BLOCK 3 PRIVATE TROUBLES AND PUBLIC ISSUES

INTRODUCTION TO BLOCK 3
Prepared for the course team by John Clarke

UNIT 13 SOCIAL WORK: THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL
Prepared for the course team by John Clarke

UNIT 14 SOCIAL WORK IN THE WELFARE STATE
Prepared for the course team by John Clarke

The Open University Press
Cover acknowledgements  illustrations and photographs reproduced courtesy of
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**Preface**

The first two blocks of the course have taken the individual and the family as their respective starting points. In both cases part of the purpose of the block has been to explore the connections between the particular starting point and wider social patterns and processes. Several key phrases have been used to describe the issues which Blocks 1 and 2 have raised in the process of making those connections between the individual, the family and social arrangements:

- the individual and society,
- the personal and the political,
- the private and the public.

These phrases highlight important tensions in the ways in which we think about social problems and social welfare. They address the question of how we go about explaining social problems—are they individual/private troubles or public issues? They are concerned with how social interventions are shaped and organized by definitions of social problems—are they aimed at solving ‘private’ problems or do they aim to change social arrangements? The phrases also point to one of the central themes of the course, that social science is constantly concerned to link both terms in such phrases. That is, the aim is to understand the relationship between the individual and the social, the personal and the political, and the private and the public.

In different ways, both blocks have stressed the importance of the idea of *social construction* for understanding these relationships. How we, as members of a society, make sense of the world in which we live, and how our understandings affect the way we behave, is involved in processes of social definition. In the course so far you have had a chance to look at such processes as they shape our understanding of (and consequently our behaviour towards) the ‘stages of life’ which an individual passes through, as well as the main institution through which those stages of life are supposed to be experienced in our society — the family. So far, then, one of the aims of the course has been to subject our understandings and expectations of the individual and the family to social scientific analysis to see what sets of social definitions and processes of social construction are at work. We have considered, for example, what shapes our conceptions of age (childhood, adolescence, old age) and our understandings of family life and its related issues of gender roles, sexuality and morality.

One recurrent point to emerge from these studies is that the boundaries between the personal and political, and between the private and the public are themselves the product of social definitions. Although these boundaries carry great social significance (for example, in ideas that ‘private’ and ‘personal’ spheres should not be invaded by public institutions), they are not eternally fixed or inevitable boundaries. They are subject to change as a result of social processes. For example, in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, it would have been inconceivable that such figures as health visitors, social workers, probation officers, educational welfare officers and supplementary benefit investigators would normally be expected to have access to families in their own home. As Unit 11 showed, while the family has continued to be defined as ‘private’, this definition goes alongside policies and practices (and the ‘discourses’ which support them) that have made the family a site of social intervention.

**A note on ‘norms’**

The study of processes of social construction and definition in one’s own society is not an easy or comfortable one. It involves trying to create a distance between being an observer of, and being a participant in, the everyday workings of the society. This sense of distance — an ability not to take for granted the things we ‘know’ as participants — is an essential ingredient of the social scientific perspective, or what the American, C. Wright Mills, once called the ‘sociological imagination’.
At the heart of this activity is the process of trying to analyse what are taken to be the ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ patterns of how people live in this society. At times, getting a perspective on these expectations and assumptions about normality can be aided by comparative studies (either cross-culturally or historically). Such comparisons can aid us in viewing assumptions about normality sceptically, by demonstrating that they are neither ‘natural’ nor ‘inevitable’. But the hardest part is still to look inside the pattern of expectations and assumptions of our own society, to see how they are made, how they are held together, and what social consequences they have.

A key concept, which has appeared many times already in the course, is that of ‘norm’. It is important because it contains a particular sort of ambiguity. On the one hand, it refers to statistical regularity or a numerical majority (e.g. the ‘family norm’ is two parents with 2.3 children). In this sense, it is descriptive. It tells us how large numbers of people live. On the other hand, it can also be an evaluative judgement, a ‘norm’ to which it is claimed all or most people aspire (i.e. most people want to live in a family with 2.3 children). It is this ambiguity surrounding the idea of ‘norm’ that makes it so important for the social sciences. In its statistically descriptive sense, it does not lead to any direct social consequences. It tells us some information about how people live (remember Unit 6’s discussion of families and households?). But as an evaluative judgement (this is how we expect people to live) a norm becomes a social force, a pressure of expectations and assumptions that has to be conformed to or resisted. (Think, for example, of Unit 6’s discussion on the pressures on married couples to explain why they are not having children, or Unit 1’s consideration of the pressures created by the ‘norm’ of delivering babies in hospital.)

One of the effects of the evaluative sense of norms which has played an important role in the work you have done so far is the evaluation of those who do not conform to these expectations. In the statistical sense, ‘normal’ or ‘majority’ patterns will be surrounded by other, different patterns, without any particular social significance being attached to these differences. The social consequences arise when evaluation is added. As Unit 11 clearly showed, discourses of the ‘normal’ also include evaluations of these other patterns they are identified as abnormal, deviant, or pathological (‘there must be something wrong with people who don’t want 2.3 children’). So the pressures to conform to the ‘norm’ can also include pressures against ‘abnormality’. Such pressures range from social disapproval, through attempts to ‘help’ the deviant achieve normality, to punishments for non-conformity.

A central task for the social sciences, then, is to keep these two senses – the descriptive and the evaluative – separate. One part of that is to insist that statistical significance (a numerical majority) is not the same as social desirability (the ‘right way’). For example, if a majority of people in our society break the law (even if only in a minor way) there is no reason to think that this pattern of behaviour should be regarded as socially desirable. A further part of the task is to keep the statistical patterns in mind, because there are often gaps between the ‘statistical’ norm and the ‘evaluative’ norm. How people behave and live their lives might be very different from the publicly proclaimed ‘norms’ of our society. (Again, you might want to think back to the ‘norm’ of the family and the statistical distribution of households in Unit 6.)

**Why social work?**

So far, it may seem as though this introduction to a new block has mainly taken the form of reviewing earlier ones. This is because the themes and issues you have encountered there are central to the work you will be doing in this block. Whereas Blocks 1 and 2 have focused on the individual and the family, and have looked at social interventions from those starting points, Block 3 begins from one particular form of social intervention designed to respond to social problems and to promote social welfare. Social work. Where Blocks 1 and 2 viewed social intervention from their standpoint in studying the links between the individual, family and society, Block 3 reverses this process and views the individual, family and society from the perspective of social intervention.
The choice of social work as the subject of Block 3 is not accidental. There are many forms of intervention in the area of social problems and social welfare which could have been studied, but social work is particularly significant at this point in the course. It is the form of intervention which most self-consciously sees itself as linking the individual and society. As such, it is engaged in working on the boundaries of the personal and political, and the public and private.

On the one hand, social work is a form of social intervention, shaped by public and political pressures and processes. It intervenes in problems which are socially defined - the care of the elderly, juvenile delinquency, child abuse, etc. On the other hand, it primarily intervenes in what we might call the 'private dimension' of social problems, dealing with individual cases (rather than social groups), and working with individuals and families to promote welfare and help solve problems. In this sense an understanding of the distinctions between the private and public, and the personal and political are essential to the study of social work.

**Themes of the block**

Block 3 aims to provide an understanding of social work's place as a form of intervention in social problems and social welfare in contemporary Britain. It is not a guide on how to be a social worker, but an analysis of social work. In that sense it aims to study social work in the same way that Blocks 1 and 2 studied the individual and the family looking at the social patterns, pressures and processes that shape social work.

You will find that a number of key themes linking this block to your other work on the course are explored in different ways in the units which make up this block.

1. How are the social problems with which social work is concerned defined?
2. What sort of social intervention is social work?
3. What are the social patterns, pressures and processes that have shaped social work as a form of social intervention?
4. What are the main tensions and conflicts within social work as a form of social intervention?

Even though the block is a long one, it is not a full and exhaustive study of every aspect of social work. It is selective, focusing on those aspects which we feel are most relevant to the work of this course. Necessarily, then, there are gaps in our coverage of the range of social problems which social work confronts, and in the range of ways in which social workers try to deal with those problems. However, we feel that the block manages to give an indication of that range, while still being able to focus on the themes and issues which are essential to the course.

In preparing to study this block it may be useful to think of it as made up of three sub-sections which, although linked together, are shaped by their concern with particular issues.

Units 13 and 14 provide an historical account of the origins and development of social work in Britain. They have two main concerns: one is to examine the social processes which shaped the growth of social work as a form of social intervention, the second is to consider some of the problems, tensions and conflicts that characterise social work as an intervention which works on the boundary between the public and the private.

Units 15, 16 and 17 focus on one of the central, and most controversial, areas of social work - its interventions into problems of childhood and the family. These three units explore the processes and problems involved in social work intervention in the care of children and the support of families. From them you should gain an understanding of why social work with children has become a subject of major public and political controversy.
Units 18, 19 and 20 explore some aspects of the changing conditions of social work practice. They deal with changing welfare policies and their impact on the provision of social care, and with challenges to the professional definitions of needs and care that are expressed in social work. Unit 20 returns to some of the wider economic, social and political processes which shape the present and future of social work, not the least of which is the political conflict about the role of the state in providing social welfare.

As with the other blocks, the last unit (Unit 21) is a review unit which looks back over the work of the block and draws together the themes and issues that have been raised.

**Study Table for Block 3**

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- Block Introduction
- Unit 13 *Social Work: The Personal and the Political*

**Study Week 14**
- Unit 14 *Social Work in the Welfare State*
- TV 7 *The Origins of State Social Work*

**Study Week 15**
- Unit 15 *Received into Care*
- TV 8 *Why Care?*

**Study Week 16**
- Unit 16 *Child Abuse*

**Study Week 17**
- Unit 17 *Images of Domesticity: The Work of the Family Centre*
- TV 9 *Family Centres*
- TMA 04

**Study Week 18**
- Unit 18 *Care in the Community*
- Cassette 4, Side B *Informal Care*
- TV 10 *Care in the Community*

**Study Week 19**
- Unit 19 *Issues in Disability: Integrated Living*

**Study Week 20**
- Unit 20 *Social Work in the Context of Decline*
- Cassette 5, Side A *The Future of Social Work*
- TV 11 *Social Work in the Inner City*
- Reader *Chapter 6 'Hazardous lives – social work in the 1980s: a view from the Left’*
  - *Chapter 5 ‘The role of the social services: a view from the New Right’*
  - *Chapter 4 ‘The future of social work: a pragmatic view’*

**Study Week 21**
- Unit 21 *Review*
- Reader *Chapter 2 ‘The undeserving poor: unemployed people, then and now’*
- TMA 05
Unit 13 SOCIAL WORK: THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

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Aims

In this unit we shall be looking at the origins and development of social work in Britain from the mid nineteenth century through to the end of the Second World War. In trying to cover this long history, we shall be focusing on a number of themes rather than just trying to ‘tell the story’ of social work. These themes are intended to link the study of social work to the issues you have already been studying in the course, and to provide a basis for the further work in this block, and in the remainder of the course. These themes are

1. the relationship between social work and definitions of social problems which see them as based in personal or familial causes,
2. the relationship between economic and moral ideas of poverty as a social problem,
3. the links between social work and other agencies and institutions of the state which deal with social problems,
4. the theory and practice of social work as a distinctive form of social intervention, looking at the role of ‘professionalization’ in the development of social work

Study guide

This unit is one week’s work. There are no television programmes, cassettes or additional readings associated with the unit.
1 THE HISTORY OF SOCIAL WORK: WHY START HERE?

Although this course is primarily concerned with social welfare and social problems in modern Britain, you will already have realized that history plays a significant role in the way these issues have been presented in the course. Many of the units you have studied so far have used historical examples to raise questions about contemporary social issues. We might suggest that these historical examples serve two main purposes. On the one hand, they can highlight processes of change; on the other, they can illuminate continuity. In the first case, history serves a similar purpose to cross-cultural comparison between societies. It can show how things are not ‘natural’ or universal. For example, the units in Block 1 dealt with the social construction of those ‘stages of life’ (childhood, adolescence and old age) which are often seen as ‘natural’ in our society, and used historical comparison to look at periods when these stages were seen and organized differently in our society. History in this sense is useful as a way of relativizing those aspects of social arrangements which we might otherwise take for granted. In addition, it raises the questions of how things changed, and of what causes were important in moving from then to now. You may remember that Unit 4, for example, looked at different explanations of how the dependent status of old age was created.

These uses of history are important, and often dramatic, in highlighting how social arrangements have changed. But the second use of history is also significant – though often less dramatically so. The study of continuities is as important as the study of change. Some sets of social arrangements persist over relatively long periods once they have been created. For example, once the dependent status of the elderly had been created, it proved to be remarkably persistent. Although social policies about the elderly have changed considerably since the middle of the nineteenth century, all of those changes have taken the dependent status as their starting point. That status has become a taken-for-granted part of our social arrangements. A full historical account, then, needs to pay attention to change (how are new arrangements created?) and to continuity (how are some arrangements maintained over long periods?)

This unit deals with the creation and development of social work in Britain from its nineteenth-century origins through to the 1940s. It is intended to raise questions of change and continuity. By the end of the unit you should have an understanding of why social work developed in the mid-nineteenth century, and what its main concerns were. You should also be in a position to discuss how and why it changed during the following decades, and be able to trace some of the main continuities which link social work as a form of social intervention in modern Britain with its earliest stages. This unit, together with Unit 14 on the development of social work in modern Britain, stands as an introduction to the block as a whole. The other units in this block consider in detail particular issues about social work which are of special importance to a discussion of social problems and social welfare today, such as child abuse and children in care. By tracing the development of social work in these first two units, we hope that you will be able to see the connections between these more particular issues – and the arguments surrounding them – and the development of social work in general.

There are a number of ways in which the history of social work could be presented in these units. For example, we could trace how the different organizations involved in social work were created and developed, looking at their internal methods, procedures and organization what we might call an institutional history of social work. We could look in detail at the people who undertook social work, at how they organized, trained and practised a professional history of social work. Although these units will touch on some of those questions, they will take a rather different approach. We will be looking at the relationship between the development of social work and the wider structure of society, in particular at the links between social work and patterns of class and gender relationships, and at the links between social work and the social definition of social problems in which social work was intended to intervene. The units will be offering a social history of social work.
This approach to the history of social work puts particular demands on you in studying these units. First, and most obviously, you need to be concerned with what the units say about change and continuity in social work. That is the main purpose of the units. Secondly, you need to think about the explanations of change and continuity that are being presented. Like everything else in the social sciences, historical development is subject to different explanations. Thirdly, you need to be attentive to the links between these units and the earlier sections of the course. Some of the issues which these units raise about social work are connected with earlier discussions about the family, the individual, the social nature of social problems and attempts to solve them. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the units need to be read carefully. This may sound like a particularly banal observation in an Open University unit, but I have a special reason for making it. Much of the 'evidence' which this unit presents is in the form of statements and observations from those involved in the development of social work. You will need to read these statements to uncover the attitudes, beliefs and ideologies they express. This sort of 'reading' is an important study skill, especially where we are dealing with questions of how social problems are defined and responded to. With these matters firmly in mind, let us proceed.
Between the middle of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century a range of institutions was developed to deal with social problems in British society. Although these institutions were designed to deal with different sorts of social problems—illness, old age, madness, poverty, worklessness and crime—they shared a number of features. The most striking of these was that each of these institutions—the hospital, the asylum, the workhouse and the prison—involved the physical segregation of the ‘problem’ from the wider community. They removed the sick, the mad, the poor, the workless and the criminal to a separate place. They institutionalized the problem group.

The emergence of these institutions is closely associated with the process of social change in Britain during this period. The country was moving from a primarily rural and agricultural society to an industrial and urban one. As it did so, old forms of social relationships were destroyed—in particular, the dense and tightly knit patterns of rural society which had had their own distinctive ways of dealing with social problems, i.e., processes of mutual support, the role of the gentry in taking care of ‘their’ tenants and workers, and ruthless repression. While such rural communities might be viewed nostalgically for their capacity to tolerate or support the elderly or ‘village idiots’, rather than packing them off to old people’s homes or asylums, it is worth remembering that crime was responded to by brutal physical punishments, execution and deportation.

The transition to a society dominated by the town and the factory involved two processes which affected social problems. First, the transition undermined old ways of ‘coping’ with existing problems. Second, new problems emerged with the growth of the cities and the adjustments that were required to the demands of factory life. The town came to be perceived as a site of social problems, contrasted with a nostalgic view of a rural ‘golden age’, in which life was comfortable, harmonious, and in which everyone knew their place. The industrial towns were seen as dirty, anonymous and dangerous. This sense of ‘danger’ encompassed a variety of threats—to health, to property, and to the social and political well-being of the ruling classes. In their minds, danger was associated with the general ‘disorderliness’ of the newly emerging urban working classes. They were the carriers of disease, of immorality, of criminal tendencies, and of dangerous habits of mind such as Chartism and its demand for universal political suffrage. The following passage summarizes ruling-class views of the ‘lower orders’. Make a note of what the author argues is the main concern expressed in these views.

Seaweed and drains were guiding metaphors for those who deplored the deviants of this time. ‘Foul wretches’ and ‘moral filth’ lay heaped in ‘stagnant pools’ about the streets. When they moved, they were seen to ‘ooze’ in a great ‘tide’. The population was ‘slime’ which gathered in ghettos which were described as ‘poisoned wells’, ‘canker-worms’, ‘sinks of iniquity’, and ‘plague-spots’. Their houses were described as ‘cass-pits’, and their way of life was a ‘moral miasma’, for it was essentially a moral condition which was captured in these lurid images. The city ‘reeked’ of vice, the ‘scum’ and the ‘dregs’ of society was a ‘moral debris’ and ‘residuum’. The words ‘pustule’, ‘fever’ and ‘wart’ came readily to hand when describing the moral condition of the labouring and dangerous classes.

The sewer speaks to the nineteenth century about its dangerous moral and maternal condition. This is the dominant theme of the sewer metaphor and around it a number of subsidiary themes group themselves. A common image of the poor, for example, was that they were licentious and enjoyed a sexual freedom (and a sexual corruption) not available to the middle classes. The sewer conveniently describes a concealed, and occasionally overflowing, nastiness. And like the mob, the sewer on occasion erupts, flows into the streets, and reminds the city of its dangerous refuse-particularly the unemployable human refuse of an unpredictable economic system. The final theme which finds its expression in the image of the sewer is that of contagion and contamination, a political contamination, that is, over and above a simple health hazard. For the sewer is, above all else, a political image in the nineteenth century. The fear expressed here is the ever-present fear of the contamination of the respectable labouring classes by the dangerous classes, and the possibility that economic fluctuations, hard winters, or epidemics might throw large numbers of ‘honest folk’ into their ‘dangerous’ ranks (Pearson, 1975, pp 161-5; emphasis in original).
The pervasive sense of social fear about the 'contamination' of the respectable poor by their dangerous counterparts promoted an array of responses intended to manage the control of the dangerous places and dangerous people of the industrial towns, and the institutions mentioned at the start of this section took their place among them. They were designed to segregate and isolate the 'problem populations' to avoid the prospect of 'contamination'. By physically separating the 'dangerous' it was hoped that they would not infect the morally and politically - as well as physically - healthy sections of the working class. The British landscape is still marked by the signs of this philosophy of segregation we are accustomed to seeing the enclosed - walled-off - spaces that mark the places where the 'dangerous' were incarcerated: the prisons and the asylums. Each of these institutions had its 'target' population: the physically sick, the mad, the criminal, and the workless - those unable or unwilling to support themselves by waged work.
This institutionalization is a common thread linking many of the responses to social problems in the transition to an urban and industrial society. Even though such institutions in practice only contained a limited proportion of these ‘problem populations’, the idea of institutionalization dominated thinking about how to deal with such social problems. Each of the new institutions laid great emphasis on the close supervision of its inmates. The walls not only segregated these ‘deviant populations’ from the outside world, they also held the inmates available for scrutiny by the warders, doctors and nurses who could carefully monitor their behaviour for signs of continued ‘disorder’ or ‘improvement’.

