culture as an adult, developing new spiritual beliefs or even their experience of engaging with higher education and professional training, which for some people may provide a strong sense of identification, but for others may feel quite alienating. Equally, for some people, their 'professional' life is not central to how they identify themselves; this might be secondary to their gender, marital status, ethnicity, religion or other aspects of themselves.

The significance of specific aspects of a person's identity may vary. For instance, in the England and Wales census of 2011, 59% of people identified themselves as Christian (ONS, 2011). In Northern Ireland and parts of Scotland, however, to describe oneself as 'Catholic' or 'Protestant' is to make an important statement, not just about religious belief, but also about belonging to a particular community and all that it entails. In those circumstances, religious affiliation defines identity more strongly than many other attributes. Similarly, nationality or language may be strongly linked with identity, for example, whether someone identifies themselves as Welsh or British, Welsh-speaking or not, and some people who are Muslim or Jewish regard their religious identities as central to their being and way of life, while other Muslims or Jews might see their identities as more linked to community, family, nationality, ethnicity or class. Minority groups might also see their identities as partially forged by the discrimination and exclusion they experience, which means that as discrimination changes, so identities can shift in relation to it. Other people might derive their identity from a geographical area, so they might say 'I'm a Londoner', 'I'm a Geordie', 'I'm from Belfast', 'I'm from Swansea' or 'I'm Glaswegian'. Often people use these terms when they are away from home in order to emphasise their 'differentness' from others. As Hall suggests, the importance attributed to different aspects of identity are liable to shift and vary over time and with circumstances.

Self-definition

There are many important aspects to life that can help shape an identity, including nationality, class, religion, gender identity, sexuality and ethnicity.



Activity 5 How do you define yourself?

Allow 20 minutes to complete

Write down a list of words you would use to define yourself, in order of importance. See how many of these draw on your work and your leisure activities (the things that you do) and how many draw on your personal characteristics (the things that you are).

Then ask someone you know well to complete this exercise about you.

Compare your list with theirs.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

How did you find carrying out this exercise? Notice that you have just applied the previous theoretical discussion on the shifting nature of identity to your own life and experiences.

Were factors such as ethnicity, class, gender identity, political beliefs, sexual identity, religious belief (or lack of it) and vegetarianism significant factors in your list, or did you include others?

This exercise should show how complex the notion of identity can be and it should warn you against making assumptions about other people's identities.

Ascribed identity

Ascribed identities can be thought of as the identities that other people, or society, might impose on you. These include, for example, gender- and age-defined identities which are rooted in very early social experience.

There may be conflict between the two kinds of identity. Many social work service users, for example, find that their view of themselves (their self-identity) differs from society's view of them (ascribed identity), and that frequently the latter is negative and based on a stereotype. Stereotyping is a process through which we assign a set of attributes to a person based on their presumed membership of a particular group. It also involves simplifying information about complex situations. For example, many older people find that their identity is seen only in terms of one attribute, their age, and the traits that are assumed to accompany that age, while their individual characteristics, capabilities and experiences are ignored. Similarly, people with mental health problems are often portrayed as one group and are frequently stereotyped in films, books and television as being stupid or violent and therefore to be feared.

Stereotypes represent society's views in a rigid and simplistic way. It can be all too easy for individuals to absorb or internalise stereotypes so that they come to believe they are true of themselves or of others. It is an important part of social work to become aware of how we may have internalised some assumptions about people before getting to know the real person. You may feel you have been stereotyped yourself. For example, you might have come across some stereotypes of social workers and noticed that this affects your views of social work.

- How accurate do you think these stereotypes are?
- Do they contain any truths?
- How does it make you feel to be stereotyped in that way?

While we recognise that stereotypes exist in our culture and can become part of our personal responses and attitudes, it is important in social work that we spend time thinking about, and becoming aware of, our assumptions.

Activity 6 Thinking about your own stereotypes

Allow 20 minutes to complete

Look at these images and answer the questions below.



Consider the following questions:

- Have a guess at who and what are the four pictures depicting.
- In what ways do you think some people or groups might be stereotyped by society at large?
- Do you think representations of these people or groups reinforce the stereotypes or challenge them?
- Are there any stereotypes of people or groups that you think you might have held in the past or are affected by now?

Make a note of any time you think you have been stereotyped. How did this feel?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Based on a single image it can be hard to establish who and what the pictures are about with complete certainty. But it's likely we will 'read' certain aspects of the pictures in similar ways. For example, the first image appears to be an older adult about to land after a tandem sky dive. The second picture depicts what seems to be two women and two children having fun on a beach. But what assumptions do you first make about the relationships between the people in the picture? For instance, are the women a couple? And are they the parents of the two children? The third image appears to be

an elite athlete, possibly a Team GB Paralympian, celebrating. The last picture is a man with numerous tattoos (a form of body modification often associated with 'tough guy' personas) looking lovingly at the baby he is carefully holding.

These images have been chosen because they challenge selected stereotypes – for instance, the assumption that older people do not take part in dangerous, adrenaline-filled activities. The pictures were chosen to suggest that stereotypes should be challenged and thought about. How did you react to them? Did you react differently depending on the picture and perhaps some of the assumptions you made? Do you have other examples of stereotypes you would like to challenge?

It is not easy to challenge certain stereotypes, but it is important to do so. We can all be influenced by what other people think, but part of building good social work skills is to reflect on the assumptions we make about how people might think, feel or behave on the basis of a stereotype.

Spoiled identities: stigma

In his classic book *Stigma* (1963), the Canadian-born Erving Goffman argues that stigma relates to the notion of 'devaluation', in which an individual is disqualified from full social acceptance. Society establishes ways of categorising people and what are felt to be the 'natural' or 'normal' attributes for each category. Stigma, then, is essentially a pejorative (negative) label that sticks, one that is applied to an individual's 'differentness', their perceived non-conformity, deviance or simply a difference in appearance or behaviour. That individual is then discredited. Stigma can result from physical or mental impairment, from known biographical records (such as a prison sentence or hospital stay) or from context (keeping 'bad company'). It can be ascribed (e.g. his father is a criminal, so he must be one) or achieved (e.g. becoming a delinquent).

Goffman argues that society tends to regard the person with a stigma as 'not quite human' and this leads to a form of discrimination that reduces their life chances. Of course, stigmatised individuals are likely to be very aware that others do not accept them and are not prepared to deal with them on an equal basis. Their own sensitivity to the standard set by society may also lead to some incorporation of that judgement into their view of self. As Goffman puts it:

... shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess.

