Part I

The context of social work with adults
1 The evolution of social work

Georgina Koubel

Those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it.

(George Siddhartha)

Once upon a time, way back in the mists of the early 1970s, I was sitting on a train. Two women stood near me, talking quietly and earnestly to each other. Something in what they were saying caught my attention. They were discussing the situation of a family who were finding it very difficult to cope and the psychological implications for the children within that family of parents who found it both emotionally and materially difficult to meet their needs. I can’t say I remember any of the details of what they said and I had never heard of social work but something within me resonated and I knew that this was an area I would have to explore further. I can’t even remember how I found out what a social worker was, but I did, and within a few years I was on a social work course and for many years worked as a social worker, initially with the whole range of people using services and later specializing in working with adults. My interest and concern to understand the way people work, my fascination with the relationships between people and with the complex and sometimes contradictory interconnections between society’s perspectives and its more disadvantaged members continues to intrigue and challenge me as an academic as much as it did when I was a practitioner.

Introduction

In order to understand what social work is actually about, and to develop the ability to stand back from the demands of practice and cultivate a more critical perspective on the issues that are covered in considering the process of social work with adults, it is important to understand where the concepts that inform social work have come from and how they have changed over the period in which social work has been part of society. Without this broader perspective, it becomes too easy for social workers and other practitioners to get caught up in the day-to-day pressures of applying this particular policy and meeting those particular targets. This can potentially lead to practice that runs the risk of becoming routine, reactive and unreflective, forgetting the knowledge, skills and values that make social work the unique and meaningful interaction with
individuals, groups and communities that it should be. The aim of this chapter therefore is to enable practitioners within the profession to gain and retain the ability to think carefully about what they are doing and why they are doing it.

It is particularly important that those working in Adult Services should have a critical awareness of the changes and developments that have informed the evolution of social work. This will enable them to develop an objective understanding and a critical eye when considering the context and environment in which social work with adults operates. The first chapter will take a brief overview of the history and evolution of social work with adults from the Poor Law, paying particular attention to the transition from the political indifference of *laissez-faire* (let them be) through the collective principles of the welfare state to the beginnings of the ‘modernization’ agenda that led to the developments of care management and the changes that have emerged as a result. There will be analysis of the role of the social worker with adults, drawing on the underpinning and often contradictory concepts of charity and social justice that make social work so complex and interesting. Using reflective exercises and case examples, the chapter will start by considering:

- Where does the notion of social work with adults come from?
- Who are the kinds of adults who will need to engage with social services?
- What do you understand by the *laissez-faire* approach to welfare in the nineteenth century?
- What is the difference in considering the collective principles that underpin the Welfare State?
- What do you think are the principles that underpin current social welfare policy with adults?

**Learning outcomes**

By the end of the chapter, readers should have developed their understanding and awareness of:

- the social, political, legal and policy context of social work with adults, particularly the transition from a *laissez-faire* model of welfare to the collective principles of the welfare state model;
- how notions of stigma, the concept of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor and issues relating to resources and dependency have affected the historical development of social work with adults;
- the need for understanding of different perspectives in social work and social care in order to maintain critical reflection and analysis of the context in which practitioners operate.

The intention is to ensure that practitioners in Adult Social Work develop the habits of reflection and critical analysis (Brown and Rutter 2008; Knott and Scragg 2010). Throughout the book we will look at ways in which practitioners can be helped
to develop habits of critical thinking and reflection, which are no more than the ability to question where necessary practices that may be taken for granted, and to think consciously and conscientiously about their own practice. For practitioners, understanding how the tides of social work ebb and flow can help to avoid the sense of being flooded by the demands of the job or overwhelmed by the inevitable changes and challenges that will arise. Crucially, this level of awareness provides the opportunity for a better and more considered engagement with people who use services.

Clearly this is a lot to cover in a relatively brief account so I have separated the evolution of social work into two chapters. This, the first part, will look at how social work has evolved from the early days of the Poor Law to the comparative consensus around the roles and functions of social work that appeared to operate following the development of the welfare state up to the end of the 1970s. The development of social work will necessarily be considered initially within the wider context of the concepts, perspectives and ideologies that have contributed to the formation of an idea that could be called ‘social work’.

The following chapter will look at the modernization of social work and will focus more specifically on issues relating to social work with adults. In some ways this division reflects the changes that have been taking place within social work in the move from generic, inclusive services to increasingly specialized and marginalized practice. We will consider these ideas in more detail as we go on.

The first question we ask of anyone who applies to become a social worker is what they think social work is. In fact we split it into three questions:

- What is social work?
- What do social workers do?
- Why are social workers necessary?

Over the next two chapters (and in fact throughout the book) we will try to address the issues that underpin these three deceptively simple questions.