This stress on surveillance and scrutiny—the careful monitoring of behaviour and the search for ‘regular’ and ‘normal’ patterns—echoes the social arrangement of the other great institution invented in this period, the factory. There, too, people’s actions were monitored carefully, to ensure that they were leading a ‘good and productive life’. The factory—the all-dominating institution of the new urban scene—required discipline from its ‘hands’, and overseers and foremen were one means of ensuring that ‘time was well spent’. Marx ironically called the factory ‘the great workhouse’, and the connection between the great ‘house of industry’ and the institutions of confinement and reform is a close one. These institutions—one of normal life, the others for the ‘deviant populations’—were intimately linked, not only by their physical resemblances and by the importance of supervision, but also by their organizing internal principles. The favoured ‘therapy’—the means of reform—in these institutions was work: the performance of labour. In the workhouses, in the asylums and in the prisons, putting the inmates to work, whether at ‘useful’ labour or tasks invented merely for something to do, was seen as a means of instilling discipline and creating ‘good habits’. The reformer Mary Carpenter, in extolling the merits of agricultural labour as a regime for reforming young offenders, said: ‘The salutary fatigue of the body removes from the mind evil thoughts and renders it necessary to devote to repose those hours which in the towns are given to evil pleasures’ (1853, p 306).

These ‘good habits’ were precisely those being sought in the industrial centres by the rising class of industrialists, who wanted ‘useful hands’ workers who were disciplined, orderly and not given to evil thoughts or pleasures. Carpenter also highlights the contrast between the rural environment and the ‘evil pleasures’ of the town. This suspicion of, and hostility towards, the city was a very powerful theme in nineteenth-century British culture, and the view of the city as debilitating and corrupting (in contrast with the ‘natural’ harmoniousness of the countryside) has persisted into this century (Williams, 1973).

### 2.1 Alternatives to institutions of control

These institutions dominated nineteenth-century thinking about the social problems of health, sanity, crime and poverty. Even so, they were less than a complete answer to the social problems of Britain at that time. For example, they became a target for criticism from subsequent generations of reformers who argued that incarceration—absolute separation from the community—was, at least in some cases, counter-productive. The prisons, for example, came under attack for being ‘schools for thieves’, in which criminals could become hardened, learn more criminal skills, and re-emerge as a greater danger to society than when they entered the institution. In relation to the prisons, this argument was first made by those concerned with the treatment of young offenders. As the 1828 Parliamentary Select Committee on Criminal Commitments and Corrections saw it:

'We cannot doubt that the present system of long imprisonment for young offenders, besides the expense and inconvenience attending it, greatly promotes the growth of crime. A boy is committed to prison for trial, the degradation and the company that he meets there prepare his mind for every vice; after long delay, he is sentenced to six months or a year’s imprisonment; he herds with felons and comes out an accomplished thief, detesting the laws of his country, and prepared with the means to avoid them' (1828, p 12).
In the first instance, these arguments produced demands for separate and differentiated institutions of confinement for young offenders – reformatories. But subsequently it became clear that all institutions had 'institutionalizing' effects on young offenders. They learned crime as readily from other young offenders as they had from adult prisoners. This realization led to attempts to link 'reform' with ways of keeping the offenders 'in the community', in this can be seen the origins of the probation system. This development of working with the offender, 'advising, assisting and befriending' in their home circumstances, exemplifies one of the subsequent problems of social work that of the tension between 'care' and 'control'. The probation officer was (and still is) an officer of the court, whose duty it was to 'supervise' the offender, and that supervision (control) was backed by the force of law. Yet the officer was also supposed to 'befriend' the offender (care), even though the offender's acceptance of this care was enforced.

Around each of the institutions we have mentioned so far, there developed attempts to link the institutions with the wider community – the creation of what might be called 'gatekeepers' who dealt with the interconnection of the inmate, the institution and the community outside the institution. In some cases, this 'gatekeeping' role also involved work which attempted to keep people out of the institutions by working in the community. For example, by the end of the nineteenth century some of the charitable hospitals employed 'medical almoners', whose role was to work with the out-patients' department of the hospital, visit patients at home, and liaise with the charitable bodies who might pay for the patient's care.

Read the following extract from a report of the Hospital Almoners Council. What are the two problems it identifies?

The far-spread abuse of hospitals is a fact too well known to need comment. For a long number of years the public has become aware that funds given for this form of charity have been constantly spent on patients totally unsuitable for charitable relief in any form, and that patients who most need medical relief fail to benefit because their home circumstances are such that it is impossible for them to carry out the doctors' recommendations (Hospital Almoners Council, 1907, p 2).

The extract highlights two issues about which the Council was concerned, and which will be of continuing significance for this unit. On the one hand, there is concern about the 'home circumstances' of the patients, which may affect their ability to benefit from medical assistance. On the other hand, there is a concern about the 'abuse' of charity by 'unsuitable' patients.

These concerns recur across a range of state and voluntary agencies in the latter part of the nineteenth century, in the work of probation officers, health visitors (remember Unit 11?), rent collectors in special housing projects for the poor, and among those who administered the Poor Law. These 'gatekeeping' activities tended to combine providing assistance to those 'in need' with the exercise of 'control' to ensure that such assistance was not abused by 'unsuitable' people.
This concern with the control of 'abuse' of charity, and the interest in home circumstances in the work of the medical almoners, echo the major concerns of one organization which played a leading role in the development of social work, the Charity Organization Society (COS). Where the medical almoners developed on the margins of the hospital, the COS developed alongside a different institution, the workhouses of the Poor Law. In the nineteenth century the Poor Law was the one state system intended to 'relieve' poverty, whether it was caused by illness, old age or unemployment. The Poor Law offered two kinds of 'relief' - 'indoor' and 'outdoor'. Outdoor relief was provided to the poor who continued to live in their own homes. Indoor relief required the poor to enter the workhouse, and obliged them to perform labour to 'earn' their relief. The workhouse was established as a sort of test of 'genuine need' to prevent the 'work-shy' from gaining economic support from the state.

By the middle of the nineteenth century this system of state relief was supplemented by a complex array of private charities - philanthropy - which provided assistance to the poor. Such charities were part of a growing pattern of middle-class concern, and fear, about the state of the urban working class. Their 'conditions' were investigated by Royal Commissions, by social scientists, by 'missionaries' who went out to work, not in 'darkest Africa', but in 'darkest England', and not least by journalists and writers who reported to a fascinated and alarmed middle-class reading public on what happened in the 'unrespectable' areas of their towns and cities. Such new knowledge went hand in hand with both social concern and social fear. Young and Ashton, in their historical study of social work, emphasized the role which religious thought and sentiment played in forming the social concern which gave rise to charity.

Business morality and religious morality overlapped. Many of the commercial and manufacturing classes, laissez-faire in their economics, were evangelical Christians. Philanthropy was the bridge in many cases between their business dealings and their Christian conscience. They were assured by economic and political thinkers that the pursuit of private profit would lead to the greatest good of the greatest number, but should the profits be devoted to charitable purposes any lingering qualms about sharp business deals would be removed. They genuinely felt their duty of private benevolence, what mattered was not how wealth was acquired, but how it was spent (Young and Ashton, 1956, pp 29 - 30).
Alongside, and intertwined with such religiously motivated social concern, went another sentiment – that of social fear about the poor. As we saw in the quotation from Geoffrey Pearson, this fear about the gulf between the classes was wide-ranging in its concerns: health, crime, morality and politics. In the 1860s, when economic recession, high levels of unemployment and poverty combined with social unrest in the cities, this concern focused on the effects of the wide availability of charitable relief for the poor. The unco-ordinated spread of charity, it was argued, was leading to the demoralization of the poor. Gareth Stedman Jones has summarized the main themes of this concern about ‘demoralization’ as follows:
'Clever paupers' took advantage of the lack of coordination between charities and the Poor Law by moving swiftly and skillfully from one charity to another, from one clergyman to the next, from the refuge to the stoneyard and then back to the soup-kitchen. By such means, they were able to secure more by the 'wages of mendicity' than by the 'wages of labour', and when these methods failed, not and depredation were sufficient to create new sources of relief. The 'honest poor' noted the success of the 'clever paupers' and began to follow their example. Thus the East End turned from thrift and self-help to idleness and dissipation. For ten winters of the 1860s, this process of 'demoralization' was a product of the separation of classes, but not simply through the medium of deterioration of local administration. At the most fundamental level, the separation of classes had led to a breakdown of social relationships and traditional methods of social control (Stedman Jones, 1971, p 251)

Two solutions were proposed to this problem of demoralization and the 'wages of mendicity' (begging). First it was argued that the administration of relief through the Poor Law needed to be tightened up. In particular, it was suggested that outdoor relief should be reduced, if not abolished altogether, thus requiring the poor to face the 'deterrent effect' of the workhouse test, and, in the process, prove themselves to be in 'real' need. Second, the workings of the private charity systems needed to be rationalized, bringing about a closer connection with the state system of the Poor Law, and finding ways of coping with the 'clever pauper' to prevent abuse of the system and the ensuing corruption and demoralization of the 'honest poor'.

Source: Punch, 16 July 1914

It is the second of these strategies that is of interest to us here, since it forms the springboard to the emergence of social work. But before looking at how this development took place, we must consider one more aspect of this crisis in poor relief. The critics of 'charitable relief' were concerned not only about its disorganized character, but at the way in which its operation reflected, rather than overcame, the 'gulf between the classes'. Charity was anonymous, given by philanthropists who never came into contact with those who received its benefits. As such, charity contained no personal relationship between the giver and the recipient, and thus the
recipient had no reason to make any distinction between the ‘gift’ of charity and the assistance that could be claimed from the Poor Law. Charity therefore could not be marked out as a special relationship between rich and poor. As Samuel Barnett argued in 1875:

If, instead of official giving, we can substitute the charity of individuals given in adequate amounts, and to those who are proved to be in need, but given by individuals to individuals, those who give and those who receive will be better for the meeting human sympathy will add power to the gift, and break down the barrier which makes each class say, ‘I am, and none else beside me’ (Barnett, quoted in Stedman Jones, 1971, p 253)

The Charity Organization Society was founded in London in 1869 with the aim of overcoming this series of problems about the relationship between the Poor Law, charitable relief and the poor

The aims of the Society are set out below. Make a note of any ways in which you can think they express the concerns:
(a) to provide assistance, and
(b) to control the ‘unsuitable’

**OBJECTS.**

The objects of the Society for Organising Charitable Relief and repressing Mendicity may be stated in the following terms:

I.—To bring into harmonious co-operation with each other and with the Poor-law authorities the various charitable agencies and individuals in the district, and thus effectually to check the evils of “overlapping” relief caused by simultaneous but independent action.

II.—To investigate thoroughly the cases of all applicants for charitable relief, whether they are referred to the offices for inquiry and report, or whether they apply of their own accord.

III.—To place gratuitously at the disposal of all charitable agencies and private persons the investigating machinery of the Committees of the Society, and to send, to persons having a legitimate interest in cases, full reports of the result of the investigations made.

IV.—To obtain from the proper charities, or from charitable individuals, suitable and adequate relief for deserving cases.

V.—To assist from its own funds, and as far as possible in the form of loans, all suitable cases for which adequate assistance cannot be obtained from other sources.

VI.—To repress mendicity by the above means, by the gratuitous distribution of Investigating Tickets, and by the prosecution of Impostors.

VII.—To afford to the public at large information regarding the objects and mode of working of existing charities.

VIII.—To promote as far as possible the general welfare of the poor by means of social and sanitary reforms, and by the inculcation of habits of providence and self-dependence.

Source: Charity Organization Society, 1882

3.1 The deserving and undeserving poor

Before looking at the Charity Organization Society’s work, we must stop for a moment and examine one of the key themes in this nineteenth-century discussion of poverty and poor relief – the distinction between those of the poor who were ‘in real need’ and the ‘clever pauper’. This is a recurrent issue in the arguments of the time about how to deal with the poor, but it is also a theme which, with varying labels, has continued to appear in the discussions of social policy and welfare provision in Britain right up to the present day. The ‘clever pauper’ is the forerunner of the ‘shiftless, work-shy, sponging scrounger’ of more recent discussions about poverty and social welfare.
You may remember that in Section 6 of Unit 11 Roger Sapsford and Pamela Abbott discussed the origins of the ‘discourse’ about the family and health which emerged in the late nineteenth century, and which continues to shape our ideas about the family and social intervention. The same period is also a formative one for our ideas about poverty and the provision of social welfare. A new ‘discourse’, or ideology, is created here, too As we shall see, it is one which has strong overlaps with the discourse about the family

CHARITY ORGANISATION SOCIETY.

ST. JAMES’S AND SOHO COMMITTEE.

OFFICE—29 GREAT PULTENEY STREET, W.

CHAIRMAN—H. LONGLEY.

TREASURER—R. BUSHBY PYM. ASSISTANT—M. W. MOGRIDGE.

OFFICE HOURS—11 A.M. TO 1 P.M. DAILY

It is often supposed that the Charity Organisation Society is mainly concerned with repressing mendicity and exposing impostors. This mistake arises from the fact that the cases which come most widely into the view of the public are of this nature; and from them a general, but mistaken, opinion is not unnaturally drawn. The truth is, however, that the detection of impostors is by no means the chief part of the work of the Society. The Society aims at obtaining relief for distress in the best possible way. It finds out how a distressed person may be best relieved. It inquires into his or her history, because without such inquiry it is impossible to know how assistance should be given. If, in the course of this inquiry, it appears that the distress is not real, or that the character of the applicant is bad, these facts are made known to those who have a right to know them. But if the distress be genuine, neither trouble nor expense is spared in the endeavour to give the most thorough and practical help that the case admits of.

Again, it is often said that ‘while the Committee is inquiring the applicant is starving.’ The St. James’s Committee asks anyone who shares this opinion to come to their office and see their work. No applicant is allowed to starve while the case is being investigated. When the applicant is destitute, and there seems to be any reasonable chance of doing permanent good, temporary assistance is given; and the applicant is sent to a refuge or otherwise supported until full inquiry has enabled the Committee to decide on the proper course. The following are examples of the work of this Committee.

A. B. was a young Greek woman, with one child, deserted by her English husband. She was kindly maintained for some time in the House of Charity, Greek Street; and was afterwards placed by the Committee in a highly respectable coffee-house, where she was maintained for many weeks. It was difficult to find her employment as she spoke scarcely any English, but this was at last done, and her child placed in a home until she should be able to provide for it herself.

C. D., a young widow, left destitute with two children was also maintained for some time until permanent provision could be made for her. By the advice of some medical gentlemen interested in the case she was sent to a Hospital to be trained as a midwife. The children were boarded out, and the Hospital fees and expenses paid by the Committee.

E. F. is a man dying of consumption. His wife, a highly respectable woman, is obliged to give her whole time to attending upon him, and their means are exhausted. They have been supported recently by the Committee and by donations from the Society for the Relief of Distress, with assistance from the local clergy. If the man lives much longer the entire burden will fall upon the Committee.

This concern to distinguish between ‘real need’ and ‘abuse’ is one which rested on a particular view of human nature and the causes of poverty. The COS accepted the dominant view of economics in Britain at the time — that of ‘laissez-faire’ or ‘free market’ economics — which saw the economy as working perfectly to co-ordinate the wishes of individuals (to buy or sell goods, or to buy or sell labour) as long as it was free of externally introduced ‘imperfections’ (such as state interference or collective action by the sellers of labour through trade unions). In such a view of the economy,
'structural' or social causes of unemployment (and thus poverty) were unimaginable. The economy itself could not be at fault. Poverty could only come about for one of two reasons. First, the person could be a victim of 'natural disasters' beyond his or her control. (One favourite COS example was of a widow whose husband had died, thus depriving her of access to a wage – see the leaflet reproduced on p 19. What does this say about their view of the sexual divisions of labour within the family?) Alternatively, the person was unemployed because of their own moral failing; they did not wish to work. This second reason stressed the 'character' of the individual, pointing to moral weakness as the cause of unemployment and poverty.

There can be no doubt that the poverty of the working classes of England is due, not to their circumstances (which are more favourable than those of any other working population in Europe), but to their own improvident habits and thriftlessness. If they are ever to be more prosperous, it must be through self-denial, temperance and forethought. (Charity Organization Society, 1881, p 50)

The distinction between those 'in real need' and the 'clever pauper' is a moral one, captured in the other phrases used at the time to mark this division – the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. The 'deserving poor' were those who, through no fault of their own, found themselves in 'distress' and, equally importantly, showed a willingness to display those desirable moral virtues in order to 'stand on their own two feet' again. thrift, sobriety, self-discipline, forethought, and above all 'self-help' were the moral qualities which supposedly distinguished the 'deserving poor'. By contrast, the 'undeserving poor' were to be identified by the total absence of these redeeming qualities, and their immorality brought its proper reward – poverty and hardship. 'Clever paupers' were those who took advantage of charity to avoid these 'just deserts'. If they were to be relieved, it should only be under the most rigorous, constraining and fierce conditions in the workhouse.

The COS aimed to embody this distinction in its own work. Its ambition was to investigate systematically the conditions and character of those applying for assistance, and from this careful investigation to determine whether the applicant was 'deserving' or 'undeserving'. The Society would only administer aid to the former, and would pass on the undeserving to the Poor Law Guardians. The Society itself set out its intentions clearly in its notice to applicants for relief.

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Make a note of how the following notice (COS Form No. 28) distinguishes between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving'.
Charity Organization Society: notice to persons applying for assistance

1 The Society desires to help those persons who are doing all they can to help themselves, and to whom temporary assistance is likely to prove a lasting benefit.

2 No assistance should be looked for without full information being given in order that the Committee may be able to judge:
   (a) Whether the applicant ought to be helped by charity.
   (b) What is the best way of helping them...

3 Persons wishing to be assisted by loans must find satisfactory security, such as that of respectable householders... Loans must be paid back by regular instalments.

4 Persons who have thrown themselves out of employment through their own fault ought not to count on being helped by charity.

5 Persons of drunken, immoral or idle habits can not expect to be assisted unless they can satisfy the Committee that they are really trying to reform.

6 The Society does not, unless under exceptional circumstances, give or obtain help for the payment of back rent or funeral expenses. But when help of this sort is asked for, there may be other and better ways of assisting.

7 Assistance will not, as a rule, be given in addition to a Parish allowance.

By Order,
COS Committee

The notice contains a variety of points which are intended to mark the difference between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ between those who ‘are doing all they can to help themselves’ and can find ‘satisfactory security for loans’, and those who ‘have thrown themselves out of employment’ or who are of ‘drunken, immoral or idle habits’. But it is also important to note that the Society also insists that ‘full information’ must be given. The collection and use of such information was central to the Society’s method of operation.

3.2 The practice of casework

The central thread of the Society’s work – and its main practical legacy to the subsequent development of social work – was the practice of casework. Casework combined three things which the Society viewed as essential in the rational administration of charity. First, it was the means of conducting a detailed investigation of the applicant’s conditions and character, on which a future plan of action could be decided. Second, if the case was to be proceeded with, it was the means of connecting the ‘gift’ of charity to a personal relationship which would ensure that the recipient was morally ‘improved’ as well as materially helped by the charity. Third, such personal contact through casework would play its part in the wider process of bridging the social ‘gulf’ which separated the classes – in particular, ensuring that the recipient of charity was exposed to the ‘improving’ influence and example of one of their social betters. The COS required its volunteers...
COS casework proceeded according to a systematic plan. Upon receipt of an application for assistance, a caseworker would be appointed to investigate the case. The investigation had two main dimensions: the home visit, and the wider enquiry into the applicant's character by means of taking up references and asking questions of friends, relatives, landlords, previous employers, and local clergy. The home visit had two combined purposes. On the one hand, it centred on the caseworker's interview of the applicant, through which the worker could assess both the conditions and character of the applicant. On the other hand, it provided the caseworker with an opportunity to survey the domestic circumstances of the applicant, which could themselves provide important clues as to moral character. (The home visit) enables them to form a much better judgement of the case as a whole, for the conditions and surroundings of the home are among some of the best indications of character. (Toynbee, 1893) From the detailed written report provided by the caseworker (the Society provided carefully structured report forms detailing the information required), a committee at the district office would form a judgement on whether to proceed with the case, and then, where appropriate, form a plan of action to be implemented by the caseworker.

So far we have looked at the origins of the COS, its view of poverty and the methods it used. By now, I hope you have developed a fairly clear picture of how the Society viewed the poor. I'd like you now to stop for a moment and think about how the poor might have viewed the Society. Jot down what you think, and compare it with what follows.

The recipients of the Society's investigations were sometimes less than grateful for the attention given to them, in particular resenting the detailed enquiries which the Society made about them among neighbours, employers and others. There was also resentment about the home visit, and the feeling of having the caseworker 'sit in judgement' on their domestic standards and character. As the following quotations from case records indicate, the recipients were sometimes less than pleased about the Society's methods.