(Goffman, 1963, p. 18)

Self-identity and ascribed identity are rarely separate from each other. They interact with, and impact on, each other. In other words, our views of ourselves are necessarily formed by other people's views of us.

Think back to Mary Baker's experience of going to Halliwick Hall. This example dramatically illustrates how someone's self-identity can change drastically, in this case through admission to residential care. Mary had one view of herself up to the point of her admission, but the regime at Halliwick Hall treated her as a number, rather than as a person with a name and individuality. Even without knowing more about Mary's story, it would be reasonable to assume that her ascribed identity may have led her to experience the 'shame' described by Goffman and to have low self-esteem. You can see here how societal definitions of a stigmatised group (here children with disabilities), can have a

devastating impact on the way in which they are treated and therefore come to view themselves.

Mary Baker's account reminds us that some regimes in institutional care can, and do, damage a person's sense of identity. Stripping people of their individual characteristics by dressing them in the institution's uniform, calling them by numbers rather than by name and treating them all alike are powerful assaults on an adult's identity – even more so on a child's. Residential care, like all living environments, can be a powerful influence in determining residents' identities, for good or bad.

Psychosocial theories of development

There are a number of psychosocial theories of human development and these all emphasise something slightly different. David Howe suggests that:

... by psychosocial we mean that area of human experience which is created by the interplay between the individual's psychological condition and the social environment....

(Howe, 2002)

Erik Erikson, a German psychoanalyst who worked in the USA from the 1930s, proposed that there are eight stages of life, from infancy to old age, each stage having its own particular task in the development of an individual's identity (Erikson, 1950). This theory has been very influential in social work and continues to be so.

Erikson's work, and that of other theorists, has been criticised for being based on studies with mainly white European and North American populations, and therefore taking no account of other cultures' approaches to identity development (Robinson, 2002). Erikson himself acknowledged that his theory of psychosocial identity might not have universal application as it was largely based on his own clinical practice. Nonetheless, his theory has a contribution to make to social work practice.

The next section focuses on 'attachment theory' – a psychosocial theory of human development which has been extremely influential within social work.

Attachment theory and social work

John Bowlby was the first exponent of attachment theory. He spent his career studying the impact of maternal deprivation. He formulated his ideas in the 1940s and 1950s from working with war orphans, evacuees and children who had suffered emotional deprivation in childhood. Bowlby believed many of these children went on to suffer a range of behavioural, emotional and mental health problems that he felt were in some way connected to their earlier experiences.

In formulating his theory, Bowlby drew on the research of his colleague Mary Ainsworth. Her studies of infants and mothers identified sensitive and responsive care as the vital ingredient in promoting secure infant–parent relationships. She found that care giving helped children to develop a sense of self, to make trusting relationships with others and to have the ability to learn and achieve (Lindsay, 2006). Bowlby defined an attachment as the 'lasting psychological connectedness between human beings' formed with the person who provides physical and emotional care (Bowlby, 1969). To Bowlby and his colleagues it seemed that if children were to thrive emotionally they needed a close, continuous, care-giving relationship in infancy.

Bowlby believed that human beings are biologically programmed to seek proximity, safety and security from attachment figures in the face of fear or threat. Removed from their primary care givers, he thought, children go through a cycle of protest, despair and detachment. Bowlby noticed that even when children were returned to their primary care giver, sometimes their anxious behaviour continued.

The 'strange situation'



Figure 6 The 'strange situation'

Ainsworth developed a research technique called the 'strange situation', in which young children are subjected to a series of brief separations from their parent(s) and encounters with a stranger followed by a reunion with the parent(s). This has shown that it is possible

to distinguish different patterns of attachment of young children towards their parents. Howe summarises the four different patterns of attachment which Ainsworth identified as:

1. secure attachments
2. insecure, ambivalent attachments
3. insecure, avoidant attachments
4. disorganised attachments.

Each attachment pattern can lead to a different way of relating to other people. We all have different attachment styles carried over from our early experiences and this might affect how we relate to others.

Howe suggests that, although attachment theory and other psychosocial approaches are a framework for understanding individuals rather than a specific method for social work intervention, they do have implications for social work practice.

Howe proposes that attachment theory and other psychosocial theories can help us to understand risks and protective factors in people's lives. Protective factors include having someone significant who cares about you and the sense that children and adults can make of their early experiences. He suggests that a social worker can help to identify the protective factors in an individual's psychosocial environment, and help to strengthen them.

Disrupted attachments

In the next activity you will be reading more about the emotional needs of young children and their reactions when their early attachments become disrupted.

Activity 7 Emotional needs

Allow 20 minutes to complete

Read '[Who cares? The emotional needs of young children](#)', by Fagan.

- What are some of the responses that Fagan suggests children can have to early adverse experiences?
- Were any of these surprising or new to you? Which ones?
- Are any of these reactions familiar to you from your own experiences with children that you know or have worked with?
- What emotions are they likely to evoke in someone else?
- This article talks about the 'mother' as the primary care giver – how did you feel about that?
- What effect might disrupted attachments have on people as adults?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Fagan suggests that children can respond to not having their early needs met in a number of different ways, such as:

1. by not caring and withdrawing, trying to avoid feelings of disappointment, loss, anger or frustration
2. by pushing boundaries

3. by demanding total attention and possession
4. by pushing away intimacy
5. by becoming aggressive.

While some of these behaviours might be familiar to you, others might be less so.

Although this article talks about the 'mother' as the primary care giver, attachment research now shows that early on in a baby's life it is responsive care from a consistent care giver which is most important; and it does not have to be a biological parent to whom a baby becomes attached. Who looks after a child in babyhood might well be determined by culture and circumstance. Infants can also form attachments to more than one care giver, although these might have different levels of intensity. Babies seem to start to discriminate between caregivers between the ages of three and six months. While Fagan talks about children and adolescents, it is important to keep in mind that attachment theory can be used as a framework for understanding biographies and histories at any point in a person's life.