**Defining social work**

In his helpful basic introduction to social work, Horner (2009) highlights two contrasting definitions that will help to explore the diverse elements that inform social work. The first is from the Association of Schools of Social Work and International Federation of Social Workers (2004 cited in Horner 2009: 3), which claims:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.
Another definition is provided by Jacqui Smith, a former Labour Home Secretary, who saw the role and function of social work somewhat differently. She says:

Social work is a very practical job. It is about protecting people and changing their lives, not about being able to give a fluent and theoretical explanation about why they got into difficulties in the first place. (Social work training must equip) social workers to demonstrate the practical application of skills and knowledge and their ability to solve problems and provide hope for people relying on their support.

(DH 2002b)

Reflective exercise

• What do you think are the key similarities and differences between the opinions expressed in these two statements?
• Which of these statements fits more closely and coherently with your own understanding of social work?
• Which statement do you prefer?
• Why do you prefer it?

Both statements highlight the importance of social work being knowledge-based and make it clear that the function of social work is to help and support those who need services. Jacqui Smith’s view focuses on the importance of the practical application of this knowledge and uses some interesting language around the role of social work being to ‘solve problems and provide hope’ for people who use services. There are some differences in emphasis in relation to the importance of the practical application within the IFSW definition but they also talk about the importance of problem-solving and enhancing well-being.

There are, however, a number of crucial differences, and these are important because they lead us back to the sources of social work and reflect the diversity of the origins of social work. Both definitions emphasize change but in the IFSW version the key term is ‘social change’ while Jacqui Smith’s summation talks about changing people’s lives. In this latter definition it is the people (or their lives) that have to change while in the IFSW definition it is the role of the social work profession to promote social change. In other words, intervention depends on where the problem is located, whether social work operates to address the inequalities of society that need to be challenged on a political or structural level, or within the lives of people who need services, which can be improved by social work intervention at the level of the individual or family.

A further fundamental difference is that the IFSW places the principles of rights, empowerment and social justice at the forefront of their definition while the statement by Jacqui Smith, without any overt reference to social work values, makes social work practice all sound rather simple and straightforward. Of course it’s not a matter of one or the other but the ethical challenges that practitioners are facing are often more complicated than outsiders appreciate.
Most decisions in social work involve a complex interaction of ethical, political, technical and legal issues which are all interconnected. Our values will influence how we interpret the law.

(Banks 2006: 12)

Within the media, the most common representation of social work is that of a statutory social worker who has either misused her power to intervene inappropriately or who has failed to intervene when she should have done. While it is easy enough to look in hindsight at what should have happened and to find a scapegoat to blame for the terrible things that can happen to children and vulnerable adults, these tragedies do highlight the need for social workers to acknowledge the power they possess and to acquire the skills and reflective capacity to sensitively balance the care and control components of the job. This tension can lead to limited public understanding of the social worker’s remit and a lack of appreciation of the difficulty of the decisions that sometimes have to be made in respect of children or adults who may be vulnerable.

It is the fact of social work’s potency – being replete with assumed and ascribed power – that, to a large degree, explains its contested and controversial identity.

(Horner 2009: 5)

One way of trying to understand these issues is to look in a bit more detail at the origins of social work and how it has developed into the collection of knowledge, skills and values that inform social work as it is practised today.

Social work as an identifiable concept can arguably be traced back to the inception of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) which as:

. . . the first organisation to which social work today can trace a direct lineage, was called into being and given the task of coordinating both voluntary associational charity and the state provision under the Poor Laws.

(Pierson 2011: 17)

This assertion already contains the seeds of further questions, such as the issue of the relationship between social work, charitable organizations and the state. While this appears to be a modern conundrum in view of cuts to welfare services and the promotion of the Big Society and the assumption of individual responsibility (Koubel and Bungay 2012) rather than depending on the state to provide, the question of who should receive services and who should provide them has been a contested area for centuries.

A brief historical overview may help to clarify why and how social work came into being. In order to make sense of what social work means, we have to draw some links with the way in which society has developed and the beliefs and ideas that informed people’s attitudes and values in relation to work with vulnerable or disadvantaged individuals.

The role of the Poor Laws is particularly interesting, as these provided the main source of support for people beyond any provided by their own families or community.
This was the role of the parishes, which were charged under the Poor Law with the provision of ‘material relief’ in cash or kind to people who would otherwise be completely destitute. From early times there was a relationship between religion and assistance or alms, and in the normally settled and largely unchanging medieval society where everyone knew their place, there was an expectation that those with money and status owed some kind of obligation to those who for whatever reason were unable to support themselves. However, the reasons for the formation of the original Elizabethan Poor Law in 1601 (and perhaps even more so with the later amendment of the Poor Law in 1834) could be seen to have been the fear of challenge, if not revolt, by the poorest classes just as much as a commitment to the ideal of Christian charity and help for the needy (Pierson 2011).