Later the applicant wrote objecting to the COS approaching his landlord. 'With the idea, as it seemed to me, of making enquiries of him. As I certainly wish to keep a roof over my head, and am not in the habit of confiding in a man of his position, nor desirous of bandying words, I felt that enquiries had gone far enough, especially as the letter to my father's friend (which had been forwarded on to the COS) was a private one and which I think the recipient should have treated in that light.' He also wanted to know if any communication had been made with his employer about him 'as it will do me incalculable injury, in fact I shall have to throw up the appointment I have obtained if it has been done.' The Secretary replied 'as you decline to allow us to make any further enquiry, we must consider your application to be withdrawn.'

Wilfred, a son who lives with her, hides from the COS Agent. During the subsequent visit the old lady says that 'the original application was a mistake on the part of the son-in-law who thought the COS would provide a pension without applying to the family at all. Her family and son with whom she lives did not like the idea of being interfered with.' (COS case records, quoted in Fido, 1977, pp 220 – 1, 224 – 5)

As we shall see later in this block, these issues of confidentiality, feelings of intrusion and 'being interfered with', as well as the mismatch of expectations about what 'assistance' might involve, have accompanied the development of casework into social work. As well as individual objections to COS methods, organizations representing working-class interests also expressed hostility to the COS approach.
Here is an extract from the London Trades Council's criticism of the Society's involvement in assisting servicemen's wives and dependants during the First World War:

The Council emphatically protests against the insulting and inquisitorial questions and suggestions that the wives and dependants of our soldiers and sailors are subjected to on the matter of grants and separation allowances by the 'Paul Prys' of the COS and similar bodies. It urges upon the government the desirability of entrusting all such enquiries as are necessary to the officers of the Old Age Pensions committee, who should be prohibited from making insulting and callous suggestions to those who have already made the most supreme sacrifice of their lives in the interests of their country and who are being asked to make still further sacrifices by persons who have never known what it is to go short of a meal, or to forgo a single luxury they considered necessary, during the whole of their useless lives (London Trades Council, 1914).

Look back and compare these comments with your own suggestions. Did you cover these issues? We must also note that suspicion was not the exclusive province of the recipients. The COS were themselves highly suspicious both of applicants for relief (remember their aim to 'repress mendacity and imposture'), and of the working class in general.

Some social workers felt there was a problem when information was sought from people of the same social class as the applicant, for example, from a foreman, 'who often is of no better class than the applicant himself, there is the danger of his being liable to underestimate the man's wages and also let his mates know that he is applying for charity.' Informants in a working-class neighbourhood might be unreliable. One suggestion was that a list of reliable people in various streets should be kept. No doubt some COS visitors saw the solidarity of working-class neighbourhoods as a possible obstacle to enquiries (Fido, 1977, p 219).

These tensions around the COS approach to poor relief were not confined to the internal problems of 'doing casework'. They also surfaced in more systematic and public forms in the political arguments that emerged during the late nineteenth century about unemployment, poverty and social welfare. We shall be considering these arguments — and the place of the COS within them — in Section 4, but now we want to look at how the theory and practice of casework embodied certain sets of social relationships which might explain how these tensions came about.

### 3.3 Class, gender and casework

As we have seen, casework had a very clearly defined place within the class relationships of late nineteenth-century Britain. It emerged out of the mixture of social concern and social fear about the conditions (and future behaviour) of the working class. And casework, in the COS style, set itself the self-conscious task of 'harmonizing' these class relationships through using the combination of charity and personal influence to bridge the 'gulf'. Gareth Stedman Jones has argued that the central class grouping involved in the work of the COS was the elite professional class, its most active members being 'drawn from the Church of England, law, medicine, the army and the navy, and the civil service' (1971, p 268). He suggests that this group saw itself as a 'new urban gentry', aiming to fill the same role as the old 'gentry' had done in rural society, combining social and moral leadership with a sense of obligation and service to their social 'inferiors'. You may remember that at the beginning of this unit I suggested that the transition from a rural society to an urban and industrial society had led to the breakdown of old social relationships and means of maintaining social order. Stedman Jones suggests that the COS represented an attempt to adapt some of the old means of maintaining social order to the new urban conditions — to revive the 'gentry' traditions of concern and service as a way of re-integrating class relationships which threatened to split apart and become socially, morally and politically dangerous.
Stedman Jones extends this analysis to talk about the relationship between the class position of these professionals and the class ideology which shaped the way they approached the ‘problem of the poor’. Read the following extract carefully and note the connections he makes between the class position and experience of the ‘new gentry’ and their ideas about social intervention (the definition of a social problem and the proposed solution).

[As members of the liberal professions, their new found prestige rested not upon their wealth or birth, but upon education and the possession of appropriate professional credentials even when they possessed independent means, they stressed primarily the value of a professional vocation. This helps to explain the emphasis of the COS on the indispensable value of expertise and its thesis that charity was a science with its own professional procedures which could not be safely practised except by those in possession of the requisite skills. But at the same time, this new urban gentry was perhaps least equipped by experience to comprehend the behaviour of the poor. As a social group they had no natural economic contact with the working class, except in the form of the servants they kept in their households, and the beggars who imported them in the streets. Moreover, as a group who had obtained positions of eminent respectability, not by accident of birth, but through the practice of austere virtues and long years of unremitting hard work, they were prone to view the poor, not with the undemanding paternalism of the established rich, but with a headstrong severity born of strong avarice to all those who stood condemned of fecklessness, idleness and lack of resilience. With this background, the equation between virtue and vice, success and failure was relatively simple to make (Stedman Jones, 1971, pp 269 – 70).]

What we have so far is a view of the COS and casework being shaped primarily by class forces in two ways. First, the ‘problem of the poor’ and the response to it can be understood in terms of the fears and concerns about the working class in the context of a turbulent urban and industrial society. Second, in a more localized way, we can see how one of the responses to this ‘problem’ – the casework strategy of the COS – was shaped and influenced by the class position and experiences of the professional class who were most actively involved. But this view of the origins of social work which starts from class relations leaves something out of account – and something which, from another point of view, can be seen as equally significant for the future development of social work. That ‘something’ is the issue of gender and the family. Most of the volunteer workers for the COS (and for other similar agencies concerned with the health and welfare of the poor) were women, and the COS laid great emphasis on the role of the family in combating poverty. As Charles Loch, the COS President, put it ‘We take it that the family is the civic unit. A sweet and wholesome family life is the first condition of good citizenship’ (1890, p 10).

The involvement of women in charitable and welfare work such as the COS was a striking feature of the late nineteenth century. Such work provided middle-class women with one of the few legitimate ways of being outside the home. The ‘family ideology’ of women’s domesticity was at its peak in Victorian Britain, especially among the middle classes, and such women were subject to intensive pressures to remain at home and ensure that the house provided the ideal ‘haven’ to which men could retreat from their efforts in the outside world of business, commerce or politics. These pressures were particularly severe for single women, with no role as wife or mother to fulfil. From the mid-century onwards, increasing numbers turned towards involvement in social issues as a way of establishing a role for themselves. Even this sort of activity was not free from the pressures to conform to ideas of women’s proper role, with expectations that they should confine themselves to those issues which were appropriate to ‘womannly’ concerns (for example, the establishment of organizations for befriending young single women working in the cities). Such pressures were by no means wholly successful, as women reformers and volunteer workers engaged themselves in causes and issues which were seen as distinctively ‘unwomanly’ – as in the case of the campaign led by Josephine Butler for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts because of their repressive effect on women’s rights (the Acts required the registration of women ‘suspected’ of being prostitutes).]
However, in other areas of welfare and charity, the growing involvement of middle-class women gave rise to a peculiar paradox. As Elizabeth Wilson has described it:

"Work had to be found for the army of surplus middle class spinsters and to them fell the task of teaching their impoverished married sisters how to be better wives and mothers. So grew up a paradoxical situation whereby middle-class women with no direct experience of marriage and motherhood themselves took on the social task of teaching marriage and motherhood to working-class women who were widely believed to be ignorant and lacking when it came to their domestic tasks. (1977, pp. 43-4)"

These different elements came together in the COS practice of casework. As we have seen, the home visit and the evaluation of the moral and maternal character of the home played a significant part in the assessment of applicants. Equally important was the role which the family was expected to play in overcoming the problems of poverty. Relatives were expected to contribute to the family’s attempts to escape poverty, and caseworkers were expected to give advice and guidance on how best to manage the family budget. Such advice would, of course, usually be directed to the wife, since she would be expected to manage the household economy. These concerns are reflected in Octavia Hill’s strictures to a meeting of COS district visitors about the importance of not thinking of the poor as a ‘race apart’:

"Depend upon it, if we thought of the poor primarily as husbands, wives, sons and daughters, members of households, as we are ourselves, instead of contemplating them as a different class, we should recognize better how the house training and high ideal of home duty was our best preparation for work among them. (1977, p. 25, quoted in Woodtofte, 1962, p. 49)"

Thus, view of the centrality of the family for the work of the COS is further reinforced in Hill’s observations on the sort of person who would make a suitable caseworker:

"In my experience, those who are deeply imbued with the spirit of family life are those who best help the poor, in this spirit they meet on the great human ground, older than the theories of equality, safer than our imaginations of fresh arrangements for the world, and fitter to inspire the simplest and noblest sense of duty. I will say that the deep honour for home life is essential to the best kind of work for the poor now. (1993, pp. 37-8)"

Stop for a moment and think about why these ideas of the family should play such an important role in the work of the COS. You might like to think back to what you learned from Block 2 about the ideology of the family.

Make a note and then compare it with my suggestions below.

The first significant aspect is the way that the family is ‘naturalized’ – identified as the ‘great human ground’ – such that it stands outside of society. As such, it can be contrasted with the more ephemeral and less significant matters of society, such as ‘theories of equality’ or ‘imaginations of fresh arrangements’. The family is identified as a common ground on which people can come together in spite of social differences, such as those of class.

The first quotation suggests that viewing individuals as members of families (as mothers, daughters, etc.) can allow the merely ‘social’ differences of class to be transcended. Charitable work among the poor should focus on the family, and should be carried out by those with ‘house training and a high ideal of duty’. It is worth thinking back to the discussion of the ‘family discourse’ in Unit 11. The family is presented here as both a target of social intervention and as a channel or medium through which intervention can be carried out. Contained in this ‘family discourse’ is
a significant assumption that the family is a universal institution, and that its role and internal arrangements will be the same across classes. The 'norm' (the expressed or assumed pattern) is one that is shaped by the experience of the middle-class household. Consequently, the patterns discovered by visitors in some working-class households (especially its 'unrespectable' sections), such as working mothers, poor 'budgeting', 'insanitary' domestic habits, and high levels of unsupervised autonomy for children, were likely to be viewed as problems needing 'improvement', rather than as adaptations to different social and economic circumstances.

Equally significant is the implication of who is best fitted for such work. In Victorian Britain those 'naturally' imbued with 'the spirit of family life' were women – and from this point of view woman could naturally speak to woman about those things which they intrinsically had in common. The middle-class woman caseworker could thus talk to her impoverished sister on their common ground without class coming between them.

At this point, class and gender relations coalesce. Gender differences working through this 'naturalizing' ideology of the family are aligned with the class relationships at play in this attempt to 'improve' the poor and remove the necessity of 'imaginings of fresh arrangements of society'.

### 3.4 Intervening in the family

The ability of social workers and other groups (such as health visitors) to intervene in the family in such ways raises important issues about the place of the family in Victorian Britain. You may remember that in Block 1 the question was raised about the boundary between 'public' and 'private' worlds. In the nineteenth century the family was viewed as a private sphere, in which parental authority – and in particular the authority of the father – reigned supreme, and in which no outside interference was tolerated. This ideology of the family as a private realm was a powerful one, particularly, though not exclusively, in middle-class Britain. So how was it possible that by the end of the century the state and other 'reformers' had acquired the power to intervene in this private sphere?

One partial answer draws on what I have just said about the class relations in which social work was enmeshed. Concern about a variety of social problems in the second half of the nineteenth century focused on the 'failure' of the working-class family. Poverty, juvenile delinquency, immorality, ill-health and other problems were diagnosed as being a consequence of the failure of working-class families to function 'properly' (i.e. in the same way as middle-class families). These failures (supposedly the results of parental ignorance, immorality or improvidence) provided a justification for the state or other reformers to step in. In this way, it was argued, at least the young could be 'rescued' from the follies of their parents. But, by itself, such an argument is not enough, for even when confronted by such justifications, many members of the middle class were unwilling to concede the right of the state to interfere with parental authority. Speaking of attempts to introduce legislation to decrease infant mortality, Whately Cooks Taylor addressed the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in 1894:

> I would far rather see an even higher rate of infant mortality prevailing than has ever yet been proved against the factory districts or elsewhere than intrude one iota further on the sanctity of the domestic hearth and the decent seclusion of family life (quoted in Hewitt, 1958, p. 160).

In spite of such entrenched opposition, the treatment of children became an extensively publicized issue during the 1880s, not least thanks to the efforts of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. The Society did much work in creating concern about physical cruelty to and the maltreatment of children, and was responsible for ensuring the passage of an Act through Parliament in 1889.
The Act provided powers for children to be removed from their parents if cruelty or neglect was proved. The campaign for legislation centred on examples of physical maltreatment, but the Act also included provisions concerning the employment of children, children begging in the streets, and school non-attendance. While 'child abuse' might take place in all the social classes, the Act's provisions concerning employment, education and begging were clearly directed at controlling the 'failures' of the working-class family. There, and not in the private sphere of the middle-class family, children's earnings were likely to be a significant factor in avoiding family poverty.

As we shall see in later units, the issues which the NSPCC campaign and the subsequent legislation raised about the privacy of the family, parents' authority and children's rights, especially in respect of neglect and abuse, have continued to play a central role in the development of social work. Children were one of the focal points through which the state's power to intervene in the private world of the family was extended. Social work's particular concerns with poverty and the children of 'failing' working-class families meant that it stood at the intersection of these complex relations of class, gender and power.

Source: Punch.
19 February 1908

This conjunction of social work with issues of class, gender and the family is a central issue for this unit, and you will find it reappearing in other units in this block. It will be helpful if you write a summary of the main points that have been made here.
We have seen that the work of the COS, and its use of casework as a response to the problem of poverty, reflected some of the ‘ruling ideas’ of the mid-nineteenth century — in particular, the individualistic focus of laissez-faire economics, a ‘moral’ view of the relationship between personal character and poverty, and a middle-class perception of the family. Over the last twenty years of the nineteenth century these ideas — and the COS theory and practice of casework based on them — came under increasing challenge from other views of social problems and other strategies for responding to them. The main causes of this change were social and political, especially the growing organization of the British working class. The ‘new unionism’ of the late nineteenth century extended the practice of trade unionism to semi-skilled and unskilled workers from its origins among craft workers. At the same time there were increasing efforts to form political parties to represent the interests of labour, in a political system seen to be dominated by the interests of capital and the middle classes ‘Paternalism’ — trusting one’s interests to be ‘looked after’ by one’s social betters — was less and less tolerated.

These organizations — and the threat to established economic and political power which they represented (a new form of ‘social fear’) — had a decisive impact on how the social problems of health, unemployment, old age and poverty were seen and responded to. The organized working class began to demand greater security from the destructive effects of a capitalist economy. These played a significant part in the creation of the first elements of a system of state welfare, which began to replace the mix of the Poor Law and charity in the early years of the twentieth century. Between 1906 and 1914, Liberal governments introduced legislation establishing limited forms of health insurance, unemployment insurance, old age pensions, school meals and medical inspections.

Although working-class organization and pressure contributed to the creation of these measures, they were also the product of emerging divisions within the social classes concerning social problems and their solution. Large sections of ‘informed opinion’ (the capitalist and middle classes in the late nineteenth century) were coming to view some form of state intervention — sometimes called ‘collectivism’ — to distinguish it from the ‘individualism’ of laissez-faire views — as a necessity. There were different reasons for this. Some viewed it as a necessary price to be paid to keep economic and political instability — what Joseph Chamberlain once called ‘the ransom which property must pay for its continued survival’. Others saw it as a means of improving the health and fitness of the British race. Medical inspections during the recruitment of soldiers for the Boer War had revealed alarmingly low standards of health, creating fears about the fitness of ‘British stock’ to compete effectively in the imperial conflicts of the early twentieth century. As the Liberal MP T. J. MacNamara put it when arguing for school meals, baths and transport for children:

All this sounds terribly like rank Socialism. I’m afraid it is, but I am not in the least dismayed. Because I know it is also first-rate Imperialism. Because I know that Empire cannot be built on rooky and flat-chested citizens. And because I know that it is not out of the knotted gun or the smoothbore rifle, but out of the mouths of babes and sucklings that the strength is ordained which shall still the Enemy (1905, p 248)

Finally, greater state action was urged by groups such as the Fabians and the ‘New Liberals’, who saw the state as the agency through which the ‘gulf’ between the classes could be overcome, by creating citizens with equal rights and obligations. Such groups saw welfare provision as one central way of creating social and political equality, and thus minimizing the effects of economic inequality between the classes.

The COS and its allies were hostile to the extension of the state’s role in these ways, suggesting that it would reproduce the sort of ‘demoralization’ that they had struggled against. Like unorganized charity, state benefits would produce in the poor the expectation that they would be looked after. Consequently they would cease being self-reliant. Similarly, they argued, the state could not hope to provide the sort
of detailed and personal investigation and support that the COS's casework offered.
In the remainder of this section, we are going to look in detail at some of the
arguments for and against the COS approach to poverty. In the first extract, C S
Loch restates a defence of charity in the face of the increase in what he called 'state
philanthropy' after 1906.

Source: Punch, 28 April 1909
State philanthropy brings large numbers of the population to its ministrations. The poor, as Mr MacKay used to say, are not usually importunate or aggressive in the case of charitable relief. Their expectations are limited. But where there is a State fund, it is to them as the income of many multi-millionaires, and there is not the same reluctance to turn it to account. A very large number of applicants necessitates alike wide supervision and a close attention to an immense amount of detail. This again necessitates a large staff and a large extension of methods of routine, and the outcome is likely to be a large and increasing bureaucracy. Further, as this tendency prevails, the individual with his need of special help and personal attention, is apt to become one in a queue of claimants, to get a turn of help and then pass quickly out of sight. Thus, the individual in distress and his family may find less help and consolation, while at the same time the offers which are made to them in the new regime of State intervention may fail to meet their real want.

What, then, is our enterprise? If it is possible, to humanise the action of the State, to keep alive, in spite of it, the initiative of the people, their spontaneity of character, and their independence. It would hand a good tradition on, for tradition lives in the safest place, the hearts and wills of good people. It would prevent paupersism, the unsettlement, listlessness and discontent of the pauper in mind, which always creeps in as responsibility is diminished and independence decreases. It would prevent institutions from crushing individuality (Loch, 1923).

I think there are three main points here:

1. The mere existence of a 'state fund' will encourage increasing numbers of people to make more demands on it.
2. State action will produce a large bureaucracy, which will be dehumanizing and lose sight of individual needs and circumstances.
3. State provision would tend to increase, not reduce, 'paupersism', by encouraging people to become dependent on state benefits rather than taking responsibility for themselves.

I now want you to contrast Loch’s arguments with one of the critics of the COS approach to poverty. As I have suggested, the political struggles in this period meant that the laissez-faire principles of the COS were under attack from many directions (see Clarke, Cochrane and Smart, 1967).

The following extract is taken from an article by J. A. Hobson, in which he reviews one of the COS publications setting out their 'philosophy of charity organisation' Hobson was one of the leading 'New Liberals', and was also closely associated with the Fabians. An economist, he wrote extensively on economic matters, social problems and social reform. As before I want you to read the extract carefully and note down what you think are Hobson’s main criticisms of the COS.
Professing to be devoted lovers of ‘facts’, and to be the exclusive possessors of the facts relevant to the study of poverty, they confine themselves wholly to facts in their bearing on individual cases, ignoring those facts which consist in the relation of individual to individual, or, in other words, ‘social’ facts. All larger social and economic facts are consistently excluded from this view. Thus they enable themselves to affirm the individual responsibility of the family as a ‘fact’, in face of all the teaching of social science, which proves that in all the ordinary economic issues of life, upon which the stability and solidarity of family life depends — e.g., the price of labour, the regularity of employment, the effectiveness of saving — the independence of the family is ever less and less. Such ‘facts’ do not come within the ken of the Charity Organisation Society.