The impact of early experiences

Recent developments in neuroscience (the scientific study of the nervous system) have confirmed Bowlby's original findings. They have also allowed us to extend our understanding of the importance of the relationship between responsive early care giving and the development of the human brain. The brain develops differently depending on what kind of experiences it receives. From the last three months of pregnancy up to two years of age is a crucial time, as this is when the brain is most malleable and when its pathways first form. But neuroscientific evidence also suggests that change is possible throughout the lifespan. We might never completely erase our previous experiences, but we can build new experiences, new expectations and new pathways in the brain (Music and Miller, 2006).

Critics of Bowlby's theory have argued that attachment theory can appear to 'blame' mothers and place too little emphasis on the whole range of influences throughout people's lives, such as life circumstances and peer interactions. Despite criticisms and modifications, attachment theory remains a powerful influence in social work. As Howe (2002) claims, an understanding of how attachment works can help social work practitioners

... to make sense of the way children and adults react to and deal with the social and emotional demands of others.

(Howe, 2002, p. 175)

For social workers, the role of attachment figures in early childhood requires careful thought, particularly in relation to children in need of protection. However, they must also make careful judgements as to the kind of interventions they make with all children. While children often exhibit amazing flexibility and strength in the most difficult of circumstances, poor decisions made during this period can undermine a child's ability to form future attachments. These relationships may also have untold implications, both for individuals and the quality of parenting they subsequently offer their own children.

Attachment theory can be a useful framework for understanding and working with individuals at any point in their lives, particularly when they might be going through a

change or transition, such as becoming parents themselves. It has also proved a useful approach to working with adults in mental distress, especially those who are trying to make sense of their own identities in the face of childhood trauma and abuse (Bateman and Fonagy, 2003).

Understanding identity

You can see that a positive sense of identity can go awry for a range of reasons. The factors can be psychological, as in the parent-child example, or sociological and political, as with child refugees. Cultural and heritage factors can also be significant. Care regimes and child placement policies are determined by a combination of these factors as well as by social policy. What all these have in common is that identity is formed by a person's interaction with others – caregivers, peers, people in powerful positions, dominant social groups – but equally, identity can be strengthened or damaged by these elements too.

It is easy to make assumptions about service users without recognising that many experiences have contributed to shape them into the people they are. You may need to remind yourself that their identities are as varied and as complicated as your own. A better understanding of how service users see themselves will help you to work with them.

Key points

- Identity and identities are based on both how we define ourselves and the ways in which society defines us.
- Theories of identity are useful tools that we can use to understand how identity develops, in diverse ways throughout our life.
- The complexity of, and disruption to, people's lives mean that a positive sense of identity can be damaged, but attention to life stories or biography can enable us to understand the person.
- Attachment theory is a powerful influence in social work and offers important ways of understanding biographies, despite modifications to its original formulation.

2.3 Developing a professional social work identity

In this section you will learn about the key skills needed in social work, such as empathy, ethics and accountability.



Empathy

Empathy is a skill that is vital in social work for understanding the experience of service users in order to help them more effectively. This is particularly important for those service users whose experiences are very different from your own. Empathy is one of the basic building blocks that you will need to develop a professional social work identity. Later in this course you will consider service user perspectives, and values and ethics.

How people respond to stress and distress depends on their previous experiences and the sense they have been able to make of them. If a service user's experiences are very different from yours, then you are quite likely to misunderstand their response, or even the cause of their distress. Such misunderstanding can lead you, as the practitioner, to react unhelpfully, and to make things worse.

You cannot assume that other people will see things the way you do, or respond in the way that you would, because your feelings and reactions are influenced by your particular life experiences. How, then, can you go about trying to better understand the experiences and feelings of others? The answer is by developing empathy, something that is less straightforward than it sounds, and which we explore in some detail in this section.

What is empathy?

One definition of empathy comes from the work of the US writer on counselling and social work, Gerard Egan, who defines empathy as:

The ability to enter into and understand the world of another person and to communicate this understanding to him or her.

(Egan, 1986, p. 95)

In the context of social work, Lena Dominelli uses a slightly different approach using a common metaphor to make the same point when she writes about 'placing oneself in another's shoes' (2002). These quotes emphasise that the responsibility lies with the professional to make the effort to understand the other person. However, doing so requires effort and imagination.

Most people actually use empathy in everyday life when they read a novel, watch a television 'soap', a film or a play. Indeed, we often judge the success of the novel, film or play by the extent to which we are caught up in the 'world' it is portraying, and how 'real' the characters in the 'story' feel to us. Sometimes we find that the characters continue to live in our imaginations long after the book has been closed or the film or play ended. We have entered, without too much difficulty, into the 'world' created by the 'story-teller'. In so doing we identify with the characters we meet there and enter into their worlds.

Service users frequently tell us that skills of empathy and understanding are relevant in all social workers, including the following:

- listening (including active listening)
- giving space and making people feel safe so they can reveal very personal aspects of their lives to social workers
- remembering shared responsibilities in relationships and thinking how preferences for shared aspects of care could be maintained and not disrupted (e.g. how and when the service user would choose to take care of their teeth and bathe, and how the carer could support this)
- taking on board the knowledge that carers and service users have about the best ways of helping and caring for an individual.

Lack of empathy

It is clear that service users are very quick to sense when practitioners are attempting to understand but are struggling to empathise. Here is a comment from Kate, a service user at a family centre in Northamptonshire, which illustrates the point very well.

Kate

I found that a lot of social workers aren't really interested in you as a person, and a lot of them say things like 'I know how you feel' and 'I understand what you're going through', yet they don't really know how you feel or what you are going through. That's because a lot of them have learned it from books, they haven't experienced it from their own life experiences.

When empathy is difficult

There are a number of reasons why on occasions it may be difficult to demonstrate empathy towards service users. The most obvious is where there is some characteristic the social worker finds difficult to tolerate. An experienced social work colleague once remarked that he found it difficult to work with 'really smelly people'. This may seem trivial, but for that worker it was important to recognise the problem and thereby guard against

giving an unsatisfactory service to 'really smelly people' or to any other group towards whom he felt an antipathy. Clearly it is important for social workers, as for all members of the helping professions, to ensure that personal likes or dislikes do not influence the provision of services.

While this example seems straightforward enough, other instances can be trickier, when strongly held beliefs may clash. For example, it might be difficult for a social worker who is strongly committed to anti-racist practice to show empathy towards a service user who is making racist remarks or refusing to accept services from a black or minority ethnic service provider.