The theory of the Charity Organisation is that they are able to perform a twofold work: (1) To find all relevant facts, (2) To stimulate and raise the individual moral character. In reality they can do neither. The kind of person satisfied with the narrow illogical position of the Charity Organisation Society has educated in himself a view of human nature which is a fatal barrier to the attainment of his ends. The highly cultivated lady or gentleman of the Charity Organisation Society, with keen suspicions and some detective skill, whose mind is bussed with knotty points of Poor-law or delicate problems in the science of character, is just the person whom vital facts escape. The essentially ‘inhuman’ and illogical view of poverty and property which marks the theory of the Charity Organisation thinker vitates in a thousand little unseen ways the quality of quick, instinctive, uncalculated sympathy which is somehow necessary to extract facts from the poor. The very voice and mode of speech of some of those who boast their close contact with the ‘facts’ must be insuperable barriers in this work. Before such outward signs of class distinction many essential facts close themselves like clams. A sense of superinity is nearly always discovered and rebutted. I know that many Chartist Oligarchy visitors disown this sense of superinity. Doubtless they do their best to conceal it. But the uneducated classes are preternaturally keen in perceiving it, and it has innumerable opportunities for oozing out. Moreover, it cannot and ought not to be concealed — for it is there. These persons do feel they are superior; if not, what is the power which they affect to use? They are not drunkards, they are not thriftless, they are not given to petty pilfering, or to violent assault upon the person, or to other common vices or defects of the poorer class. Now, if this sense of moral superinity were justified, its existence would be, to some extent, admitted by the poor, and it might act as a moral lever. But, though they haven’t reasoned the matter out, the poor feel and know that they are not fairly matched in opportunity with their ‘friendly visitors’, they feel ’it is all very well’ for these well-dressed, nice-spoken ladies and gentlemen to come down and teach them how to be sober, thrifty, and industrious, they may not feel resentment, but they discount the advice and they discount the moral superinity. In a blind, instinctive way they recognize that the superinity is based on better opportunity — in other words, upon economic monopoly (Hobson, 1896, pp 723–5).

Once again, I think there are three main points here:

1. The ‘narrow’ view of facts held by the COS, which blinded them to the social causes of poverty.

2. The way in which class divisions (and the assumption of ‘moral superinity’) affected the work of the COS.

3. The sensitivity of the poor to the imposition of that moral superinity, because of its basis in a structure of unequal opportunity (‘economic monopoly’).

These two views of casework and poverty are fiercely opposed. Each of them sets out important issues that have recurried during the subsequent development of social work. In different ways you will be coming across them in the rest of this block, so I intend to restate them one more time here. On the one hand, casework was defended as a potentially humanizing influence on state welfare, and as being better equipped to respond to the individual case than state bureaucracies. On the other hand, casework was attacked for taking too narrow a view of the individual and ignoring social conditions, and for the class bias and assumptions of moral superinity that it contained. In the next section of this unit we shall look at how social work developed in the context of a developing welfare state, and at how it responded to criticisms of its ‘moralizing’ qualities.
From the very outset, the COS had been committed to the ‘science’ of charity, and to the development of casework as a systematic method. As such, great stress had been laid not just on the good ‘personal’ qualities which its volunteers and agents needed, but also on the need for them to be trained in the Society’s ways. Loch argued that just as ‘doctors have to be educated methodically, registered and certified, so charity is the work of the social physician. It is to the interests of the community that it should not be entrusted to novices, or to dilettanti, or to quacks’ (Loch, 1906, quoted in Jones, 1979, p 76).

The Society established its own School of Sociology to train its caseworkers and others interested in charitable work with the poor in 1903, and in 1912 it was amalgamated with the London School of Economics – a Fabian-inspired institution whose view of social policy was closer to that expressed by Hobson than to the COS. This amalgamation coincided with the decline of fortunes of the COS view of poverty and its moral zeal. Although the Society continued its work (eventually becoming the Family Welfare Association), the development of social work moved towards a more ‘scientific’ and professional model. In the different forms of social work – in welfare work with poor families, in the work of hospital almoners, and in probation work – certain parallel processes can be identified.

First was the tentative move towards paid workers rather than volunteers. The COS had itself used both paid agents and volunteer visitors, and other societies had also supplemented their supply of volunteer labour with paid workers. Once established, particularly in the probation service administered by the Home Office after 1907, the existence of a body of paid workers gave rise to demands both for career structure and access to proper training. More immediately, it also raised the difficult question of whom to recruit to such positions. While social and moral concern had been the main driving force of volunteers for philanthropic social work, questions were being raised about whether moral zeal was in fact the best quality for working with the poor. Such issues surfaced more forcefully in the arguments about the sort of person to be recruited as probation officers. The initial officers (charged with ‘advising, assisting and befriending’ offenders under their supervision) were recruited from the ranks of police court missionaries, who worked for such organizations as the Church of England Temperance Society. Those who wished to see a ‘professional’ probation service argued that the connection with such ‘denominational’ bodies would get in the way of a properly professional approach to the work.

Temperance was the primary object of this society and the society chooses its instruments in conformity with its ideals. But a (probation officer) of the highest type must possess qualities that a temperance advocate can afford to lack. What wonder, then, that sometimes the police court missionary is well-intentioned but narrow-minded, zealous but inclined to preach. As agents of a denominational society they are tainted with the sectarian brush (Gamon, 1907, pp162 – 3, quoted in Bochel, 1976, p 38).

These views were the first outbreak of an argument that was to run into the interwar years about the recruitment of social workers and probation officers, and which paralleled the development of a more ‘professional’ stance within these occupations. By the First World War both hospital almoners and probation officers had established professional associations committed to improving the standards of work in their respective fields. Both associations gave advice on the sort of person to recruit, and were insistent voices in the demands for proper training, especially the need to have a systematic ‘body of knowledge’ on which social work should be based.

The training for social work that emerged in the early years of the twentieth century combined three main elements: social studies, so that the practitioner should understand the conditions of the poor and the work of the other institutions, such as the Poor Law, involved with the poor, the theory of casework, so that practitioners should understand how to practise, and a degree of practical experience as a trainee caseworker supervised by more experienced colleagues. The training of social workers centred upon the theory and practice of casework which the COS had built up during the late nineteenth century. The method was retained, although the COS’s
moral ideology about the causes of poverty was increasingly discredited as being ‘unscientific’

In this development, one of the continuing arguments about social work was established. Was the ‘method’ of casework neutral? Could it simply be stripped of the old-fashioned and offensive tones of ‘moral superiority’ that had accompanied its development in the work of the COS? Or, as some of the critics of social work have argued, was the method the product of that theory of moral character which the COS had developed? Did its transfer into social work carry with it assumptions about moral character, the centrality of the family, and the role of the social worker as an ‘improving personal influence’? For those who take an optimistic view of social work’s development in this period, the separation of the COS theory of poverty from the method of casework represents a major advance. It marks the ‘coming of age’ of social work as a professional practice, in that it leaves behind the ‘unscientific’ ideology of poverty and personal character, in favour of a neutral and professional approach to casework which was not ‘tainted’ with the tones of class bias and moralism. Critics, by contrast, have suggested that the theory of poverty and the method of casework cannot be so easily separated, and have argued that the casework approach gave a distinct priority to the individual and familial explanation of and solution to poverty. Consequently, social work, while it retained this focus – even as a method – would always be in the position of emphasizing the role of individual facts rather than social facts. I am not suggesting that you should try to answer these questions at the present time, but you should watch out for the reappearance of these arguments during the remainder of this block – and remember where they first began.

5.1 The psychiatric deluge

The decline of the COS theory of moral character left a gap in the theory of social work. The method continued to focus on the individual and the family, but there was no obvious replacement for the COS theory of ‘moral economy’ which explained (a) why the individual and the family should be the main focal point of intervention, and (b) what casework should aim to do by working with the individual and the family. This ‘gap’ in the theory of social work is of particular importance, since it is a space which became filled by the developing science of psychology. In this sense, psychology naturally ‘fitted’ into the theory of social work because, it, too, has its primary focus on the individual and the family. It filled the ‘gap’, not as a moral theory but as a scientific one, offering a systematic body of theory and facts about human life. It promised a scientific understanding of the processes of normality and deviance – about why some people develop wrongly. The most dramatic rise of psychology in social work took place in the USA in the years following the First World War. Kathleen Woodroffe has detailed the attraction of this new ‘science of the mind’ for social workers.

Beginning as a study of the mind diseased, it had early turned its attention to the psychopathology of everyday life, where its exploration of human behaviour and relationships yielded new knowledge and insight which the social worker was quick to seize. A deeper understanding of the forces which control human behaviour, a concern with the motives which prompted a person to seek help, an emphasis upon his past experiences and the seemingly non-essential areas of his life, an appreciation of the factors which might conceivably lie beneath the immediate problem – these were some of the concepts which psychoanalysis bequeathed. And as they were read, learned and inwardly digested, not only did the emphasis of the social worker’s philosophy and practice change, but, in accordance with the new preoccupation with the psychological rather than the economic, she began to see herself in a new light. No longer was she a dispenser of charity, interested in the poverty of the poor, no longer did she divide those who sought her help into the deserving and the undeserving. Now, shorn of her old-time censurness, armed with a vocabulary richly strewn with medical terms, and convinced, apparently, that the poor were no longer with us, she saw herself as a species of social physician, concerned with the problems of psychological maladjustment rather than material need, and versed in the arts of treating such symptoms of a sick society as broken homes and juvenile delinquency (1962, pp 131 – 2)
Psychological theories had an increasing impact on social work training, writing and practice in Britain after 1930. Two groups of social workers in particular formed a ready audience for these ideas. One was psychiatric social workers – those working in the fields of mental illness and handicap, for whom a 'science of the mind' had a clear appeal, and for whom it represented access to a scientific and professional body of knowledge which put them on a more equal footing with the medical professionals who controlled the institutions in which the psychiatric social workers worked. The second was the group of social workers involved in child guidance work. For them, the focus of psychological theory (in particular psychoanalysis) on the formative nature of the first years of life and on the internal dynamics of the family, made such theories seem especially relevant to their concerns. In the 1930s, both of these groups established close connections with their American counterparts and imported much of the theory that was becoming established in American social work.

Source: Punch, 18 January 1950

5.2 Professionalism and politics: the case of the problem family

Although the theories which social workers used changed in this period of professionalization, the main focus of their attention continued to be the poor. The new psychological theories, as we have seen, reinforced the way in which social work viewed the family as the key to social problems. The family was the starting point of 'investigation' and was the target of intervention through casework. But one thing which did change was the explicit class-based discussions of poverty which characterized the approach of the COS. In the interwar years, the language of class – and the moralism associated with it – gave way to a more scientific language, which in place of such terms as the 'labouring and dangerous classes', the 'deserving and undeserving poor' and the 'clever pauper', began instead to
speak in more coolly analytical terms of the 'social problem group' and 'the problem family.' The idea of the 'social problem group' was first coined by the Wood Committee on Mental Deficiency in 1929, which described it as follows:

Let us assume that we could segregate as a separate community all the families in this country containing mental defectives of the primary amentia type. We should find that we had collected amongst them a most interesting social group. It would include, as everyone who has extensive practical experience of social services would readily admit, a much larger proportion of insane persons, epileptics, paupers, criminals (especially recidivists), unemployables, habitual slum dwellers, prostitutes, inmates and other social ineptitudes than would a group not containing mental defectives. The overwhelming majority of the families thus collected will belong to that section of the community whom we propose to term the 'social problem' or 'subnormal' group. This group comprises approximately the lowest ten per cent in the social scale of most communities (quoted in Blacker, 1968, p 217).

I want to draw out a number of points about this analysis. First, it shows how significant the impact of psychology (the 'science of the mind') was becoming in defining social problems. Mental deficiency is now the key idea which underpins the whole list of social problems previously accounted for by the moral degeneracy of the poor in the nineteenth century. Psychology provides a scientific, rather than a moral, language for talking about these social problems, and in the process these problems lose their 'class character.' Where in the nineteenth century 'the Social Problem' referred to the whole of the lower classes, by the interwar years we have multiple social problems, scientifically identified and separated (as a social problem group) from the wider society. 'They' are identifiably different – subnormal, in fact. The family plays a central part in this analysis, too. The Wood Committee, for example, does not talk of separating all the 'individuals' who are mentally deficient, but of the 'families containing mental defectives.' The reasons for this are made explicit in the survey conducted by Caradog-Jones and others of the 'social problem group' in the Liverpool area in 1932. They argued that

in any large area there exists a 'Social Problem Group', the source from which the majority of criminals and paupers, unemployables and defectives of all kinds are recruited. It is reasonable to suppose that the individuals who comprise this group would not be attractive to normally intelligent persons and hence they would tend to intermarry amongst themselves, as indeed they do. This goes far to explain why clusters of them should be found in certain districts, and seeing that so many of the group are clearly below average in physique and mentality, it is no matter for surprise that these districts should, in the course of time, deteriorate into slums. Moreover, where prudence and foresight are wanting, there is no brake to apply to instincts which are purely physical (quoted in Blacker, 1968, p 219).

Let us be clear about what is being argued here. It is the physical and mental deficiencies of the problem group which cause social problems – and which give rise to slums. The problem is worse, because being unattractive to normal people they interbreed, producing new generations of deficient children. Worse still, because they apply 'no brake' to physical instincts, they overbreed. These same issues were discussed by the Departmental Committee on Sterilization in 1932, which considered how to prevent hereditary abnormalities and deficiencies, and recommended that the 'Social Problem Group' needed further investigation. The 'group' did indeed continue to be further investigated, and became a focal point for the activities of both state and voluntary welfare services up to the 1950s. Increasingly, it was talked about as the 'problem family' group as attention became explicitly focused on the children and on the issues of emotional and physical neglect and deprivation. The training of public health inspectors, midwives, child-care workers, hospital almoners and, of course, social workers included guidance about how to identify and respond to the 'problem family'
The quotation below is taken from one such guide to social workers and details the 'typical' problem family. How much do you think has changed in the view of the poor which it represents? As you read it, try to make a note of what you think are the continuities and the changes

Often it is a large family, some of the children being dull or feeble-minded. From their appearance they are strangers to soap and water, toothbrush and comb. The clothing is dirty and torn and the footgear absent or totally inadequate. Often they are verminous and have scabies and impetigo. The mother is frequently sub-standard mentally. The home, if indeed it can be described as such, has usually the most striking characteristics. Nauseating odours assail one's nostrils on entry, and the cause is usually located in some unneatly, faecal-stained mattress in an upstairs room. The children, especially the older ones, often seem perfectly happy and contented, despite such a shocking environment. They will give a description of how a full sized midday meal has been cooked and eaten in the house on the day of the visit when the absence of cooking utensils gives the lie to their assertions. One can only conclude that such children have never known restful sleep, that the amount of housework done by the mother is negligible, and that the general standard of hygiene is lower than that of the animal world (Wolinden, 1944, quoted in Blacker, 1988, p. 233)

Taking this quotation with the two previous ones, I think the main changes are:
1. The stress on mental deficiency (here 'feeble-minded' children and 'mentally sub-standard' mothers), which explains the 'moral' failings visible in this home
2. The very explicit stress on the failings of the mother, who carries the burden of guilt for the sub-standard home
3. The attempt to make these descriptions of 'social problems' more scientific and neutral

By contrast, I think the main continuities are:
1. The passages deal with the same sorts of social problems with which nineteenth-century reformers concerned themselves
2. The concern continues to be about the family and individual 'pathology' as the sources of these problems
3. As with the COS home visits, the conditions of the home are used to provide 'clues' as to character
4. In spite of the attempt to be scientific, moral distance and superiority reappear in the descriptions. In the last passage, the children are seen to 'lie' about their home life, which is itself condemned in a variety of ways ('lower than the animal world', 'the home, if indeed it can be described as such', and so on)

5.3 Social work, children and the family

One other feature about the concern with 'problem families' is worth noting because of its significance for the subsequent development of social work: the growing link between social work and a focus on children. Children increasingly came to provide the main point of entry for social work's involvement with the family, and this focus was given extra impetus by the rediscovery of the neglected child during the Second World War. The evacuation of children from the cities provided dramatic evidence about ill-health, malnutrition and lack of development among many working-class children. Although environmental conditions clearly played a role, much attention was focused on the failure of families to provide proper care and nurture for their children. A series of reports drew attention to these conditions, culminating in the Women's Group on Public Welfare's The Neglected Child and His Family (1946). The report recommended an array of reforms ranging from improving material assistance
to poor families through to better training for mothers in domestic management and child care. In some respects their arguments echoed those of the Curtis Committee on the Care of Children (1946). Both groups argued that there was a need for a specialist social work service for families and children, and both were reluctant to see children removed into care from the family home.

The Curtis Committee had in fact been set up in the aftermath of the death of a boy through maltreatment at the hands of his foster parents. The Committee was especially concerned with improving local authority practices and procedures for dealing with children in care, and its recommendations were embodied in the creation of local authority children’s departments under the 1948 Children’s Act. These departments were to employ specialist, social-work trained officers to take responsibility for working with families, children in need of care or protection, fostering and local authority residential care for children. These departments provided the vanguard for the development of professional social work training in Britain in the post-war period, and thus reinforced the place of the family and children at the heart of the social work enterprise.
It is worth remarking, for the final time in this unit, on how poverty and the family have been constantly entangled in the development of social work. Although the focus of concern during the period immediately after the Second World War was on the problems of child care and neglect, the real target of that concern was the poor family. Whatever other characteristics it has, the 'problem family' is always poor. But because of social work's focus on theories of psychology and on the practices of child-rearing and parenting, the poverty of the problem family constantly comes to be seen as the consequence, rather than the cause, of the problems. In spite of the continuing tension between 'individual' and 'social' views of poverty, social work continued to approach the problem family from the standpoint of 'individual' facts – and individual cases of neglect – rather than from the standpoint of 'social' facts and poverty as a structural issue.

6 CONCLUSION

In this unit I have tried to deal with some of the main themes in the development of social work in Britain from the mid-nineteenth century up to the Second World War. This has not been a full and detailed history, instead I have tried to focus attention on those issues which remain significant for the nature of social work today. In summary, these issues are:

1. The relationship between class and gender in the creation of social work as a form of social intervention. Social work was developed in the context of middle-class fears about the urban working class, and aimed to find 'personal' means of bridging the gulf between the classes. These personal means were through casework in the supposedly universal institution of the family, often by middle-class women.

2. The connections between social ideologies, theories of social problems and the practice of social intervention (casework). Social work rested on a particular view of poverty, which distinguished between the deserving and undeserving poor on moral grounds. This view of poverty linked the practice of casework (moral assessment and personal improvement) with the dominant laissez-faire ideology of the economy and society.

3. The importance of 'familial ideology' in the development of the theory and practice of social work. The family became the focal point for social work intervention, and this focus was reinforced both by increasing attention to the children of 'problem families' and the influence of psychology in the training of social workers.

4. The arguments which surround social work, especially those relating to 'individual' versus 'social' views of social problems. Social work developed around a view of social problems as caused by the moral failings of the individual, and was profoundly opposed to social or structural views of social problems and poverty. This view was maintained by the emergence of psychology as the most influential theory for social work, and by the focus on 'problem families'.
5 The 'professionalization' of social work and the attempt to develop 'scientific' theories of social problems. Social work shed its overt 'moralism', and aimed to become a scientifically informed profession. Nevertheless, it remained focused on families in poverty (working-class families), and continued to see them as creating their own problems, rather than as having problems as a consequence of structural arrangements.

6 The tensions that are contained in social work and have shaped its development. In my view the two most significant tensions which we have considered in this unit are as follows: first, social work is shaped by a tension between the social conditions and causes of poverty and social problems, and a method of intervention which focuses on individual and familial factors (casework); secondly, there is a tension embedded in social work between 'care' (the provision of assistance) and 'control' (the management of 'unsuitable' or 'deviant' populations).

7 The combination of change and continuity in the development of social work from its nineteenth-century origins. As I said in the introduction to this unit, one of the purposes of historical analysis is to illuminate these processes of change and continuity. This will be a concern of Unit 14, which deals with the development of social work in Britain after the Second World War. You might like to think about this summary of the issues dealt with in the unit and make your own notes below about changes and continuities in these issues.

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Finally, one major focus of the activities in this unit has been that of reading extracts from documents of the time. This sort of reading involves a particular type of study skill, in that you need to be able not merely to extract or summarize the points being made, but also to look for the assumptions that lie behind what is being argued. This, too, is a process which will be a part of your work on Unit 14.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following for permission to reproduce the pictures in this unit:

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Unit 14  SOCIAL WORK IN THE WELFARE STATE

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Aims

The main focus of this unit is the development of social work in the context of the welfare state in post-war Britain. It examines the continuities and changes in the role and practice of social work as a form of social intervention. Within this, the unit aims to deal with a number of central issues

1. the professional and political arguments that influenced the creation of state social work in post-war Britain,
2. the tensions and dilemmas that have characterized social work in the welfare state,
3. a consideration of some of the explanations for those dilemmas and tensions within social work,
4. how social, economic, political and professional changes in the 1970s and 1980s have affected the practice of social work in contemporary Britain.

In addition to providing you with an overview of the development of social work in post-war Britain, this unit (together with Unit 13) attempts to establish some of the general themes and issues about social work as a form of social intervention which will be taken up in subsequent units in this block. Those units look in more detail at particular aspects of social work.

Study guide

This unit represents one week of your study time. There are no supplementary readings, but TV7 is linked to this unit and, if possible, you should have read Section 1 of the unit before watching the programme. The illustrations reproduced in this unit are all front covers from Social Work Today, a weekly journal published by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and aimed at practising social workers. The illustrations thus reflect some of the principal professional concerns of the period.
1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF STATE SOCIAL WORK

In 1950, a book produced for ‘a Committee of Professional Social Workers’ about social casework in Britain identified the following different types of social work casework in social service, family casework, medical social work, psychiatric social work, probation work, moral welfare, and child care (Morns, 1950). These different specialisms were conducted within different organizations and with different client groups. Some were organized by voluntary welfare bodies, and some by the state. Even within those provided by the state, a number of different departments were involved: the Home Office (probation service), local authority children’s departments (child care), and the Ministry of Health (medical and psychiatric social work). By 1970, the dominant form of social work in Great Britain was the ‘generic’ social work provided by local authority departments of social services, which aimed to provide social work as a form of family and community support. While the probation service remained a separate organization administered by the Home Office, and voluntary bodies continued to practice social work, the diversity of client groups, organizations, and practices of social work had been drawn together into one major state pattern of social work provision. The purpose of Section 1 of this unit is to consider how these changes came about, the later sections explore some of their consequences for social work.

1.1 Social work: continuity and change

The conclusion to the book on social casework mentioned above was written by Eileen Younghusband, who was to play a major role in the development of social work training in the post-war era. In her conclusion she looked back over the emergence of social work and contrasted it with the state of casework in 1950. In her description of the complexities of contemporary social work, what emerges is a classic definition of the social work task as it was seen in the 1950s and 1960s.

I would like you to read the following extract, and make a note of (a) what Younghusband identifies as the main difficulties confronting the social worker, and (b) what her view of the client is.

The result is that the social worker can no longer rest satisfied with her knowledge of the social services and her manipulation of entities like relief funds, prams, pawn tickets, ambulance services, hostels and so forth, trusting to the light of nature for her understanding of the persons for whose benefit these services exist. It is now demanded of her that she shall seek to understand the person in need, not only at that particular moment in time, but in all the major experiences and relationships which have gone into making him the person he is, with conflicts of whose origins he may be unaware, with problems whose solution may lie less in external circumstances than in his own attitudes, with tensions, faulty relationships, inabilities to face reality, hardened into forms which he cannot alter unaided. Instead of seeing the situation through her own eyes and producing a ready solution, the social worker must be able to see him and his needs and his relationships as these appear to the person in need himself. She must enter into his problems as he sees them, his relationships as he experiences them, with their frustrations, their deprivations and their satisfactions, and see him, or his different selves, as they appear to him himself. Yet at the same time she must also see clearly the realities of the situation and try to help him come to terms with them, so that in so doing he may be able to accept and overcome them. (Younghusband, 1950, p 193)

I think that two main difficulties for the social worker are identified in the passage, which we will find frequently repeated in the discussions of social work practice that have taken place since this time. The first is the tension between ‘material’ needs and services with which the social worker must deal and the ‘personal’ or psychological world of the client which the social worker must understand in order to be able to help effectively. (There are echoes here of the nineteenth-century
arguments about ‘individual’ versus ‘social’ facts which you looked at in Unit 13.) Secondly, we can see how much more complicated the view of the ‘personal’ world of the client has become since the assessment of ‘moral character’ in the nineteenth-century view of casework. The social worker must see the client as he sees himself — that is, must empathise with his problems and experiences, but must also be able to ‘see the realities clearly’ — to stand outside the client’s own view. Psychology — the basis of scientific casework — allows the social worker to be able to see the causes and processes which the client cannot see himself, revealing the hidden dimensions. So the social worker must cope with the tension of moving between subjective empathy and objective analysis (of the client’s psychology, neither lapsing into ‘pure’ empathy (simply accepting the client’s point of view) nor into ‘pure’ objective judgement (and thus failing to understand the client’s point of view)).

Two things strike me about the view of the client presented by Youngusband, which echo the view of the social worker’s task. The first is that the emphasis for social work remains primarily on ‘individual’ rather than ‘social’ facts (“problems whose solutions may lie less in external circumstances than in his own attitudes”). In this view social work must give a privileged place to the psychology of the client over material conditions. Secondly, the client is seen as less knowledgeable about himself than the social worker. The training of the social worker gives her a privileged insight into the client’s psychology, and her task is to help him to understand and adjust himself to reality. Later on in this unit we shall consider how these views of the social work task and the client continue to cause difficulties for social workers. For the moment, though, I want to look at one further change with which Youngusband was concerned. I began this unit by referring to the diversity of forms of social work that existed in 1950, and this is an issue with which Youngusband was much concerned. In particular, she was worried that there might be too much emphasis on ‘specialization’, leading to a neglect of the common principles of casework.

It is an unfortunate historical anomaly that as the various types of casework discussed in this book became separated out from undifferentiated general casework, a sense of ad hoc trainings has been called into existence to give the particular knowledge and skills required in the different branches. The next big step in social work training in this country would seem to be to teach the general principles before separating casework training into what are in fact only partially water-tight compartments, though they are at present made wholly so as far as post social science trainings are concerned. This over-specialisation in training merely reflects, as it is bound to do, what many feel to be the dangerous fragmentation that is taking place in British social work. We have become so conscious of the unique needs of the ill, the delinquent, the morally astray, the homeless child, the maladjusted and neurotic, that we employ specialised workers for their care and design specialist trainings for these workers. In doing so we forget that what is unique in each different group may be less important than what they have in common, and also that some special skill which has been thought essential to helping one group may be in fact almost equally useful to others (1950: pp. 205 – 6).

This is one of the central arguments about the development of social work in the post-war era: the tension between specialization (for different sorts of clients, or for different institutional contexts) and ‘generic’ social work (based on a common body of knowledge and methods). The development of social work between 1950 and 1970 is dominated by the model of ‘generic’ social work and ‘generic’ training, but, as you will see from your study of this block, these arguments are far from finished. At this point it is worth noting some of the implications of this ‘generic’ view of social work. Youngusband argues against specialization by suggesting that there may be common skills that can be used with these different groups. Not surprisingly, in view of the earlier quotation, what they have in common are their personal and interpersonal ‘troubles’ attitudes, states of mind and faulty relationships. The skills which the social worker can bring to these problems are those of psychology-based casework.
What we have seen in this section are some of the 'internal' arguments from within social work about the way in which it should develop in the context of the post-war welfare state. In the following sub-section, we shall be looking at the way these arguments connected with wider political views about social problems, welfare and social work.

1.2 After Beveridge: social problems in an affluent society

The politics of British society in the 1950s were dominated by two major images of social change. The first was that economic growth and its personal consequence - affluence - had decisively changed the social character of British society. Affluence - the growth of personal spending power - was taken as the main driving force which was undermining traditional patterns of class differences in Britain. Sociologists spoke of the 'embourgeoisement' of the working class - the process whereby the working class took on the life-style, attitudes, and patterns of behaviour of the middle classes. As Hugh Gaitskell put it when addressing the Labour Party Conference after its defeat in the 1959 general election (the year of Macmillan's 'You've never had it so good. Have it better. Vote Conservative') 'In short, the changing character of labour, full employment, new housing, the new way of life based on the telly, the fridge, the car and the glossy magazines - all have had their effect on our political strength' (quoted in Hall et al., 1978, p 230).

Affluence, based on full employment and the prospects of economic growth (and underpinned by a massive expansion of hire purchase), was combined with the centrality of the Beveridge-inspired welfare state. Where affluence had eroded class differences, the welfare state was seen to have settled the major 'material' social problem - that of poverty. A minimum standard of living was now guaranteed by the state. But if inequality and poverty were in decline thanks to these structural changes, what did that mean for those social problems that remained? How were they to be explained and responded to? The changes taking place in Britain seemed to have settled the major structural problems for the foreseeable future. Britain had 'modernized', and put behind it the 'bad old days' of class conflict, mass unemployment and structural poverty with all the social problems those features had trailed in their wake. But, in spite of these changes, some problems remained. Not for the first time, children and young people formed the most visible, and most discussed, of these social problems. The problems of neglect, lack of care, deprivation and delinquency. Each of these provided signs that not all was well within the 'affluent society'.

The following extracts are all taken from Labour Party and Fabian Society pamphlets written between 1958 and 1966 about 'problem children'. What sorts of explanations do they present for these problems?

A high proportion of all the children in the care of local authorities thus come from homes which have broken down - not through illness, death or destitution, but through human unhappiness and the failure of parents to cope with the job of bringing up children. There is no reason to believe that children in the care of voluntary societies differ greatly from those in the care of local authorities, and it is now generally agreed that unhappy and broken homes play an important part in producing the delinquents who enter approved schools (Donnison and Stewart, 1958, p 8).

There is little doubt, nevertheless, that many delinquents suffer from grave handicaps. The parents of many of them are not equipped to cope sensibly with the pressures and problems of the modern world, many are educationally backward, parents with little insight, with few of the skills required for the care of children in the modern world and without the self-confidence and pose needed to seek advice and follow it (Donnison, Jay and Stewart, 1962, pp 18, 25).
Of these evils, the external ones – poverty and squalor – are much less extreme than in the days of Dickens while social inadequacy, the failure to fit in, may be, if anything, more widespread as the technical apparatus of life becomes more complex (Longford Study Group, 1966, p 4)

Some of these arguments will be familiar from the discussion of the ‘problem family’ in Unit 13 For example, ‘educationally backward’ parents seem to have replaced ‘mentally deficient’ parents as a source of problems The processes which produce deprived and delinquent children are family processes, involving incompetent ‘parenting’ (parents who lack ‘insight’ and ‘skills’) But there is also a new twist given to the argument in these passages: the introduction of a theme about ‘modern society’ Modern society is, apparently, distinguished by two things: One is a reduction of the ‘external evils’ of poverty and squalor The other is that life has become more complex, creating new ‘pressures and problems’ which some parents cannot cope with These arguments set the stage for the demand which these pamphlets and reports raised – the introduction of a ‘family service’, providing social work support to these incompetent parents All three were primarily addressed to the ‘problem’ of juvenile delinquency, but each saw the main answer lying in the creation of a state social work service This service was defined as being needed as a support to the ‘large-scale’ services provided by the Beveridge welfare state

Every system of government bears the marks of its predecessors The early Fabians’ determination to build up a technically competent, specialist service to assure nation-wide minimum standards of care in a wide variety of fields arose from their rejection of the chaos, cruelty and social wastage of the Poor Law We still have far to go before we can be satisfied with the standards of our housing, our mental hospitals and schools, but Fabians today should be increasingly concerned about a new problem – the tendency of large scale, specialised (and frequently competing) services, organised to meet arbitrary defined ‘needs’, to lose touch with the individuals and families that form the complex human reality they are dealing with, and to disregard human needs for which there are no appropriate administrative categories (Donnison, Jay and Stewart, 1962, p 7)

So, while the Beveridge-inspired systems of national insurance and social assistance are seen to have eliminated ‘primary poverty’ by establishing a national minimum standard, some problems still remain The above passage identifies one of the problems that human needs are more complex than can be coped with by the administrative categories of large-scale state services A second problem relates to the way the system of services breaks down when people are too ‘ignorant or apathetic to make use of the services offered to them’ (Donnison and Stewart, 1968) The third problem is hinted at by the above quotation’s mention of ‘competing services’, since attention was drawn to the way in which particular families might need the attention of a variety of different services (and thus be ‘on the books’ of an array of different departments)

One study after another has shown that the personal social services devote most of their resources to a small proportion of their clientele, and many of these people need help from several different specialised services Human needs do not come in self-contained specialised packages, they are entangled, involving whole families – and sometimes whole neighbourhoods (Donnison, Jay and Stewart, 1962, pp 2–3)

What was needed was not yet another service providing compartmentalized benefits or assistance, but a service which would focus on the complex and particular needs of individuals and families Such a service could help these people develop the skills and self-confidence to cope with the ‘more complex technical apparatus’ of life in a modern society, and help them find their way through the equally complex structures of the welfare state By focusing primarily on the family, it could also help to improve ‘parenting’ skills and contribute to the reduction of social problems Not surprisingly, the model for such a service was that of family casework

The service that is needed must set out by concentrating on the few families that get into serious difficulties, but would be available from the beginning to all those who wish
to make use of it (it would be a 'family casework service', not a 'problem families service'). It must be manned by workers with a sensitive understanding of family relationships, and special skills in mobilising the will and energy of the bewildered, anxious and aggressive people (thus it would be based primarily on the skilful use of personal relationships, rather than the provision of material help and expert advice) (Donnison and Stewart, 1988, p 7).

It is important to note two points about the nature of the family service being argued for. First, it establishes a tension between 'universality' (a service available to all those who wish to make use of it) and 'selective targeting' (concentrating on the few families that get into serious difficulties) as the principles which the new service should embody. As we shall see later, this tension between universality and selectivity has been a significant feature of social work. Secondly, and echoing Younghusband's arguments, there is a stress here on 'personal relationships' rather than 'material help'.

The service which these reports sought was eventually produced through the workings of the Seebohm and Kilbrandon committees, which established social work departments aimed at meeting these needs.

1.3 Seebohm and Kilbrandon: the creation of state social work

So far we have seen that both professional opinion and political arguments overlapped in their views of social problems and of the need for casework as a form of social intervention. At the end of the 1960s these views were developed by two major government committees, which recommended that local authorities should set up local departments of social services (of 'social work' in Scotland) as a means of promoting social welfare through social work and community work.

The impetus for the Kilbrandon Committee (1964) was the reform of the legal and welfare systems for dealing with juvenile delinquents in Scotland, and it was the basis for the creation of the Scottish children's panel (in which cases of delinquency and neglect are considered) and for the creation of comprehensive social work departments by local authorities. The Social Work (Scotland) Act of 1968 required Scottish local authorities to establish departments of social work, which unified the diverse forms of social work provision from their bases in different departments – probation, education, mental health, health, and child care.

For England and Wales, the main impetus came from the Seebohm Committee, established in 1965 to report on local authority and allied personal social services. Its report (1968) was critical of the existing provision of personal social services for their uneven quality and the lack of co-ordination between the different departments responsible for the provision of services. It recommended the creation of integrated Social Services Departments which would accommodate the following child-care services, welfare services for the elderly and the handicapped, educational welfare and child guidance, home help services, mental health social work, adult training centres, day centres, nurseries previously provided by health departments, and some of the social welfare functions previously performed by housing departments.

There are two aspects of note in the contrast between the establishment of Social Services Departments in Scotland and those in England and Wales. First, the probation and after-care service remained separate in England and Wales, under the direction of the Home Office. Secondly, whereas the impetus for social work in Scotland had come from the abolition of the juvenile court and the creation of the new children's panels, a similar attempt to create 'family courts' with a social work basis for England and Wales failed, and juvenile courts were retained, although with an expanded role for social workers after the 1969 Children and Young Persons Act.

The rationalisation of 'personal social services' which these two reports and their subsequent legislation delivered, created the forms of state social work that exist today. The departments they created (social services) are curious hybrids in a number of ways. First, they brought together into one 'generic' department social...
workers from very different settings, who were used to working with particular
groups of clients. While this merging of different types of social work was a
departmental or organizational rationalization, it also reflected the growing
commitment to the idea that social work was characterized by a ‘generic’ method,
skills and knowledge. The focus of this ‘generic’ approach to social work was
precisely on the psychological/interpersonal/family themes which we saw in Section
11 above. This set of professional concerns was intensified by the role played by the
old children’s departments in the creation of the new social work departments. In
many ways the child-care workers represented the leading section of social work,
and exerted the strongest influence on the new direction for social work. It was in
child-care work and training that the family/psychology concerns were perhaps most
highly developed. Together with the political concerns which we noted earlier, this
professional dominance helped to make work with children and families the major
priority of the new departments of social work (see Packman, 1975). Later units in
this block will explore some of the implications of this centrality of child-care issues
for the development of social work in Britain. For the moment, it is enough to note
that this dominance of child care meant lower priorities for other aspects of social
work, such as work with the disabled, mentally ill and elderly.

Organizational, ‘field’ social workers were based in area teams, and were expected
to undertake ‘generic’ social work with a mixed caseload of individuals and families
in the community. But Social Services Departments were also responsible for
‘residential care’ services (children’s homes, residential institutions for the elderly
and physically and mentally handicapped). Given the dominant professional
commitment to working with individuals and families ‘in the community’, this led to
a continuining occupational separation between ‘field’ and ‘residential’ social workers.
The residential services were for the most part the ‘Cinderella’ of the social services,
viewed as a last resort of social work intervention, staff received less training, and
fewer of them became professionally qualified. Within ‘field’ social work, too, it is
important to remember that professionally qualified social workers have always been
outnumbered by the other groups of workers (home helps, social work assistants,
volunteers, etc.) who help provide personal social services. Because of their
professional dominance, however, this unit will be focusing on social work issues
related to qualified field social workers.

The second peculiarity of these departments concerns the diversity of ways in which
they received their clients. Both Seabohm and Kilbrandon were concerned, like the
Fabians quoted earlier, that these services should not just be directed at ‘problem
families’, but should provide a more generalized service – ‘a door on which to
knock’, as Seabohm put it. Their ideal was

a new local authority department, providing a community based and family orientated
service, which will be available to all. This new department will, we believe, reach far
beyond the discovery and rescue of social casualties (Seabohm Committee, 1968, para 2)

Such ‘self referrals’, seeking advice and guidance, proved to be the largest group of
clients arriving on social work caseloads in the mid-1970s. In addition, however,
social workers received their clients through referrals from other agencies. Some of
these cases might be clients who were advised to visit a social worker, but others
were required to receive the attentions of a social worker. These clients formed the
core ‘statutory duties’ of social work departments: juvenile offenders, the chronically
sick and disabled, cases of mental illness, cases of suspected child abuse, and so on.
In this sense, the ‘client population’ of social work is itself a hybrid, being a mix of
‘voluntary’ and ‘enforced’ beneficiaries of social work intervention. As we shall see in
later sections, this mix of powers in social work poses problems for how relationships
between social workers, their clients and other state agencies (especially the courts)
have developed.
1.4 Summary (and a cautionary tale)

Q Section 1 of the unit has looked at the creation of state social work in post-war Britain. It would be useful if you now summarized the main points of this section by answering the following questions:

1. To what sort of social problems was social work supposed to be an answer?
2. What was the relationship between social work and the welfare state?
3. What type of intervention was social work intended to be?

My answers to these questions are given below, but before comparing them you might try to answer one further question which leads on to Section 2:

4. What tensions and dilemmas for social work might have resulted from this model of state social work?

We have seen how professional and political views of the value of social work as a response to social problems came together in the arguments for a ‘generic’ family service, staffed by trained social workers. These political and professional views also shared a perception of social problems in an affluent society with a welfare state, in that such ‘residual’ problems were primarily seen as a consequence of personal or interpersonal difficulties rather than the consequence of structural processes in the wider society.
In this sense state social work can be seen as a belated support to the main agencies of state welfare (public housing, income maintenance, welfare benefits, the health service, etc.) It was intended to pick up the pieces which major agencies left behind, and focused on the ‘problems of living’ and human incompetence and frailty which those other agencies were ill equipped to deal with. Social work was to specialize in these residual problems, armed with psychological insight, trained in the complexities of human relationships, and intervening through the method of casework. In Section 2 of the unit we shall be considering the consequences of these developments for the practice of state social work, and exploring some of the dilemmas that have characterized contemporary social work.

In this first section I have stressed how professional, political and policy views of the need for social work fitted together in the development of a ‘family casework service’. However, not everyone viewed this development of social work with such optimism. Critics were especially concerned about the way ‘casework’ removed attention from social and economic conditions in focusing on personality and interpersonal dynamics. One of the most eloquent critics was Barbara Wootton. In her book *Social Science and Social Pathology* (1959) she presented a devastating attack on the growth of casework. The following extracts deal with her concern that social work was moving away from offering practical assistance for material problems into an exclusive focus on psychological issues. (When reading them you may wish to contrast them with the views of Eileen Younghusband which were quoted in Section 11.)