Another and rather different circumstance might be where the experiences described by the service user are beyond the comprehension of the social worker and trying to understand them is painful for the social worker. Hedi Argent has described the experiences of a girl who, as a child refugee, saw one of her companions eaten by a wild animal during a border crossing. The girl's account includes the following description of her experience:

Sudanese child refugee

I left Sudan at night when I was 10 years old. My brother and I walked to Ethiopia. There were many of us walking. I was carrying bread, water and a kind of blanket. I ate every other day. One day I ate, the next I didn't. I also had a knife to kill wolves. We walked for two weeks. Then we stayed in Ethiopia for a month before coming to England on an aeroplane. I wanted to go to school.

(Argent, 1996, p. 25)

Although Argent did this work with refugees in the 1990s, sadly children and young people today continue to be able to give us accounts of their extraordinary experiences in fleeing their homes to find safety. Traumatic incidents do happen in times of war and conflict, and yet few practitioners will have any idea what such an experience is like. So what should you do? To say in such circumstances 'I know how you feel' or 'I understand what you have been through' would sound false and silly. Moreover, the service user would be only too aware of this and may find it hard to believe the social worker about other matters. Some social workers might be inclined to disbelieve or minimise the account as too fantastic to be true; but not being taken seriously in this way is likely to damage the service user further. A social worker who feels uncertain or incredulous about such an account should seek advice from organisations that have specialised knowledge in the relevant area, such as the Refugee Council, Refugee Action or a local refugee community organisation.

Find out more

If you would like to learn more about the experiences of child refugees, visit the website of [The Refugee Council](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/).

The quality of empathy is an essential ingredient in social work practice, however it is not something exclusive to social work; as you have seen, empathy is a human quality that is

familiar to us in our everyday lives. Like other such qualities, it can be developed through practice and through thinking about that practice. It helps us to enter into the experiences of other people and thereby understand them better. This becomes especially important when service users come with experiences that are far removed from the social worker's life experience.

Service users' perceptions

This section describes service users' perceptions when they seek help from social workers or are directed to them.

Few people find it straightforward to ask for help in their personal lives. They may feel that they should be able to stand on their own two feet and that their need for help shows a failure to do so. There may also be a worry about how professionals will respond to their request for help. Will they be sympathetic and understanding? Or will they be rude, dismissive, belittling? Will there be a benefit or will it make things worse? If the involvement of the social worker is being imposed, then these questions will be sharper, and the service user may well view the social worker with ambivalence or even hostility. These sorts of questions may be familiar to you from occasions when you have been a service user – for instance, when you have used the National Health Service (NHS) or perhaps been involved with teachers over your child's progress at school. As a service user, perhaps you have felt unsure of what to expect from other professionals. If the service you have received has in some way been unsatisfactory, perhaps you have not known to how and to whom you might complain.

Activity 8 Your experience of being a service user

Allow 10 minutes to complete

Think of two occasions when you have been a service user and have had to ask for help. Think of one occasion when your request was dealt with in a helpful way, and another when you found the response to be unhelpful. These experiences could have been with the NHS, an educational institution, the police, public transport, and so on. Write down what was helpful in the first instance and what was unhelpful on the second occasion.

- How much did it matter that you did or didn't get what you wanted?
- How important was the way in which you were treated?
- What lessons can you draw for your practice from your own experience of being a service user?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You may have felt that the way in which people in official positions responded to a request was significant, and it may have been as important as the outcome, whether or not you got what you wanted.

You may be more likely to recall the experience as a positive one if:

- you were able to deal directly with one person representing the organisation
- you were treated courteously and promptly
- you felt that your point of view was being taken seriously

- you were given explanations, so that you understood why the help you were requesting was or was not available.

Conversely, you are likely to recall the experience as negative if:

- you were not able to find anyone to talk to or found yourself getting an automated answerphone
- you were dealt with in an impersonal and unnecessarily officious way
- you had to wait for a long time to be seen and/or to know the outcome of your request
- you felt that you had not been listened to properly
- you were not given any reasons for the decision.

Previous experiences will doubtless affect your expectations when you need help in the future.

All the points above are as true for users of social work services as they are for you.

What service users want

Users in all client groups value, it seems, similar characteristics in their social workers. They want workers who keep appointments, understand the user's perception of the problem, are straight and not two-faced, and are warm and are efficient in getting services and benefits.

(Sinclair, 2002, pp. 432–3)

In his review of client perspective studies, Martin Davies draws out eight lessons for social workers and their agencies:

Lesson 1: Improve the pathways to social work service.

Lesson 2: Handle the intake process with imagination, sensitivity and tact – put clients at their ease.

Lesson 3: Be concerned with the client as a person. Handle the personal in a professional manner. That is the heart of social work.

Lesson 4: Identify the client's expectations and relate these to the agency's obligations and resources. Be active. Be alert. Be helpful. And don't string the client along.

Lesson 5: Be a good counsellor.

Lesson 6: Remember that the social work role puts you in a position of power and privilege. You cannot escape or deny it. And you must be honest and open about your agency's responsibilities.

Lesson 7: Use your knowledge and experience to benefit the client. Keep it up to date.

Lesson 8: Always be trustworthy. Always be reliable.

(Davies, 1994, pp. 49–55)

Service users above all else value relationships they have with social workers which are based on warmth, empathy, reliability and respect (Beresford, 2012). This is the opposite of formulaic and bureaucratic contact.

Beresford (2012) identifies the following four qualities:

1. **Good social work is social** and based on seeing people's lives as a whole, not just their problems.
2. **It offers practical as well as emotional support.** Social workers do not treat psychological and emotional difficulties in isolation from people's real worlds.
3. **Listening and not judging.** Service users saw the quality and skill of being able to listen as the basis for much else that service users value.
4. **Delivering** what service users want.

Beresford suggests that sometimes this means rediscovering the community orientated side of social work, which fosters empowerment, discourages discrimination and can mean social workers taking the side of service users even when that conflicts with their employers and other state agencies.

Traditionally social work has emphasised that it should treat service users with respect, valuing them as unique persons and accepting them with all their failings. It has often failed to live up to these high ideals, but there is no contradiction between what service users want and the values that social work professes.

Changing roles for service users

Many service user groups have wanted to become far more involved in having some say in the services they receive. People with disabilities, users of mental health services, older people, carers and children in the care of local authorities are just a few of the examples of such groups.

A good example can be seen in the work of Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) in Northern Ireland, which was created in 1993 by a group of young people in care as well as professionals. Their stated aim is to promote the rights and voice of children in care and care leavers.

In their service user case study on palliative care in 2008, Beresford and colleagues found that service users valued being actively involved as equal partners in co-producing and having a say about services, rather than adhering to a traditional model where service users were expected to be passive, dependent, grateful and well behaved (Beresford et al., 2008).

This is a major challenge to social workers and to social work agencies and it leads on to what has been called 'a user-led model of social work' (Croft and Beresford, 2002). Croft and Beresford argue that in order for this to happen, service users' demands for autonomy, participation and inclusion must be met. Service users are looking for social workers and social services which:

- are concerned with enabling people to be independent rather than maintaining their dependency on social workers and their services, by focusing on people's abilities rather than their incapacities, and supporting their independence
- do not serve as a palliative for the failure of mainstream policies but instead are systematically related to broader rights and need-led social

and economic policies which include rather than marginalize groups like disabled people, lone parents and psychiatric system survivors, ensuring their access to education, training, child care and employment

- provide support rather than direction and are fully participative.

(Croft and Beresford, 2002, p. 390)

This requires a major shift, not just from social workers, but from their agencies and from many other services too, not least because social workers have pressing statutory (legal) responsibilities and limited time and resources to support people.

The need for education, training, child care and employment highlights the fact that many service users are disadvantaged in several ways. Croft and Beresford (2002) point to the connections between social disadvantage and personal distress and to the need for policies, agencies and workers to tackle both. These issues are relevant to the next section, where social work values are considered.

Values and ethical practice

You have already started to think about two significant areas of values: the importance of being aware of individual biography and recognising ascribed identities and the potentially damaging impact that they can have. In this section you will consider a specific area of values: the relationship between personal and professional social work values and ethical practice.

‘Values’ is a term that is used frequently in social work and the profession has had many debates about what it means. Values refer literally to the choices and actions that you think are important. Values provide you with some personal guidance in the way you understand any situation and affect the way you respond. You do not often have to express or articulate what you value because most of the time it is an implicit part of your motivation and thinking. For this reason, understanding what you value becomes an important element in exploring the way you work with people.

The term ‘ethics’ is used to refer to the norms or standards of behaviour people follow concerning what is regarded as good or bad, right or wrong. In social work, the term a ‘code of ethics’ is used to denote a set of principles, standards or rules of conduct for ethical practice. It is also used to talk about ethical dilemmas – i.e. difficult questions about the best course of action to take which incorporates social work values.

Walmsley (2012) summed the difference between ethics and values:

- **Ethics** is about deciding what is the right thing to do in a particular situation.
- **Values** are the beliefs individuals have as to what they consider is right or wrong.

Each of the regulatory bodies for each of the four nations of the UK makes clear the centrality of professional values in social work practice, and all social workers are expected to practice in accordance with these and the law. In Wales, for example, Social Care Wales requires that social workers behave at all times within its Code of Professional Practice for Social Care, and that their practice is informed by the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for social work. In Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council set the standards of conduct that describe the values, attitudes and behaviours expected of social workers in their day-to-day work and the standards of practice that outline the knowledge and skills required for competent practice. Together,

both sets of standards combine to provide a baseline against which a social worker's conduct and practice will be judged.

The various bodies make broad statements, but how they are interpreted in practice will vary. There is no one right value set, and there are many ways of being 'right', but there are undoubtedly wrong and inappropriate stances and value positions. A good understanding of how social inequalities are produced and reproduced within social worker and service user relationships is central to being a competent social worker.

This is why you need to identify your own values, learn what values you are expected to work to as a social worker, and decide how you situate yourself in relation to the ethical issues you will face in practice.

Personal values

In beginning to explore this complex and important subject, it's worth devoting some attention to a wider consideration of where values come from, and where you acquired your own values.

Activity 9 Your own values

Allow 10 minutes to complete

Think about where your values come from. List the different influences that you think have had an impact on your values.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

In the process of growing up, most people develop a system of values which are influenced by their environments in the widest sense (this includes family, school, community, cultural and wider social environments), by their experiences and by their reflections on both. Through such influences we acquire some idea of what matters most to us – of what we value – and develop a system of personal values, which we eventually bring into our social work. Some of those values may be widely shared within society and some might be held by certain groups within the population.

It is likely that not all of your values will fit in easily with the values you encounter in social work, so it is important to note that social work practice is likely to challenge at least some of the values you hold.

While it is important to understand your own value base there are also values that it is expected that all social workers adhere to in their professional practice, which are communicated in professional frameworks.

Social work values

Service users' expectations of social workers include the values of respect for service users' own expertise, empowerment in decision making, confidentiality, honesty about power and the social work role and the ability to challenge discrimination and put users and carers first.

One might say that these values are not restricted to social workers but are relevant to anyone who is dealing with people, such as shop assistants, bank officials, the clergy and

police officers. Yet there is a long tradition in social work that emphasises the importance of ‘respect for persons’ – an idea, drawn from moral philosophy that goes beyond being respectful or disrespectful. In social work it derives from the casework tradition, and was most famously expounded by Felix Biestek, a Jesuit priest and social work teacher at Loyola Catholic University, Chicago, in his book *The Casework Relationship*, which appeared in 1961. Biestek (1961) listed seven principles of casework, which included the five values listed below. (The two remaining principles, purposeful expression of feelings and controlled emotional involvement, are less to do with values and more concerned with ‘how to do social work’.)

- acceptance
- self-determination
- confidentiality
- individualisation (seeing each individual as unique)
- a non-judgemental attitude.

These are usually grouped together under the umbrella of ‘respect for persons’. Biestek’s emphasis was very much on creating a relationship between the social worker and the service user that brought about beneficial change for the service user. Put in these terms, ‘respect for persons’ goes far beyond what one would expect from shop assistants, bank officials and police officers!

Biestek’s approach may be criticised, however, for being too limited because it sees service users separately from the social context in which they live. It runs the risk, therefore, of ignoring or underestimating the extent to which the environment in which a service user lives affects their life and their ability to change it. Thus, it could be argued, the finest relationship in the world with the most highly skilled social worker would be of little use to a service user whose major problem is extreme poverty. The point is that social work values need to go beyond personalised moral principles if they are to address the social disadvantages that adversely affect so many service users.