Nor is it clear that social work has lost its predominant concern with the ‘lower income groups’, even if the direct relief of extreme poverty does occupy less of the average social worker’s activities than it did. But, whatever the facts, it is certainly true that social workers no longer see themselves as primarily dispensers of charity, and that it is not the poverty of the poor in which they are chiefly interested. Believing themselves, rightly or wrongly, to have been deprived of one function, they have lost no time in inventing another.

In consequence of this conviction on the part of the caseworker that she can understand other people better than they understand themselves, a practice has grown up of refusing to accept at their face value the emergencies which cause people to seek the aid of a social work agency. A favourite theme of contemporary casework literature is the social worker’s capacity, and indeed duty, to penetrate below what is called the ‘presenting problem’ to the ‘something deeper’ that is supposed to lie underneath.

[The very fact that social workers in general are sensible, practical people makes it the more surprising that they should continue unashamedly to penetrate such fantastic claims, and that they should so blindly ignore the ethical questions raised by practices which suggest that they take advantage of other people’s poverty, sickness, unemployment or homelessness in order to pry into what is not their business. One need not dispute that women who ask for assistance in equipping themselves for a confinement which is only a few weeks off, or families who cannot keep themselves in coal throughout the winter or who fall behind with the rent, have other problems in their lives (who indeed has not?) which may well be connected with their economic difficulties. But to recognize this is not to admit that those who are invited to deal with one matter are entitled also to explore others, or that it is proper to give professional training in the act of extracting from those who seek help on one problem details of others of a more intimate, personal nature (Wootton, 1959, pp. 270, 277, 279).]

You may find echoes of these warnings in the following section, which deals with the tensions and dilemmas of contemporary social work.
2 THE DILEMMAS OF SOCIAL WORK

In this section we will be looking at some of the dilemmas faced by social workers in performing the 'social work task' in the context of the new Social Services Departments. In part, these represent continuations of earlier tensions in the development of social work, which were intensified by the expansion of the scale of social work following the Kilbrandon and Seabohm developments. But the dilemmas also involve new difficulties created by the new organizational structures and responsibilities within which social work was practised. These dilemmas have had a powerful influence on the development of social work in the last twenty years. I have tried to organize them around three main issues which are recurrent themes in social work: the tension between 'personal troubles and public issues', the conflict between 'care and control', and the issue of whose interests are served by social work intervention.

2.1 Personal troubles and public issues

State social work in the 1970s re-emphasized social work's traditional focus on the individual and the family - that primary attention to 'individual facts' which Hobson so fiercely criticized in the work of the COS (see Unit 13). State social work started from the understanding that the great 'structural' problems of inequality and poverty were at least on their way to being solved, and that the focal concern of social work should be the non-material problems of unhappiness, maladjustment and malfunctioning family processes 'personal troubles'. Social work training, itself rapidly expanded to meet the needs of the new social work departments, concentrated its efforts on passing on the theories and skills needed to cope with and respond to these personal troubles. Psychological theories about human development, a concern with interpersonal dynamics, and psychological approaches to casework (how to uncover the 'real' meaning of what clients say) were at the core of social work training. Great stress was laid on the quality of the relationship between the client and the worker, and the importance of the client's emotional state.

Q What sort of role for the social worker is being defined in the following extract?

There are many clients whose early experience of relationships was so unsatisfactory that they were never able to work through the initial experience of relationships within the family, the 'give and take' of such contacts, the feeling of being approved of, to internalize controls and standards and so on. In brief, they have failed to mature in this respect. They feel inadequate, and unsure of their contacts, they still see situations narcissistically, they react badly and impulsively to frustration and criticism. Such people need a parental relationship through which they can experience the relationship patterns they never had, and thus a parental relationship appropriate to the 'maturity level' which the client has reached. This assessment of maturity level, and of the role needed in the relationship, is often a technically difficult task, and it may require a number of interviews to complete. (Ratcliffe, 1959, p 4)

Like the analysis of social work and the client's problems given by Younghusband in Section 1.1, the role for the social worker here is that of the skilled analyst of human relationships and interpersonal dynamics. The worker is also seen as a skilled practitioner at constructing, as well as analysing, human relationships. Indeed, the passage seems to suggest that the social worker's task is to create a 'parental relationship' with the client as a substitute for the failure of their real family relationships.

The practice of social work, however, revealed a more confusing reality in a number of ways. First, as anticipated by Barbara Wooton, it had become increasingly clear that poverty had not been 'solved'. Indeed, from the mid-1960s it was being 'rediscovered' by a series of surveys and investigations (rediscovered by all but the poor, of course, who had known it was there all along). Although Social Services Departments were not established to deal with material problems such as poverty, they were expected to deal with the relationships and other agencies of the welfare state. What social work with the poor revealed was a failure of another cherished
assumption of the Seebohm era. Just as social workers found that the majority of their clients were living in poverty, so, too, they discovered that the welfare state had not abolished material need.

The Beveridge-inspired welfare state was assumed to provide for material needs, and to do so in a benevolent way. Social workers found themselves with clients whose needs were not being met, and whose experience of the welfare state was less than benevolent. From their point of view, getting supplementary benefit could involve long delays, intrusive questioning, and an excess of ‘discretion’ about whether they received special payments for heating, children’s clothes, bedding, etc. Similarly, housing departments and gas and electricity boards could be hostile and unhelpful, and clients looked to social workers for assistance when faced by threats to make them homeless or cut off their power supplies. Social workers were supposed to ‘humanize’ these services, to make them more accessible to the ‘less competent’ by easing them through the tangled complexities of the ‘technical apparatus of modern life’. Consequently, the ‘door on which to knock’ was hammered upon by a stream of clients who wanted social workers to help in getting these material problems settled.

The mundane practice of social work contained a rich array of possibilities for the entanglement of ‘personal’ and ‘material’ problems. How to understand and respond to problems ranging from neglected children, mental disorders, elderly people in need of residential accommodation through to electricity being cut off, or families confronting the threat of homelessness or non-payment of social security, raised questions for social workers about the relationship between ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public issues’. Workers found themselves seeing clients less as ‘individual cases’ and more as a string of examples of the persistence of poverty, or of the failure of other state agencies to meet needs. Rather than engaging in intensive casework with a limited number of ‘problem’ cases, they found themselves faced with clients for whom material assistance was an urgent and overriding priority.

Although social work was established to respond to the needs of a variety of different client groups (children, families, the elderly, the disabled, the mentally ill and handicapped, etc.), it became clear that the majority of social work clients were living in poverty, no matter what other problems they might be suffering from. They were, as Chris Jones has argued, the ‘residual and dependent’ sections of the working class (1983, p 12).

What does Jones mean by this? He is referring to those who are either excluded from, or on the margins of, the labour market. This ‘residual’ status can come about for a variety of reasons: unemployment, disability, ill-health, old age or the necessity of staying at home to care for young children or sick relatives. Poverty is highly, though not exclusively, associated with being outside the labour market. This residual status is also linked to the idea of ‘dependence’, since the main alternative to an income earned from waged work is that of state benefits (pensions, unemployment or disability benefits, supplementary benefits, etc.). In this sense, social work became a residual service for the residual sections of the working class.

It is important to realize how this class patterning of social work’s clientele dominated both the ‘universal’ and ‘selective’ principles of service provision. The ‘universal’ principle (the availability of a ‘door on which to knock’) meant that the social work service was used by many people who had ‘welfare’ problems, usually caused or exacerbated by material hardship. On the other hand, the ‘selective’ principle of social work (the ‘targeting’ of problem families, for example) also involved a social ‘selectivity’, since most ‘problem families’ – whatever their other problems – lived in poverty. Similarly, ‘problems’ referred to social workers from other state agencies reinforced this link between social work and poverty. Such ‘referrals’ took place largely because the clients were already involved with one or other of the state’s welfare agencies.
The significance of these connections between class and social work is that it provided a patterning of social work’s clientele which overshadows the normal categorization of different client ‘groups’. This ‘rediscovery of poverty’ provided a clue to some of the main social dimensions of social work’s client population. First, a high proportion of social work’s clientele would be elderly (retired from the labour market and dependent on state benefits and services). Surveys throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s drew attention to the close link between old age and poverty. Secondly, social work’s clientele would be geographically concentrated – for example, in the inner cities where the indicators of ‘multiple deprivation’ (poverty, housing problems, unemployment, poor facilities, etc.) were most heavily concentrated. Thirdly, this geographical concentration, combined with the impact of racial disadvantage on employment and housing, would also mean a high level of involvement of social work with ethnic minorities. Fourthly, and perhaps most strikingly of all, the mixture of poverty and social work’s preoccupation with the family meant that a majority of social work’s clients would be women. In this, as Davis and Brook observe, social work’s clientele reflected the sexual division of labour within social work itself.

Most of the workers at the front line of the personal social services in Britain are women. As receptionists, home-helps, volunteers, residential workers, social work assistants, and field social workers, they find themselves rationing and ‘personalising’ the services offered by statutory and voluntary welfare organisations.

At the same time, most of the individuals who come into contact with these workers are women, women outnumber men in the elderly and physically disabled populations. Furthermore, women (as relatives and friends) are the main source of ‘community care’ for these groups. The childcare services are predominantly involved with women as mothers, foster mothers and child-minders. (Davis and Brook, 1986, p.3)

You might find it useful to stop for a moment and make a brief summary of these points, because the links between poverty and social work form a central theme of this block. Try to answer the question: why is social work predominantly work with the poor?

Some of the ‘material problems’ social workers encountered were the resource limitations on Social Services Departments themselves. Even where a ‘need’ was identified, there was no guarantee that the resources would be available to meet it. Thus social workers found themselves playing a ‘gatekeeper’ role in relation to scarce resources having to argue the case, for example, for the need of their client for access to residential care for the elderly against competing claims on a limited number of places. By the late 1970s, with Britain experiencing a growing economic recession and governments committed to reducing public spending, these pressures on social work continued to grow. On the one hand, limited resources for both social work and other welfare agencies meant that social workers had less room for manoeuvre in meeting clients’ needs. On the other hand, the growth of poverty (together with other factors such as the increasing elderly population) increased the size of social workers’ caseloads as more people looked, or were sent, to them for assistance.

Reactions among social workers varied. Some stuck to their professional training, dealing, as in the example above, with requests for help as the ‘presenting symptom’ of a deeper unhappiness. Others struggled to connect the ‘individual facts’ with wider ‘social facts’. They argued for a more politicized view of social work, which would not seek ‘personal’ or ‘familial’ explanations for what were structural problems. Yet others argued for the need for social work to develop a ‘welfare rights’ or ‘advocacy’ role – to take the client’s side more energetically in conflicts with the welfare bureaucracies. In this sense social workers experienced a conflict of loyalties they were torn between the interests of the client and the state’s definition of how the client’s interests could be met. Social workers were charged with the task of
For your client's benefit:

Are you entitled to child benefit?

You can get child benefit if on 6 April 1977 you are responsible for a child under:
- under age 16, or
- under age 17 and still at school or college full-time, or
- at least in your 17th year of age if being trained by a further education authority or voluntary organisation.

But you may not get child benefit if:
- you are a single parent in a child
- you are a foster parent in a child
- you are a member of an armed forces family.

How to claim:

If you have only one child:
- Read this leaflet carefully (this leaflet contains page 25).
- Fill in the form CH17 on the first page of this leaflet.

If you have two or more children:
- Fill in the form CH30 on the first page of this leaflet.

Who should make the claim:

This claim must be made by the person responsible for the child. This person should be either caring for the child or getting maintenance in a suit of not less than the weekly child benefit rate.

Source:
Social Work Today, 26 April 1977

'humanizing' the welfare system, but found that their impact on behalf of their clients would only be very limited. Against these attempts to 'politicize' social work and to engage in arguments about the need for social reform, the defenders of casework as the proper focus of social work continued to argue for its relevance.

Not only do caseworkers affirm the moral question of each man's worth and right to be given the opportunity to achieve his socially approved goals, but there are some practical considerations, too. A person's problems today will not wait for the wheels of justice or social reform to grind out change. And they must, and it is hoped that social work will accelerate them. But the man who is their victim wants help now, because his problems in personal and family life hurt him now. And if these problems are the result of yesterday's causes, they are at the same time the causes of tomorrow's new problems.

Finally, I propose that casework serve - or is geared to serve - one purpose which cannot be brushed aside as trivial. Its existence stubbornly asserts the importance of individual man and of the individual, small, frail clusters of persons called families (Perlmutter, 1970, p. 218).

This view remained the dominant voice of the profession throughout the 1970s and, as such, was also the dominant strand in social work training. But social workers themselves increasingly looked for alternative approaches to the problems they discovered in social work practice. Along with the interest in welfare rights work, the 'advocacy role' and radical approaches to social work practice mentioned earlier, there was also a growing interest in community work. Community work was seen as a 'collective' rather than 'individualistic' approach to social problems. It involved the worker with whole communities, and aimed at involving the 'clients' in collective action to define and meet their own needs, rather than seeing them as a series of separate and individualized 'cases'.
In spite of these diverse alternatives, the tension between the ‘personal’ and the ‘public’ (or between individual and social facts) has remained at the heart of social work. So, too, has the following conflict:

2.2 Care or control? The problem of the captive client

Social work is commonly seen as one of the ‘caring professions’. Its aim, as we have seen, is to provide a distinctively personalized form of care to its clients. The professional ethos of social work reflects this commitment to care very strongly – it is profoundly ‘client-centred’. The quotation from Helen Perlman in Section 2.1 above, defending casework as a method of providing care, is an excellent example of the commitment to the individual in social work. This concern is reflected in many of the basic maxims of social work practice: the need to respect the individual, to ‘start where the client is’, to be ‘non-judgemental’, and to allow ‘client self-determination’. In each of these there is an intention to view the client as an individual rather than as a case of a bureaucratic category of need.

Despite the fact that these concerns shape the professional ethos of social work, its practice has raised severe questions about whether these aims can be achieved. Many social workers have experienced problems about their role in exercising control over clients, and about the relationship between care and control. Social work is seen as having a dual responsibility to the individual and to society. Although the professional ethos sees no particular tension in this relationship, for some social workers this dual responsibility is one which is fraught with difficulty. If a client’s problems are a consequence of social arrangements, how can the social worker fulfil his/her responsibility to the client without being critical of those arrangements? On the other hand, if a social worker ‘befriends’ a client, how can she then exercise control over the client’s behaviour, as society may require her to do?

Q This dilemma is explored in the following quotation, taken from an article by Carole Satyamurti in which she discusses her own research on social workers. In it she identifies two different forms of control in which social workers are involved. What are they?

Several social workers said that although in principle they disliked the aloofness implied in the idea of a professional relationship, in practice they felt they had to maintain some social distance between themselves and their clients, as otherwise it would be more difficult to exercise authority if the necessity arose. Sometimes what they had in mind was an eventual involvement involving direct coercion – a compulsory reception of a child into care, or admission to a mental hospital, for example. But perhaps more often, in the case of families, the authority situation they most readily envisaged was one in which the client asked for money and the social worker would have either to refuse or to impose conditions on the client (Satyamurti, 1979, pp 97 – 8).

The two forms of control identified here are: (a) the exercise of statutory power (that given to the social worker by law), as in removing a child from its home – what Satyamurti calls ‘direct coercion’, and (b) the placing of conditions on clients in response to their requests for assistance. Let us look in more detail at these issues of control, since they highlight a tension between the professional ethos of care and the practice of social work.

When state social work was established, it was created with a variety of statutory duties and powers concerning particular social groups. For example, it had an obligation to provide for children seen to be in need of care or control – children whose family situations were thought to be causing distress to the child, by neglect, cruelty, lack of parental control, etc. Such children could be taken ‘into the care of the local authority’ and placed with foster parents, or in children’s homes. Similarly, people deemed to be mentally ill – and a danger to themselves or others – could be admitted by a social worker (in consultation with a qualified medical person) to a mental hospital.
These duties and powers run counter to the professional ethos of social work. First, they are clearly exercises of judgement, rather than being 'non-judgemental'. The social worker is required to evaluate, and to form judgements about, the nature of the child's domestic situation, or the state of someone's mental health and potential dangerousness. Secondly, they run against the principle of 'self-determination', since neither the child (or other members of its household) nor the person deemed to be mentally ill is in a position to exercise self-determination. There is no guarantee that their wishes will determine the outcome of the situation. The outcome can be, as Satyamurti puts it, direct coercion. The exercise of such power can also cause problems for the attempt by the social worker to build 'good relationships' with the client. Parents whose child has been taken into local authority care may view the social worker's efforts to maintain a relationship with suspicion.

These and similar cases form what June Thoburn (1980) has called the 'captive clients' of social work. They are legally obliged to receive social work 'care', whether they wish to or not. They are defined from the outset as being 'in need', and indeed are defined as 'deviant' – as social problems – as a consequence of the legal processes and powers that have dealt with them. Although social workers may negotiate with such clients, for example over the course of action which the social worker plans to take, it is a negotiation that is based on a fundamental power inequality in the relationship, such that the client is in a position of dependency on the social worker. If, for example, parents wish a child to be returned to them from local authority care, it is in their interests to learn to co-operate with the social worker.

Even where the relationship between client and social worker is not a consequence of statutory powers, this inequality of power may still exist and involve the exercise
of control by the social worker. This is because, even when assistance is voluntarily sought, the social worker is the gatekeeper of scarce resources to which the client wishes to have access (whether these resources are material or personal – the time to listen and give advice, for example). Even where there is no statutory power, the social worker can be involved in the exercise of control, setting conditions on the client’s behaviour in return for the reward of assistance. Joel Handler (1973) studied the way in which social workers tied financial help to demands that family behaviour should conform to certain standards. His research suggested that social workers tended to have a ‘universal’ idea of how families should work (and of how mothers, fathers and children should behave within them), and that these universal ideas reflected middle-class patterns of family life. Handler argued that what took place in such family casework was a covert pressure to make working-class families conform to middle-class standards.

This theme is a recurrent one in analyses of social work in a variety of ‘problem areas’ (the behaviour of young people, patterns of domestic life, mental illness, and so on) it has been argued that social workers ‘pathologize’ patterns of behaviour which do not fit taken-for-granted middle-class standards. That is, patterns which do not fit these standards are seen as ‘problems’ needing to be solved, rather than as merely different, but viable, ways of living in the modern world. Such arguments have stressed social work’s capacity for social control, as a way of manipulating people to produce social conformity. Social workers are the ‘soft cops’ of a society in which social and cultural conflicts are turned into personal or familial ‘pathology’.

One area where this issue of ‘pathologizing’ clients has been particularly significant is that of single-parent households. Because of the strength of familial ideology in our society in general, and in social work in particular, single-parent households are likely to be viewed as ‘deviant’ rather than different. Instead of being perceived as having problems, single parents are vulnerable to being viewed as the cause of problems. Because single-parent households are likely to be near or below the poverty line, they are also likely to come into contact with social workers. In such contacts they are especially vulnerable to social work scrutiny, judgement and control. For example, single-parent households are high on the social work checklists of ‘families at risk’ of child abuse, and thus requiring social work intervention. Indeed, so intense was this vulnerability of single-parent households that in the late 1970s Gingerbread (the single-parent self-help group) advised single parents not to initiate any contact with social workers, because once contact was established they would themselves be ‘at risk’ of further social work intervention (including having their children taken into care).

A similar concern has been the relationship between social work and ethnic minorities in Britain. Here the issue about making universalizing judgements about what is normal and natural as the basis for social work practice has a particular intensity. The assumptions underlying social work intervention have involved a distinct cultural bias, seeing Afro-Caribbean and Asian families as deviations from an assumed ‘normality’ of family life. Advice, services and interventions based on such assumptions have provoked much hostility from ethnic communities, who see their own distinctive cultures being neglected or even actively eroded in these ways. Ignorance of, or even hostility towards, religious and cultural diversity has manifested itself in a variety of forms of social work interventions. These range from the provision of ‘meals on wheels’ or residential care facilities which make no provision for cultural differences in diet, through to controversies about Social Services Departments’ fostering and adoption policies which tended to place black or Asian children with white families. These issues have become central ones for social work in the 1980s, with social work departments, and social work training, attempting to address the problems of providing social work services in a multi-racial Britain.