Similarly, it is also too easy in any discussion of values to ignore the *occupational* context in which social workers practise and its influences. This issue will be addressed in the next section.

Ethics and professionalism: being accountable

One of the differences between just ‘doing the job’ and professional practice is knowing and thinking about what informs what we are doing. In other words, what explanation can we give for doing the job *this* way rather than that? Being able to explain ourselves to others is an essential skill in professional social work practice because it is central to being ‘accountable’, or in other words being able to justify and take responsibility for what we do. The concept of accountability makes explanations such as ‘we’ve always done it like this’ or ‘it seemed like a good idea at the time’ not good enough.

Being professional

One of the reasons for discussing accountability and the codes of practice required by care councils and regulatory bodies is to think about their implications in the context in which social workers actually operate, including their statutory (legal) responsibilities, the

values of their employing organisation, service users, society at large, and their own values. What happens in the event of a conflict?

There will be many occasions, particularly in practice situations, where social workers have to exercise judgement and be accountable for their decisions. This is another important element in the values of 'professionalism'. It implies that there are many situations in which laws, procedures, rules and guidelines reach their limits, and social workers need to exercise both discretion and professional judgement. Spicker (2008) summed up the dilemma:

Professionals reserve the areas in which they can act autonomously – the 'clinical freedom' of doctors, the social work relationship, or the conduct by teachers in their classes. There are tensions to be resolved; the need for flexibility and responsiveness has to be balanced against the agencies' concerns to develop consistent practices and professional claims are mediated through a process of constant negotiation.

(Spicker, 2008, p. 161)

In other words, someone must interpret and be accountable for rules and their limits, otherwise you end up with a list of rules, another list of rules about how to apply the rules, followed by another list, and so on. Lipsky (1980) suggested many social care workers could be viewed as 'street level bureaucrats'. In this position they used their discretion to fulfil the procedural and bureaucratic demands of their organisation in ways that were consistent with their own values and motivations to help people. Since this time there has been continued tension about how to meet managerialist demand for rationing and consistency while also allowing social workers to act with professional autonomy and within their own value base (McDonald et al., 2008; Ellis, 2011; Evans, 2011).

Activity 10 Personal and professional values in a practice context

Allow 30 minutes to complete

Watch this video and make notes in response to the questions. These video materials are parts of real-life social work situations which follow the work of a child protection team in Bristol, and which the OU was involved in filming with the BBC for a programme called *Protecting our Children*.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 1 Personal and professional values](#)



- What are your personal responses to the parent who is in this situation?
- How are your own ideas and values about parenting relevant?
- What are the professional or social work values that the worker demonstrates?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This video illustrates some of the human complexities that social workers are confronted with every day. You may have had a range of emotional responses. Even though the mother in this clip was clearly unhappy and distressed by their situation, you may have found it hard to empathise, or the neglect of the child might have made you feel angry. It is important to notice and talk about your feelings and reactions, rather than ignore them. This is also a good time to think about how, as a social worker, you can maintain a professional response and respect for the humanity and dignity of service users.

In this scenario you saw the social workers demonstrating social work values in showing Biesteck's 'respect for the person' and accountability to the law, their organisational context and other colleagues and organisations.

Social work is full of dilemmas and the morally active practitioner uses reflection and supervision as well as codes and protocols to think things through and arrive at the necessary decisions for action. Reflective practitioners will continue to question practice and seek improvements. In the next section, you will consider just what is meant by 'reflective practice' in social work.

Key points

- Empathy is a skill which enables us to understand the lives of people with very different experiences from ourselves and it is therefore a valuable tool for social workers.
- Social work is inextricably bound up with moral values.

- Although social work is based on personalised moral values (such as respect for people), it also exists in a social and occupational context. Professional ethics and being professionally accountable are also intrinsic to professional social work.

2.4 Bringing your learning together in reflective practice

In this section you are going to bring together the knowledge and skills you have gained so far and consider what is meant by 'reflective practice'. You have been introduced to different ways of understanding the role of a social worker and the lives of the people social workers work with. You should have started to recognise the different aspects of what it means to become a good social worker. These include skills, values, ethics and knowledge.

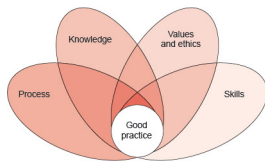


Figure 7 The elements of good social work practice

Consolidating your learning

You started by looking at the importance of historical and biographical perspectives in understanding service users' life experiences and the context in which law and policies are formed and services delivered to help them. You have now considered your own identity and value base, and been introduced to a wider knowledge base, including theories and research into human behaviour and attachments. You have recognised that people receiving services may have a very different perspective from your own. You have also by now considered some of the skills needed to be able to acknowledge this and be empathetic to each service user's situation.

However, social work is a practical business about engaging and supporting real people. Reflection is the process of learning that supports the integration of these different forms of knowledge and understanding into the direct work that is done with service users. In the rest of this section, you will explore what reflection means and how you can begin to develop this approach to your studies.

Reflection as a process of integration

There are many academic disciplines and sources of knowledge that influence social work practice, and these include sociology, psychology, social policy, law and research. These can be combined with practice experience, the skills of fellow practitioners and the knowledge of service users to make a potent learning experience, without which professional practice might be less informed.



Connecting academic learning with practice requires the ability to draw upon knowledge and use it to think about and write in a 'reflective way', and to make sense of practice. However, reflection requires not only the intellectual application of ideas, but also an understanding of this process of learning through experience and self-awareness. Reflective practice includes an appreciation of, and sensitivity to, your own skills and values, and an awareness of your own impact on others in relationship-based forms of work.

This approach to reflection has been the focus of writers such as Donald Schön (1983) and David Kolb (1985). These theorists have been interested in the ways in which adults learn, and especially in the different ways that professionals learn and develop their practice. Kolb went on to develop a cycle of learning, as illustrated in Figure 8 below.

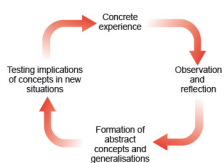


Figure 8 Kolb's 'cycle of learning'

The cycle of learning begins with the learner having a concrete, or specific, experience in practice, which prompts 'reflective observations' within the learner. These observations then lead the learner to draw out 'generalisations and abstract conceptualisations', which may then be applied to a similar experience, prompting 'application of ideas and active experimentation'. Thus, the learner does not respond mechanically, simply by following

rules or procedures, but learns by reflecting on practice and modifying or developing it in the process.