However, while these issues are particularly intense in the sphere of social work and ethnic minorities, they are not exclusive to this area of social work practice. Rather, they are embedded in the wider conflict about care and control in social work, and they raise the question of in whose interests does social work operate.
2.3 *In whose interests?*

In the previous two sub-sections we have seen that social work contains a potential tension between the client and society. Social work stands between the two poles of this tension. On the one hand, it 'represents' society to the client, embodying social judgements and standards and providing social resources. On the other hand, social work 'represents' the client to society. It interprets the client's needs, represents the client's interests in disputes with other agencies, and aims to provide a voice for the client. This tension is at the heart of social work, and the social worker is required to reconcile these potentially conflicting interests. Of course, in some contexts these interests may not conflict. The interests of society and the interests of the client may be entirely in harmony. An old person may wish to remain at home, rather than go into residential care. Social work departments may be able, and willing, to supply home helps, social work visits or other services to enable the person to retain their domestic independence.

In other contexts, however, these interests may not fit together so harmoniously. As we have already seen, social work, precisely because it is engaged with social problems, is at the centre of a variety of potential conflicts, and social workers may be required to choose where their loyalties lie.

In such conflicts of interest, social work can involve the assertion of professional judgements of the client's 'best interests' over the client's own views. The trained insight of the social worker is claimed to reveal more about the client's circumstances than the client understands. The social worker can then seek to improve the client's own understanding and insight, and improve the client's social functioning (for example, by teaching social skills or 'parenting skills') to make them better able to cope. Such a view contrasts sharply with the 'radical' alternatives to casework approaches, which aim to take the clients' own definitions of their needs as the starting point for intervention and action. The idea of 'advocacy' perhaps best expresses this idea, since it identifies the social worker as an agent who can speak on behalf of the relatively powerless, and represent their needs and interests.

In practice, much social work falls between these two extremes, involving the social worker as negotiator between society and the client. In this sense, one key feature of the social work role is the management and containment of these potential conflicts of interest. It involves the social worker in the juggling of conflicting interests trying to ensure that the client gets a reasonable deal, while not being engaged in outright conflict with her own agency or other state agencies which are taken to represent society's interests. In such conditions the social worker will be trying to make the client's needs 'fit' the available resources, and the prevailing definitions of what counts as 'need'. So the social worker engages in a pragmatic re-interpretation of the client's needs, re-tells the client's story, so to speak, in order for it to make sense within the terms of recognized categories.

However, since the early 1970s a growing number of client groups have questioned this power of social workers to 'speak for' or represent the needs of clients. Groups such as the Claimants' Union, the Mental Patients' Union, children's rights organizations, Gingerbread and others have challenged social workers' right and competence to represent their interests, and have argued that it is clients themselves who are best able to define their own needs. Such groups insist that it is the clients who have the direct experience of disadvantage or disability, and who can speak from that experience about what their needs really are. Even well-intentioned representation by social workers involves a form of paternalism which assumes, and reinforces, the dependency of the client on the social worker. To be 'spoken for' by professionals makes the client dependent on the worker, and opens up the prospect of needs being re-interpreted or misrepresented by the professionals. (This challenge to professionalism will be explored further in Unit 19.)

Even more difficult perhaps are those areas of social work intervention where it is unclear who the client is. Take, for example, the issue of non-accidental injury to children, or child abuse, as it is more popularly known. In the last ten years the
growing public and professional concern about non-accidental injury has meant that social workers' duties and methods of intervening in cases of suspected abuse have been more and more rigorously defined. But such cases still remain very complex areas, not least because of the difficulty of defining whose interests should be paramount. For example, social workers are expected to exercise judgement about whether the interests of the family are most important (is it in the best interests of the family to stay together?) Should it be the child’s interests which predominate (should the child be taken from the family to a place of safety?) Are there different interests within the family (do the child’s best interests differ from those of the parents? Do the parents themselves have different needs and interests?) How is the social worker supposed to determine what these needs and interests are, before making a judgement about which are the most important? Even from such a cursory glance at the number of potentially conflicting interests that can be at stake in a case of child abuse, it should be clear that social workers are confronted by a complex and highly charged problem about whose interests intervention serves. (The following three units of this block examine different aspects of social work intervention with families and children.)

2.4 Summary

In this part of the unit we have looked at three dilemmas which are central to the practice of social work: the tension between personal troubles and public issues; the tension between care and control; and the issue of whose interests are served by social work.
Before going any further, it would be useful if you stopped for a few moments and made a note in your own words of what you think are the central issues of these three dilemmas of social work, and compare them with my notes below. This is one way of checking that you've grasped the central points of the section, and should also be useful when you want to revise the unit later.

**Personal troubles and public issues.** Social work tends to focus on individual cases, and to look for individual or familial solutions to social problems. But if such problems have social rather than individual or familial causes, such intervention may be inappropriate, and may conceal the 'social facts' of the problem. Given that the majority of social work clients live on or below the poverty line, the assumption that social workers are dealing with 'private problems' may be misleading.

**Care and control.** Although social work is seen as one of the 'caring professions', much of its work involves the exercise of power over the client. Both where social workers have statutory powers and where clients seek social work assistance voluntarily, social workers may exercise judgement about the clients' behaviour and want them to behave differently. Because social workers have power – both over clients and over access to scarce resources – they are in a position to control clients, as well as to offer care.

**In whose interests?** Social work stands at the centre of potentially conflicting interests, caught in a conflict of loyalties between the client and society. Social work is supposed to 'harmonize' or bring together these different interests. Social workers have been criticized by client groups for the paternalism involved in the idea of being able to speak for, or represent, the client's interests.
3 THE SOCIAL WORK TASK: CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

There are a number of explanations for these dilemmas of social work which emphasize different aspects of the theory and practice of social work. This section looks at these different explanations. The first concerns the nature of social work knowledge – the information on which social workers are taught to base their judgements. The second concerns the relationship between the social worker and the client, and especially the distribution of power within it. The third and final explanation looks at the nature of social work as a profession and its place within the state.

3.1 Ideology, theory and practice in social work

In this section I want to explore the 'knowledge base' of social work, in particular the relationship between ideology and theory in the training of social workers. The tension between the view of the clients as 'self-determining' and the view of social problems as 'pathological' is one that is expressed in the basic structure of the professional theories of social work. Essentially, social workers have to cope with the paradox of recognizing the 'unique individuality and worth' of every individual, and the fact that they are working with clients who are seen as problems and therefore deviant in some way from the expected norms of social behaviour. The theories which have provided the centrepiece of social work knowledge in the post-war period have tended to emphasize, and even intensify, the distinction between the normal and the pathological. Let me start by considering the basic psychological approach which has formed the cornerstone of much social work teaching the analysis of human growth and development.

This approach is based on the identification of the different 'life stages' through which each individual must pass: childhood, adolescence, maturity, the 'mid-life crisis', and old age. Each of these stages involves the individual in a number of developmental 'tasks' which they must accomplish in order to 'mature normally', and each stage has distinctive psychological problems associated with it which may get in the way of normal development. These stages correspond to universal biological and psychological 'dynamics'. Thus, adolescence is seen as based on the physical onset of puberty and the accompanying psychological dynamics of the search for greater personal autonomy the transition from a dependent child to an independent adult. The biological and psychological dynamics of this phase of life mean that it is a universally 'troubled' phase - a period of 'storm and stress'. But, fortunately, most adolescents, given the right sort of adult support through the family, mature normally: they 'grow out of it'. Unfortunately, some fail to cope with these 'developmental tasks' and become caught up in adolescent problems - delinquency, immature sexuality, the use of drugs, etc.

I hope it is clear from the brief description I have just given that such an approach has a number of very significant implications for how social problems are understood and responded to. Stop for a moment and think back over the work you have done on the course so far, and make a note of any of the implications you can think of. Then compare them with my list below.

1 The theory sees human development as a natural and universal process. As you probably remember from Block 1, seeing human development as a natural (or biological) process is to omit any concern with the 'social construction' of stages of life. Different societies organize the structure of life in different ways, and so influential are these processes of social construction that it is misleading to take the biological notion of 'development' as the main focus of attention. The idea of universality of the processes of development means that cross-cultural differences (either between societies or within one society) are ignored - or treated as 'deviations' from the universal process.
2 The main institution which the theory recognizes is the family. However, the family is not seen as a social institution but as the natural and universal institution through which the universal processes of maturation take place. Not unsurprisingly, this universal family most resembles the Western middle-class nuclear family. Where other patterns of domestic life are considered, they tend to be viewed as deviations from this 'normal' case.

3 As a consequence of this naturalizing and universalizing approach to human development, differences are treated as deviations from an assumed normality. As such, differences need to be explained as failures to achieve this normality, rather than as different patterns of social organization. In this light, 'single-parent families' are intrinsically deviant in that they fail to achieve the normal status of having two parents, and are consequently viewed as a 'problem' to be solved.

4 By taking this universal view of human processes and social problems, the approach focuses on 'maturation' and 'family processes' as both the major cause of problems and the focal point for intervention to solve such problems. The theory of 'human growth and development' in social work was perfectly matched to an emphasis on casework methods and skills directed at intervening in 'human relationships' (which were, of course, primarily family relationships).

Let's consider in a bit more detail one of the theories that was most influential in social work education during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. John Bowlby's work on 'maternal deprivation'. In 1951 Bowlby prepared a monograph for the World Health Organization on childhood disturbance. It was published as Child Care and the Growth of Love by Penguin in 1963 and was rarely off the reading lists for child-care and social work training courses until the late 1970s. The work was a study of emotional disturbance in childhood occasioned by the separation of the child from its family, in particular from its mother. It provided a radical challenge to existing child-care policy, which had laid priority on removing children from families where they were thought to be in danger of neglect or lack of care, and placing them into local authority residential care.

Contrary to this established wisdom, Bowlby argued that such policies failed to recognize central processes in the development of the child, particularly the significance for the child's emotional development of the 'bond' or 'attachment' which it formed to its mother. Based on Freudian analysis, Bowlby's argument was that breaking this maternal bond caused emotional trauma for the child — 'maternal deprivation' — and that child-care policies should be revised to take account of this central feature of childhood development. The study was enormously influential, giving rise to increased interest in fostering and adoption as alternatives to residential care, and also creating a policy of 'keeping the family together' as an imperative in social work with children. In the intervening years Bowlby's study has been subjected to a wide variety of criticisms (for example, Rutter, 1972), but what concerns me most here is the use to which it was put in social work.

The popularity of Bowlby within social work coincided with a more general ideological concern about 'maternal deprivation' in post-war British society. The 1950s saw considerable agitation about the social problems supposedly caused by 'working mothers', especially the phenomenon of 'latchkey kids'. Working mothers were identified as the cause of adolescent emotional disturbance, juvenile delinquency, and teenage immorality, all of which were thought to be increasing dramatically in the post-war years. Bowlby's Freudian analysis of maternal bonding fitted ideally into this wider climate of opinion, providing the 'scientific' basis for those who thought women should stay at home and perform their 'natural' role as mothers. One part of this impact of Bowlby's ideas on social policy was through social work, where family casework aimed at 'improving' mothering skills and at the better adjustment of women to their 'natural' role. In this way social work was reaffirmed in its traditional orientation to the family — and in its traditional view of the sexual division of labour within the family.
In such ways the content of social work knowledge itself may play a role in maintaining the tensions between individual and social facts, and between care and control, through the way social work theory interacts with wider social ideologies – particularly those concerning the family and the dangers of violence and abuse within the family. This is not to say that all social workers simply carry out the theories they are taught in their practice with clients. But the fact that such theories do not directly translate into practice does not mean that they are insignificant. In some important ways, theory did influence social work practice, and the idea of ‘maternal deprivation’ played a substantial role in family casework. But even where theory did not have a direct impact, it was nonetheless influential simply by closing the door on the exploration of alternatives. Alternative understandings of the family which might affect social work practice only emerged with the ‘anti-psychiatry’ movement of the late 1960s (which provided a critique of orthodox psychology of the family and pointed to some of the destructive dynamics of family life), and there, more significantly, with the revival of feminism and its analysis of the unequal distribution of power and the dangers of violence and abuse within the family. In that sense, Bowlby and the wider view of family dynamics of which it was part played a major role in shaping and limiting the possibilities of social work intervention.

3.2 Different worlds: social workers and clients

When looking at the COS practice of social work in Unit 13 we noted some hostility among those who received COS investigation and assistance, and Hobson’s critique highlighted the problem of the moral superiority assumed by middle-class social workers. In this section I want to consider the contemporary state of relations between social workers and their clients to see whether some of these themes still continue. Relatively little research has been done on clients’ views of social workers (or any other professionals, for that matter). In part this reflects the difficulty of carrying out such research, but it also reflects an assumption that professionals’ services will be gratefully received by clients. However, what research there is suggests a rather different picture – in which client reactions range from appreciation of the help and assistance provided, through confused bafflement, to outright hostility. Tim Robinson has summarized the existing evidence on client views of social services, and has identified the following areas of tension:

Communication
Without much doubt the commonest complaints concern the quantity and quality of communication with the services and, especially, with the helping professionals themselves. Many of these complaints are well summed up in the words of the parents of a mentally handicapped child who wrote: ‘We need to be taken into the confidence of those who have professional skills, not offered a few crumbs of information when somebody else decides how much it is good for us to know’.

The balance of power
Perhaps the next most common dissatisfactions are about some aspect of the balance of power between professional and client. Obviously not all want a completely egalitarian relation, but many clearly feel some dissatisfaction about aspects of their relative powerlessness. To quote a group of parents of mentally handicapped children who put their experiences into a book, ‘We share a common category in the eyes of professionals in that parents are tragic-comic figures, not to be informed, not to be listened to, not to be recognised as equals, not to be treated as people’.

Clients’ subjective feelings
These criticisms have their obverse side in the comments some clients make about feeling ill at ease, lost or belittled in their encounters with services. They reflect the lack of information given to clients, the strangeness of these settings by comparison with everyday life, and often their impersonality. There are also comments about being made to feel irrelevant, stupid, irrational, unstable, even a positive hindrance to the professionals (Robinson, 1972, pp 9–16).
Can you think of any reasons why these tensions between social workers and clients should exist? Make a note of any you can think of, and compare them with the discussion below.

How are we to understand the causes of these complaints? In the nineteenth century one of the key factors was the class differences between caseworkers and those whom they visited, with the poor resenting the tones of moral superiority adopted by those in positions of economic and social advantage. Such distinctions continue to characterize the relationship between social workers and clients. The bulk of social work clients are drawn from the poorest sections of British society, while the majority of social workers in Britain, although they may not be recruited from the new ‘urban gentry’, are nevertheless a section of white-collar workers in relatively secure employment. However, this seems considerably less of a ‘social gulf’ than that which characterized casework in late nineteenth-century Britain, and the gulf between workers and clients perhaps needs more substantial explanation.

Robinson himself suggests that a stronger answer is supplied by considering the professional socialization of the helping professions, in which people acquire not only the formal skills of the profession but also the ‘informal culture’ which has the effect of separating them from their clients. We have already seen that some of the formal knowledge of social work might constitute a barrier to being able to deal with some sorts of social problems that social workers encounter. But the informal culture of a profession is in some ways a more substantial barrier, since one of its purposes is to enable professionals to cope with the ‘difficulties’ which clients represent. Robinson describes this professional ‘folk wisdom’ as follows:

It is typically more ‘down to earth’, concerned with the day-to-day practicalities of doing the job in the face of the realities of the situation. Much of it seems to be concerned with the problems of managing different kinds of clients and situations and is therefore of major importance in understanding professional—client relationships. There is certainly evidence from both the teaching and medical (and related) professions that many professionals subscribe to a very sharply polarized view of themselves in contrast to their clients. This view characterizes them as expert, objective, detached, and active whilst the ideal client is seen as either wholly passive and trusting or, at most, just cooperative, providing information asked of him, and following advice and suggestions made to him (Robinson, 1978, pp. 20–1).

Among other things, this means that the ‘active’ client (one, for example, who insists on the principle of ‘self-determination’) is a problem for the professional—needing extra negotiation, being demanding, troublesome, unwilling to accept what she is offered, and so on. Satyamurti’s study of social workers, which I quoted earlier, also revealed aspects of the way in which the informal culture of social work provided images of clients.

Stereotyping the client involved emphasizing some qualities and ignoring others so as to render reasonable a situation in which social workers were often behaving towards clients as parents towards children. The exercise of authority could be felt as more tolerable if it could be seen as in some way asked for by the clients themselves. If clients could be seen as inviting control, either directly or by virtue of their behaviour or personal characteristics, then this made the social worker’s job easier. Thus, although social workers complained constantly about their clients, in fact they had an interest in sustaining the client stereotype with which they worked. One aspect of this stereotype was to see clients (particularly childcare clients) as irresponsible, disorganised, demanding and dependent (Satyamurti, 1979, pp. 100 and 99).
These observations suggest a view of clients in the informal culture of social work which is a long way from the professional ethos of valuing the client's unique worth and respecting her individuality. But we must also note that this sort of informal culture is not unique to social work. Most occupational groups develop such cultures as ways of adapting to and managing the situations in which they work (It may be that Open University students also develop informal cultures which contain ways of coping with the Open University – including stereotypes of people who write course units, of course tutors, of the university's administration, etc.) Nevertheless, if this picture of the informal culture of social work is an accurate one, it does raise problems about the nature of the assistance which social work offers to its clients. Particularly since that assistance is supposed to involve the 'personal relationship' between worker and client as one of its core elements. To understand the 'defensiveness' of social work's informal culture it may be useful to look further at the nature of the social work task, and ask what it is that social workers need to defend themselves against.

3.3 The social work task: an ambiguous profession

So far in this unit I have been referring to social work as a profession (as one of the 'caring professions', as having a 'professional knowledge and culture'). In doing so I have adopted a convention common to writers about social work, and within the field of social work itself. But this use of 'profession' needs to be investigated a little more carefully, and I hope that in doing so I may be able to identify some of the reasons for the tensions within social work that were considered in Section 2.

The claim that social work is a profession is of considerable social significance. 'Professionals' command a degree of social respect and status by virtue of being members of a profession – they are understood to possess a form of expert knowledge in their chosen field such that their views are sought and listened to, and they are expected to behave 'professionally' – that is, in accordance with certain established standards and ethics. In this way professionalism translates into a form of social power – not merely the power to command a 'professional income', but the power to lay claim to an area of social life as their field of expertise. For social work to claim to be a profession is also a claim to this form of social power – to a professional expertise over the field of social problems. In terms of social work's history, the development of a 'scientific' model of social work, based on scientific knowledge and a rigorous method of intervention, was important in creating a 'professional' approach and shedding the image of middle-class charity and snooping into the lives of the poor – that is, changing the tones of moral superiority into those of professional expertise.

Nevertheless, this claim to professionalism in social work is an ambiguous one, and gives rise to some elaborate discussions in writings on social work about whether social work is 'really' a profession which could be equated with medicine or law, or whether it should be considered a pseudo-profession or semi-profession because it does not show all the traits associated with the original professions. I do not intend to follow all of these tortuous debates here. Instead I want to draw attention to some of the characteristics of social work which mark it out as an 'ambiguous' profession. The most significant of these is social work's relationship with the state. This relationship is important in two ways. First, social workers are employed as workers by the state. They are employees of a large organization, rather than being self-employed or partners in a professional enterprise. This fundamentally affects the degree of autonomy which they can exercise in their practice. They are bound by the rules, regulations, procedures and controls of the government bureaucracy for which they work (rather than by the rules of the professional body to which they belong). Secondly, the relationship is important because the state also 'delivers' many of social work's clients through the statutory duties which social service departments must perform, neither social workers nor clients enter into a freely chosen 'contract', both parties are obliged to take part.
In an important analysis of professionalism, Terence Johnson has drawn a distinction between this situation (which he calls ‘state mediation’) and the traditional model of professions (‘collegiate professions’). He argues that the ‘professional role’ of the social worker is inextricably entangled with her role as a ‘state worker’ – the employee of a state bureaucracy – and this produces conflicting pressures.

**Q What conflicts does Johnson identify?**

Divergent and sometimes opposed interests are generated between those in managerial and non-managerial posts and between the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’, that is, between the administration and the field workers in a given service. We may find that the simultaneous existence of organisational and occupational affiliations affects the extent to which individuals become committed to administrative ends or the problems of ‘client’ groups. A ‘client’ orientation is likely to be characteristic of practitioners close to the ‘periphery’ whose relationships with their ‘clients’ are more meaningful and immediate than those with their socially distant colleagues and superiors. In recent years, there have been a number of cases, particularly in the United States, where the ‘authorities’ have complained that social welfare officers and field social workers have become ‘overinvolved’ in the plight of their charges (Johnson, 1972, p 81).

From this viewpoint, social work – as one of these mediating professions – is characterized by a tension between the attempt to respond to ‘client needs’ and the effort to administer and control the provision of services. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the complaints of practising social workers is the extent to which ‘the system’ gets in the way of their work with clients. Johnson argues that it is likely in this situation that there will be a divergence of interest between those in managerial positions (charged with maintaining efficiency) and those in direct contact with clients.
These splits in interest and orientation between administrative or managerial control and 'client-centredness' have been present in British social work in the 1970s and 1980s. Johnson locates these in the structure of social work as a state agency, rather than in, for example, the 'softheartedness' of field social workers. Johnson's concept of state mediation can, I think, be used to understand some of the tensions discussed in Section 2 - in the sense that these are also linked to the place of social work within the state.

3.4 Social work as state mediation

Social workers' tasks are primarily set by the state, through its relationship with other agencies. On the one hand, its involvement with clients as diverse as juvenile delinquents, the mentally ill and the disabled takes place on terms defined by other state agencies - the criminal law (juvenile delinquency) and the health services (mental and physical illness). In the same way that nineteenth-century social work emerged on the margins of institutions of social control, so contemporary social work exists on the margins of other agencies' involvement in social problems. On the other hand, a large number of the client problems which social workers have to deal with also relate to state agencies - housing, social security, fuel supplies, education, and so on. In its role of `humanizing' the state (making it more responsive to individuals) social work mediates between these other state agencies and the client, at one and the same time trying to make other agencies responsive to the individual quality of the client's 'case' and also trying to find ways of fitting the client into the existing categories of state provision.

In important ways this means that the commitment to the 'uniqueness' of the individual client cannot be maintained within social work. The resources to provide assistance are shaped by administrative and legal categories which the client must 'fit' in order to have access to them. For the most part, then, what counts as a 'need' and how it can be met are prescribed by the state (not by the client or by the social worker, since social work commands few material resources of its own). Social workers are, therefore, often involved in negotiating between what clients see as their needs and what the state recognizes as needs.

Similarly, it is the state which defines social problems (such as delinquency and mental illness) and how they may be responded to. Social work is one of a variety of means available for dealing with 'deviants'. In the case of delinquency, it exists alongside fines, borstals, attendance centres and detention centres. Again, it is the form of control intended to be 'humanizing', both through the personal relationship between the client and the worker, and by virtue of usually taking place with the offender still 'in the community' (and family) rather than being removed to an institution. Here the social worker is again responsible for mediating between the supposed 'disturbance' of the young offender and the state's requirement of law-abiding behaviour.

These conditions have led some social workers, and outside critics, to talk about social work as a form of 'containment' of social problems. By 'humanizing' and 'individualizing' needs and problems, social workers were expected to 'cool out' problem populations and to keep solutions at an individual level. Care, they argued, was not the opposite of control but the means through which social workers were expected to exercise control. This 'human face' of the state was, in fact, a particularly insidious form of control since it worked through a personal and caring relationship, thus concealing the control that was being exercised. In this view social workers acted as a sort of 'pressure valve', providing a focal point for grievance, distress and problems which might otherwise appear in forms of collective action (e.g. demands for the alleviation of poverty).
If this idea of ‘state mediation’ is useful in understanding the tension between care and control, does it also help in thinking about the features of the professional ‘cultures’ mentioned earlier? Make a note of any connection you can think of.

Let’s first consider the formal culture. The claim by social work to be professional and based on scientific knowledge makes sense in terms of ‘depoliticizing’ social work – making it appear as a neutral and expert response to social problems. In this way, the old connections between social work, class divisions and the tones of moral superiority are avoided. It is no longer the imposition of the moral values of one class upon another, but appears as the neutral provision of assistance by experts to citizens – as their right. But contained within this claim of ‘professional and scientific neutrality’ we have seen that social work has been based on forms of knowledge which stress the division between normality and pathology, and which identify the main causes of social problems as being within the individual and the family. Such knowledge has provided the theoretical basis for the practice of ‘cooling out’ or ‘containment’ – turning social problems into individual ones.

Some of the features of social work’s ‘informal culture’ can also be understood in this light. Let’s look at the problems in this culture around the idea of the ‘client’. We considered in Section 2.3 the way in which social work ‘stereotypes’ client groups as problems. This distancing of the social worker from the client can be seen as one of the responses to the tension of mediation in social work as a state agency. It is a defence against taking the client’s view too seriously (a view also encouraged by the formal culture which stresses that social workers possess ‘insight’ which the client does not). This minimizes some of the potential conflicts between client-defined needs and the administrative or bureaucratic definitions of need and response within which the social worker must work. But, as Johnson pointed out, the informal culture has also been characterized by the opposite response – the claim that field social workers take the client too seriously, becoming excessively ‘client-centred’ and seeing the agency, and the wider social system, as the problem. Thus, too, has a basis in the formal culture. You will remember that social workers are expected to empathize with their clients – to see the situation as the client sees it. In practice, social workers, in this mediating role, are expected to walk a fine line between ‘empathy’ and ‘distance’ (between the client view and the agency view), and it is not surprising that the informal culture oscillates between these two poles. The demand for ‘balance’ in social workers is an inherently unstable one, for the social worker is asked to negotiate between the demands and pressures of the client and the agency.

3.5 Summary

You will find it useful to try to summarize the main points of this section in your own words before comparing them with my comments below. The central question to be answered is: how can we explain the tensions and dilemmas of state social work?
I have tried to argue that an understanding of the creation of social work as a system of 'state mediation' allows us to grasp why social work is structurally full of tensions. The role of mediation involves contradictory pressures being placed on social workers – from the client, from the 'professional culture', from other state agencies, and from the management system of social work. These tensions are not accidental occurrences or the consequences of the 'peculiarities' of the people employed as social workers. Rather they are built into the organization of state social work from the outset.

Social work contains the dilemmas we considered in Section 2 because it is itself the product of contradictory pressures. There are three different 'tasks' which social work is expected to accomplish in relation to the different client groups with which it deals. The first is to meet a limited range of needs among clients who are seen as deprived, disadvantaged or in distress (care, assistance and advice). Secondly, social work is expected to contain these 'problem populations', to 'manage' the potential conflicts between the needs of the poor and disadvantaged and the social arrangements within which they live (even where those social arrangements may be the source of the problems which the clients face). Thirdly, social work is expected to 'control' or 'police' those groups of clients who are seen as 'deviant' or 'dangerous' (to themselves or others). This mixture of expectations of social work highlights why social work can be described as being 'caught in the middle' and subject to tensions and dilemmas.
So far we have considered how the tensions and dilemmas which characterize social work were built into its origins as a state service. But since 1970 the conditions in which social work has been practised have changed considerably, and almost universally have changed for the worse. The onset of economic recession in the mid-1970s, the return of mass unemployment, and governments committed to reducing public expenditure have all had an impact on social work. At the same time, the growth of social work during the early 1970s made it more visible as a subject of public and political concern and criticism. The purpose of this part of the unit is to explore the impact of these changing conditions on social work in Britain.

4.1 Social work in recession

Britain’s worsening economy has had two different sorts of consequences for social workers. One affects the client population for social work, the other affects the resources with which social work responds to its clients. The Barclay Committee (National Institute for Social Work, 1982), in summarizing research on social work’s clients, noted that ‘they tend to come from the neediest and most socially deprived areas’ (p 11). I argued earlier that they are, in the main, the ‘residual and dependent’ sections of the working class — those who are cut off from the labour market and are dependent on state benefits for economic survival. Economic decline, therefore, has had a straightforward and predictable effect on social work, simply by increasing the numbers of potential clients through greater levels of unemployment. Coupled with the increase in single-parent households and the elderly poor, social work in the 1980s thus faces a massively expanded clientele. The Barclay Committee saw this population as concentrated in areas of social deprivation, and the social effects of the economic recession in Britain have themselves been concentrated in just these areas along the north/south divide, in the already declining manufacturing cities and towns, and in the inner cities. Ten years of recession have intensified the concentration of poverty and deprivation, and expanded the ‘residual and dependent’ sections of the working class.

Since 1976 one of the responses of both Labour and Conservative governments to Britain’s declining economy has been to try to limit levels of public expenditure. These limitations have had three types of consequence for social work. First, as other welfare services are limited or reduced (such as council housing), so more people are likely to encounter more problems (homelessness, getting rehoused or having housing repairs carried out) and turn to social workers for help and advice in solving those problems. Secondly, as other public agencies come under financial pressure, they are likely to refer more clients to social work agencies to solve their problems (for non-payment of fuel bills, for example). Thirdly, Social Services Departments themselves have limited resources with which to respond to the increased needs of an increased number of clients. In 1980 the Personal Social Services Committee (PSSC — the advisory body of social service provision, later abolished) reported on ‘cuts in local authority spending on personal social services’ and noted that direct services to all groups of clients were being affected, including the ‘most vulnerable’. All varieties of service — domiciliary, community and residential — were being affected, and inequalities of provision were worsening.

Q: What emerges in the 1980s is a picture of increasing demand being met by social workers with declining resources. What consequences do you think this was likely to have for social work practice?

The three main responses of social work agencies are tersely summarized by Ronald Walton, drawing on the PSSC’s findings: ‘social service departments are likely to concentrate on the fulfilment of statutory obligations, on crises rather than preventive work, and on high priority rather than low priority groups’ (1982, p 31).

What does Walton mean? The ‘fulfilment of statutory obligations’ means that Social Services Departments concentrate on providing defined client groups with the minimum level of service which they are legally required to produce (for the mentally
ill, chronically sick and disabled, etc.) It also means a concentration of effort where they have legal duties, such as in cases of known or suspected child abuse, or working with young offenders. ‘Crisis’ work is the involvement in cases where there is a high degree of risk or danger from clients to themselves or others (families becoming homeless, child abuse, the potentially dangerous cases of mental illness), as opposed to work which aims to prevent crises occurring. As less preventive work is done, so the likelihood of social workers having to respond to crises increases. Finally, an indication of the ‘high and low priorities’ of social work is given by the Barclay Committee’s comment on the division of duties in social work teams:

Studies comparing caseloads of social workers of differing seniority tend to indicate that senior social workers and qualified social workers carry proportionately more cases of children in care, families with multiple problems or people with mental handicap or illness, whereas unqualified, inexperienced or assistant social workers carry proportionately more cases of physically handicapped or elderly people.

It is also suggested that social workers may have a preference for the intensive counselling which they see as more necessary with children and their parents than with elderly people. (National Institute for Social Work, 1982, p. 11)

These comments suggest that political, organizational and professional views of ‘high priority’ in social work fit quite closely together. Since 1978, social work agencies have been expected by the government to emphasize work with children and families, particularly in cases of delinquency and known or suspected cases of child abuse. The growing legal and public concern about child abuse has also led to a lot of organizational innovation in social work aimed at ensuring that such cases receive a higher level of attention. The professional culture of social work, as the Barclay Committee suggests, places a high value on casework with families and children, which is perhaps seen as ‘real social work’ (involving the social work skills of counselling and intervention).

The consequence of this is that other forms of need and client groups suffer disproportionately from the declining resources available in social work. The disabled and elderly are highlighted particularly by the Barclay Committee. In important ways, then, the 1980s have seen an intensification of the dilemmas and tensions of social work. Growing material problems have seen an increase in the caseloads of social workers as the potential client population grows. At the same time, resources have not expanded to meet the needs of this larger population. Social work has responded with a narrowing of horizons – a greater concentration on statutory duties, a greater emphasis on a limited range of client groups, and a concentration on crisis work rather than prevention.

4.2 Social work and its critics

The growth of social work through the 1970s made it a much more significant and visible part of the welfare state in Britain. As such, it became a significant target for public and political scrutiny and criticism. Publicly, social workers became figures of controversy, particularly in cases of child abuse.

In such cases social work has been attacked for failing to intervene and protect children adequately for excessive interference in families, and for removing children unnecessarily. Politically, social work has been caught in the growing debate about, and criticisms of, the welfare state. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s a general commitment to the role of the welfare state had dominated British politics and, as we saw in Section 1, this ‘commitment to welfare’ played a major part in the development of state social work. By the mid-1970s, however, this consensus on welfare was succeeded by a growing array of criticism and demands for change from a variety of directions.

From the Left, social work was seen as part of the ‘failure of welfare’ to remedy material inequality. The persistence of poverty and its associated social problems was at the heart of this set of criticisms. Social work was criticized for the way in
which it individualized and contained problems which were based in social patterns (of inequality, poverty, homelessness, etc.) In terms reminiscent of Barbara Wootton’s comments in Section 1.4, these criticisms focused on the failure of the casework model to address the social realities of social problems. In addition, critics from the Left also focused on the power inequalities in social work’s relationship to its clients, and the way in which social work’s ‘care’ involved the exercise of ‘control’.

At the same time, feminist criticisms of welfare and social work’s place within it, drew attention to the ways in which welfare policy assumed a ‘natural’ sexual division of labour within the family, and in which welfare practice acted to reaffirm and sustain ‘conventional’ gender roles. Social work, as the most direct and immediate form of intervention into families, was seen as a particularly intrusive way of trying to enforce these norms of family life. Feminists were particularly insistent about the need to see the family as an institution which involved power inequalities, which could—and often did—take the form of violence and abuse. They were particularly influential in drawing attention to sexual abuse within the family, and to violence against women, at a time when social work saw abuse primarily in terms of the physical abuse and neglect of children. But most significant, perhaps, was their argument that violence and abuse were potential properties of ‘normal’ family life, rather than being the consequence of ‘deviant’ or ‘problem’ families.

As we saw earlier, such criticisms about social work’s assumptions, or value judgements, about ‘normality’ and ‘deviance’ were also raised from other quarters. Ethnic minorities challenged the appropriateness of many forms of social work intervention and assistance in an ethnically mixed society, and became increasingly alarmed by what they experienced as a mixture of patronizing ignorance,
assumptions of cultural superiority, and expressions of racism. Social work, like many other aspects of British society, was slow to adapt to the demands of working in an ethnically divided society. Such issues were sharpened by the fact that a high proportion of social work activity takes place precisely in those urban areas with large ethnic minority populations.

At the same time, social work was coming under attack from a range of client groups on the grounds of its assumptions that it could, and should, 'speak for' their needs and interests. As we noted earlier, client groups ranging from disabled people through mental patients to parents and children's rights organizations came to reject the power inequalities of the 'professional-client' relationship in social work, and the dependence of the client on the professional which that relationship implied. Instead, they argued for an ability to define their own needs and be assisted, rather than controlled, by social work.

Together, this range of criticisms of social work mounted a challenge to many of its professional assumptions and practices, suggesting, in fact, that social work's role of 'mediating' between the client and society tended to be structurally biased in favour of a narrow vision of society and its interests. In the terms used in Unit 10, these criticisms amounted to a demand that social work take account of being part of a society which was structurally unequal and culturally diverse, rather than working to an image of a society with one 'normal' style of life to which everyone could—and did—aspire.

As you saw in Block 2, these views of social and cultural diversity stand in sharp contrast to attempts to restore 'conventional' morality and conceptions of social order. These views were also linked to criticisms of the welfare state and social work from what has been called the 'New Right'. Some of these criticisms focused on the excessive cost (to the taxpayer) and economic inefficiency of state-provided welfare services, and their failure to allow individuals to make and pay for welfare 'choices' of their own. But they also addressed what they saw as the damaging effects of welfare (and social work in particular) on the family and conventional morality. Social work was seen as intruding into 'private' matters of family life and usurping the natural functions of the family in providing care and discipline for its members (especially children). As a consequence, parental rights and duties were being taken over by the state, and moreover by a liberal or 'permissive' group of state workers.

Social work was attacked for undermining standards of right and wrong, patterns of discipline and patterns of normal family life. State support for 'unconventional' households and living patterns, it was argued, had the effect of undermining traditional patterns, making it easier for the rise in single-parent families to take place, for example. Consequently, efforts by social work to respond to the first set of criticisms (towards a recognition of social and cultural diversity) were met with a strong insistence that social work had a responsibility to maintain conventional standards of morality, discipline and order.

Together, this range of criticisms from the right amounted to a double demand on social work. On the one hand, social work should intervene less, since welfare should be primarily a private matter, left to a combination of the natural 'caring' networks of family, friends and voluntary activity, and the market-based choices of welfare consumers. State welfare should become a 'safety net' or 'back-up' to such private welfare provision. On the other hand, the argument was that when social work did intervene, it should do so in a more firmly controlling way (e.g. in the case of juvenile delinquents), with the aim of reasserting morality, responsibility and self-discipline. In some cases the work of the COS (considered in Unit 13) has been held up as the model of what social work should aspire to (see, for example, Chapter 12 by Stephen Davies in the Course Reader)

In this section I have tried to provide only a brief overview of social work's critics. These will be considered more fully in Unit 20 in this block. Nevertheless, I hope that one thing is clear from this overview: that social work remains 'caught in the
middle' of conflicting demands and pressures. Its role of mediating between the
'individual and society' has, if anything, become more complex as political conflict
about the role of welfare (and thus what the terms 'individual and society' mean) has
increased.

4.3 Summary
This section of the unit has considered the contemporary state of social work by
focusing on two main areas: the impact of economic recession on social problems
and social work, and the growing political criticism of social work. In each of these
we can trace important continuities in the dilemmas, tensions and contradictions
which, I have suggested, characterize social work in modern Britain. The three
themes outlined in Section 3 of the unit have remained central to state social work
in the 1980s.

I would like you to make a note under each of the following headings about
the ways in which the developments of the 1980s have had an impact on the
three themes:

1. Personal troubles and public issues
2. Care and control
3. In whose interests?

5 CONCLUSION

In this unit we have been considering how social work has developed as part of the
welfare state in Britain. We have focused on some of the central issues and features
of that development and of social work generally, rather than looking at a detailed
picture of social work in practice. The subsequent units in this block will be taking a
closer look at some of the ways in which social work is organized and practised in
contemporary Britain.

This unit has identified some of the changes and continuities in the
development of social work in the post-war period. Stop for a moment and
think back over the unit. Make a note of what changes and continuities you
have noticed. Then compare them with my brief list, which follows.
1 The most important change is the development of state social work itself, with Social Services Departments becoming the main providers of social work services. Nevertheless, the focus of social work on the individual and the family has remained a central feature.

2 The tension identified in Unit 13 between ‘individual’ and ‘social’ facts in social work has continued, although the view of the individual has been changed by the growing significance of psychological theories and methods in the professional culture of social work.

3 Social work has continued to be a form of social intervention primarily directed at the poor. Poverty, dependency and powerlessness characterize all of the diverse ‘client groups’ with whom social work is concerned. The experience of economic recession has intensified this focus.

4 The tension between care and control has also continued, and has in some ways been intensified by the statutory powers which social workers are given over some client groups.

5 The tension between social workers’ views and client views remains a central feature of social work, although the main focus of the tension has moved from that of the class position of social workers and clients to the view of the clients within the formal and informal professional cultures of social work, and the power inequalities of the ‘professional relationship’.

6 The development of social work as an ‘ambiguous profession’ (shaped by its role of state mediation) has intensified the tensions and dilemmas within social work, especially those of care and control, between individual and social (or private problems and public issues), and about responsibility and accountability.

7 The role of social work in the state has also made it more visible as the subject of political and public criticisms. The political conflict over social work’s role in welfare has made the idea of mediating between the ‘individual and society’ more complex. This conflict has highlighted problems about what sort of society social work takes place within (e.g. arguments between ‘cultural diversity’ and ‘conventional morality’).

I hope your list bore some resemblance to mine, and that this unit has given you a useful grasp of some of the central issues surrounding social work in contemporary Britain. Finally, here is an extract from the introduction to the Barclay Committee’s report on social work. I’d like you to read it and think about how the arguments in this unit can help to explain the situation that is described here:

Too much is generally expected of social workers. We负荷 upon them unrealistic expectations and we then complain when they do not live up to them. There is confusion about the direction in which they are going and unease about what they should be doing and the way in which they are organized and deployed. When things go wrong the media have tended to blame them because it is assumed that their job is to care for people so as to prevent trouble arising. They operate uneasily on the frontier between what appears to be almost limitless needs on the one hand and an inadequate pool of resources to satisfy those needs on the other. (National Institute for Social Work, 1982, p vii)

In the remainder of this block we shall be exploring some aspects of contemporary social work. While you are studying the following units I hope you will keep in mind the discussion of the problems and tensions of social work which this unit (together with Unit 13) has presented.
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