Cycle of learning

Here is an example of how each of the element in Kolb's cycle of learning was used to reflect on an experience of some voluntary work undertaken by a male practitioner. Read his concrete experience extract below and then think about what you would draw from this at each stage of the cycle of learning before reading what the practitioner in question took from the experience.

Concrete experience

About Susan

I was asked by the voluntary agency I worked for to go and speak to Susan, about coming to use our lunch club for older people. The social worker had said that they had already talked about it, and Susan was expecting someone to come and make the arrangements. I had written to make the appointment but when I arrived Susan did not appear to be expecting me. However she asked me in and I attempted to explain where I was from, and the referral from the social worker.

The room she invited me into appeared to be set up as a bedsit. It was very untidy and a bit smelly and was not helped by the fact that Susan had five or more cats wandering in and out. As is always the way, the cats were particularly keen to come and greet me, bring on my allergic asthmatic reaction and generally ignore my attempts to politely shun them.

Susan was very deaf and it was difficult make myself understood. But it was clear she was not aware of the offer of the lunch club and didn't think she would want to bother. Somebody from the council had been to speak to her a while ago but she wasn't sure what that was about. She thinks they came because of her GP and they were going to get her something to do with the toilet downstairs.

I thanked Susan for her time and left saying I would get back to the social worker who had made the referral.

Observation and reflection

What observations and reflections would you take away from this experience? Here are some example responses that may be familiar to your own:

1. I came away worried about Susan's situation. I wasn't sure we communicated clearly because of her deafness. I don't think she always heard what I was saying and so nodded or agreed to placate me.
2. I felt, with my general physical discomfort in the room, I hadn't been very clear or assertive in my communication. I would just be another person wandering through her home.
3. It was easy to think of her as confused because of this, but I wasn't sure if this was just because she hadn't got the full picture.

4. Her situation wasn't ideal, but I didn't know if the social worker had made a proper assessment and had weighed up the balance of risk and choice.
5. I felt bad about doubting the thoroughness of the judgement of another professional about this situation and felt I should just know my place in the professional and service hierarchy – i.e. an unqualified worker in a voluntary agency.

Formation of abstract concepts and generalisations

What abstract concepts and generalisations might you take from this experience?

1. Service users sometimes have different priorities from those of agencies and their workers. It is important to be alert to this.
2. If someone is hearing-impaired then workers need to do everything they can to augment their communication and ensure they have been understood. For instance, the worker should sit in a good light so the person can see their face, be prepared with paper and pen to write down key messages, ask specific or closed questions to check they have been understood.
3. If you are confident the person has understood, choice and control is an important value base and this needs to be respected, even when people are making choices you don't think are good ones. The judgement or assessment about risk, or even potentially safeguarding concern needs to be shared and recorded with the social worker involved so that they can ensure they are getting as full a picture as possible about someone's situation.

Testing implications in new situations

What are the implications for new situations?

1. I decided to always carry a blank notebook and a clear felt tip pen with me to help communication if it was needed.
2. I got a card and leaflet from the agency with my name and number printed on it so that the person I visited could always have a record of where I had come from, or show it to other visitors.
3. I reported and discussed my anxieties with my supervisor. She suggested I phone the social worker and talk to them. I also wrote the social worker a letter to report what I had seen and Susan's decision not to come to the lunch club.

Developing your own reflective skills

An important aspect of developing your own reflective skills is that you try this for yourself on any aspect of your experiences.

Activity 11 Reflecting on your own practice

Allow 30 minutes to complete

Think of a situation that you found difficult when you first attempted it, such as your first time doing something new, meeting someone who was using the service for the first time, or a situation where you or somebody else became upset in some way.

Use the stages in Kolb's cycle of learning to help you reflect on what happened.

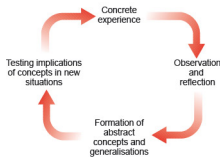


Figure 9 Kolb's 'cycle of learning'

Using the questions below, try to recall what emotions, thoughts or reflections the situation prompted in you and what you learned from the experience.

How did you deal with a similar situation the next time you encountered it?

- Describe the **concrete experience**.
- What **observations and reflections** did you take away from the experience?
- What **abstract concepts and generalisations** might you formulate?
- What are the **implications for new situations**?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Hopefully by working through this exercise you will have recognised that there is nothing mysterious about Kolb's cycle of learning.

However, reflection is not only about making connections with knowledge; Boud and Knights (1996) described three phases of thinking things through in reflection as:

1. returning to an experience
2. attending to feelings connected to the experience
3. re-evaluating the experience through recognising its implications and outcomes.

Boud and Knights' emphasis on feelings is important, as emotional responses can both influence a worker's ability to make judgements and lead them to intuitive questioning, which can be very valuable in itself. Social work involves more than simply following procedures; social workers have to think things through, apply lessons from past experience and find new ways to deal with new situations.

Being self-aware in reflective practice

Being aware of yourself and conscious of your impact on others is a necessary element of reflective practice and is crucial to the relationships social workers build with the people they work with. Joyce Lishman described social work as:

Entering into the lives of people who are in distress, conflict or trouble. To do this requires not only technical competence but also qualities of integrity, genuineness and self-awareness.

(Lishman, 1994, quoted in Lishman, 2002, p. 95)

Qualities such as 'integrity, genuineness and self-awareness' are central to developing empathy and an understanding of social work values. However, although self-awareness is needed in terms of work with service users, it is also a necessary part of taking a professional responsibility for your own learning and development.

In both Scotland and Wales the Care Council's codes require workers

...to be accountable for the quality of their work and take responsibility for maintaining and improving their knowledge and skills.

(Scottish Social Services Council, 2009; Gofal Cymdeithasol Cymru, 2017)

This supposes that students and workers are aware, not only of their own practices, but also of their professional development needs. It is perhaps natural to feel able to understand and comment on other people's motivations, practices and attitudes more easily than our own. It is also often easier to articulate clearly the strengths and shortfalls of the organisation we work within than to see our role or contribution to its successes and weaknesses. Self-awareness is a form of reflection, in the sense that it encourages us to think about ourselves, what sort of people we are and want to be. The process never stops, of course, for the more self-awareness we acquire, the more we discover the need to develop it further. The complexities of human behaviour and life today also mean that we are constantly learning about both ourselves and other people.

Developing your self-awareness

An important part of developing professional identity is understanding yourself better. Increasing self-awareness allows practitioners to understand what might influence their relationships with service users. It is important to be aware of what *they* bring to the relationship themselves – in terms of skills and experiences but also in terms of assumptions and even subconscious reactions.

Activity 12 Awareness of your self

Allow 15 minutes to complete

As you have worked through this course what have the activities revealed about your personal attributes and experiences? How might these have an impact on your relationships (both good and bad), whether you already work with service users or not?

Think about these questions and make some notes on what you have learned about yourself and your relationships.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You might be surprised to learn how many different activities in this course are related to personal awareness. For example, you considered how you define your identity in different settings. You also considered some stereotypes that you might hold. It is important to acknowledge such reactions, so that you can deal with them. Similarly, everyone has their own blind spots and automatic reactions. If you are aware of these, you can deal with them and take this into account in your social work relationships. You have to be prepared to consciously put your prejudices aside. Rather than just reacting automatically, you need to examine the reasons behind your reactions. Consider, for instance, the practitioner who reported that he has problems with people who smell. Once he acknowledged this prejudice, he was able to take it into account and adjust his reactions accordingly.

In addition, you have considered your personal values. Again, it is important to be aware of your own values so that you can see where they differ from those of other people.

Supervision as a tool for self-awareness

While trying to maintain critical awareness is one way of developing your reflective skills and practice, supervision is another very important way of doing so. Social workers normally have supervision built into their professional practice and would consider it central to their development as skilled and reflective practitioners.

Lishman (2002) lists six points that should form the basis of all supervision for students and staff:

1. It should focus on learning.
2. It should be provided on a regular and reliable basis.
3. It should involve mutual trust and an awareness of issues of authority and responsibility.
4. It should provide support and opportunities to express feelings and to go 'below the surface' in the analysis of problems and situations.
5. It should address those particular issues which you identify as problematic, including dealing with pain, anxiety, confusion, violence and stress.
6. It should be anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory in its content and its process.

She concludes that 'supervision is time for exploration, reflection, learning and problem-solving' (p. 107).

Supervision was given prominence and recognition in the Munro review of children's social care services in England in 2011:

Analytic skills can be enhanced by formal teaching and reading. Intuitive skills are essentially derived from experience. Experience on its own, however, is not enough. It needs to be allied to reflection – time and attention given to mulling over the experience and learning from it. This is often best achieved in conversation with others, in supervision, for example, or in discussions with colleagues.

(Munro, 2011, p. 87)

Her words serve as a reminder that reflection helps you to deal better with complicated situations that cannot be resolved simply by following rules or guidelines.

Reflective writing

You have now considered reflection as a way of thinking and learning. Now you will move on to think about reflective writing. Many of the expectations of reflective writing will be very similar to the kinds of writing you may already be used to, such as the requirement to acknowledge your sources by using references and using clear language that is easily understood by your reader. There are also, however, important differences which you will also need to think about, should you go on to study for the social work degree.



1. The questions may not require an 'essay' answer and may therefore need a different approach and structure from the conventional one of introduction, main paragraphs and conclusion.
2. While most professional writing (e.g. reports, records) are written in the third person, reflective writing requires that you write about your own experience and consequently the use of the first person ('I') is actually encouraged.
3. While you are still expected to use your reading or 'theory', this will need to be linked to your discussion of your own experiences and also what you have learned from these experiences.

If you already have experience of writing in higher education, reflective writing may feel odd at first. One social work student who was already a graduate commented that while her experience was that academic writing 'is looking at writing in the third person', reflective writing is about something different:

Well, you write that to your Auntie Jane, you don't write it for a course, I've never written it for a course ... In this course you are going to be asked to write about yourself big style. You have got to be king. You have got to be in the centre.

(Social work student)

Although reflective writing is not exactly like writing a letter to 'Auntie Jane' or a personal blog, this student was picking up correctly that reflective writing has something in common with writing a diary or journal (or blog) and that most academic writing does not encourage you to write about yourself and your own experiences.

Activity 13 Reflective writing

Allow 30 minutes to complete

Spend 15 minutes writing as freely as you can about your thoughts on your learning so far. This writing is only for you to see, so don't worry too much about how you organise your ideas or even about your language (words used, sentence construction, spelling, grammar, punctuation etc.). Just write from your own thoughts.

After writing for about 15 minutes, put your writing away somewhere safe.

Later, perhaps the next day, come back and re-read your writing. Note down your answers to the following questions:

- Did you enjoy writing in this way, or did it feel difficult?
- Did you feel able to forget about traditional expectations of 'good' writing and just let your thoughts flow?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Some people find this type of writing hugely enjoyable, as a way to put their feelings and thoughts on paper and even to develop creative ideas. For others this is an awkward, challenging and artificial task, particularly for people who would not commonly talk about themselves reflectively, never mind commit their thoughts about themselves to paper in this way. Some people also feel very inhibited by the thought of someone reading and judging their writing, which can get in the way of expressing themselves. Free writing can be a good way to overcome feeling anxious about expressing yourself. Free writing also has a lot in common with reflective writing, as the focus is on you, the writer, your thoughts and experiences as told in the first person. If you found this activity difficult in any way you might like to keep practising this free writing exercise. Remember, you can pick any topic, based on work or personal experiences and you can jot these down on paper, phone or computer or perhaps by using voice recording software.

Key points

- Reflection can enhance social work practice.
- Reflection involves drawing together your experiences, study and feelings to help you evaluate practice and think about intervention and outcomes.
- Supervision plays an important role in supporting reflection.

Conclusion

This free course has covered a wide range of issues that are designed to make you reflect on your own life experiences and on the experiences and perceptions of service users and practitioners. The section title 'Focusing on the individual' reminds you that social work is about working with people, as service users and as colleagues, and that you are also one of the people in this process. Hopefully by working through the course it has prompted you to reflect on your own practices, feelings, thoughts and reactions. To check your understanding and make sure you have taken in this material, you may find it useful to consider the following core questions and see if you can answer them now.

Core questions

- Why is biography important?
- How does an understanding of identity and attachment theory contribute to social work practice?
- What qualities do service users value in social workers?
- What values are integral to a professional social work identity?
- What does it mean to practise reflectively?

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [K113 Foundations for social work practice](#).

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