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, individuals and families flocked in great numbers from the countryside to the towns and cities. There, it was believed, there were opportunities to achieve through paid employment a standard of living that would have been impossible to aspire to in their small agriculturally based communities. The Industrial Revolution was undoubtedly a time of great development and change in the United Kingdom, and not a few individuals made great fortunes from the industry and ideas generated by these changes. However, for others this mass migration to urban centres had a number of unfortunate consequences.

The first of these was that individuals who had impairments or disadvantages could not compete in situations of fierce competition within the marketplace. As people flooded into the new conurbations such as Manchester, Liverpool and London, rural communities became fragmented and disconnected. The parishes that had supported the few older and disabled people in their midst were no longer able to do so. Additionally there was a strong belief among industrialists and politicians, who were the people who held the power in the towns, that the only way this revolution could work (to their advantage) would be to limit to the absolute minimum any intervention by the state. This was called *laissez-faire*, which basically means let it be, don’t interfere.

Thus the picture of the early nineteenth century is of a piece: rapid movement from country to city, poorly built urban housing, poor sanitation and the doctrine of laissez-faire all arrived, historically speaking, at the same time. (Pierson 2011: 7)

The concept of laissez-faire also led to a hardening of attitudes towards those who were for any reason unable to compete in this harsh new world. In 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed, limiting the provision of ‘outdoor relief’, i.e. the benefits that it had been possible for people to receive in order for them to remain living in the community. The notion of ‘less eligibility’ was introduced to ensure that no one could live better on ‘relief’ than they could even on the lowest of wages. In addition to the hardship this caused many people, there was a deliberate attempt to deter people from even applying for help by the use of the weapons of shame and stigma, so that in addition to their travails, people were made to feel guilty about even asking for help.
These questions also challenged individuals in the nineteenth century who were thinking about those people who were unable to support themselves. Charitable societies were set up to address the problems of those who were seen to be indigent through no fault of their own; these often included an awareness of the plight particularly of orphaned children, and sometimes those who were severely and visibly disabled were cared for in hospitals. Others who could not provide for themselves or their family (through age or illness, for example) had to enter the work houses or the poor houses as they were known in Scotland. Conditions were extremely harsh, and in addition this inability to remain independent was seen as a source of stigma and shame.

However, the struggle to survive within the unmitigated market economy of the industrial revolution was so severe that it did lead to an increase in awareness among some elements of the emerging Victorian middle classes. Authors such as Charles Dickens and other philanthropists highlighted the plight of the ‘poor and needy’. Although there was a general belief that those who fell into poverty were usually themselves to blame through their own weakness of character and intemperate habits, there was also a dawning recognition that for some the conditions of the industrial society contributed at least partly to their plight. Poor housing and sanitation, for example, led to many illnesses that made people unable to work, and within some quarters of society, there was a recognition that there were people who through no fault of their own might be in need of external assistance to acquire the Victorian virtues of thrift, individual responsibility and sober behaviour (Pierson 2011).

The Society for the Organisation of Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendacity [sic] was founded in 1869. It was soon to change its name to the Charity Organisation Society, the organization that could be said to have ‘invented’ the key philosophies and principles that underpin modern-day social work. Often it was remarkable individuals who led the reforms at this time, and the Head of this innovation, Octavia Hill, was no exception. She believed that people who required assistance should be valued and respected, and that a supportive and empathic relationship could aid them in changing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflective exercise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Some of the concepts we have been talking about may have struck a chord with you. Think about the way society now regards people who require help or assistance and try to answer as honestly as you can the following questions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you think as a society we still have the concept of the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ claimant for benefits and services?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you think notions of shame and stigma still affect people who access services, perhaps particularly social services?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Going back to the earlier discussion about human rights and social work values, do you think everyone should be entitled to services if they need them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Should people have to meet some kind of eligibility criteria and if so how do you think this should be decided?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who, at the end of the day, should pay for these services?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
their behaviour and improving their circumstances. She recognized the impact of poor housing and the damaging effects of poverty, although she did not necessarily see it as a relevant part of the help provided. She set up a system of regular lady visitors who went to see the families to help them with issues of budgeting, child care, and so on. They became a contact outside the family who would be there to help and support people – so long as they also made some effort to help themselves.

The role of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) visitors was to form an empathic, caring relationship with those they visited on a regular basis but also to carry out assessments as to whether, with their support, these families and individuals could be helped to acquire the important Christian values of honesty, sobriety, self-reliance and hard work. Some small amount of money or other material support might be made available if the people could demonstrate their commitment to these values but in general the COS did not see its remit as the provision of ‘relief’ or benefits. However, it was believed that these empathic and supportive relationships could help people change their ways and aspire to these qualities. This process was called ‘casework’, and the values underpinning it included ideas of active citizenship and the view that people should be seen as more than merely economic units of production.

Reflective exercise

- Does this sound to you like the kind of issues and values that social workers might be interested in today?
- Are the processes familiar from your understanding of social work?
- Are there aspects of the way this was set up that you would disagree with?
- What other ideals and values do you think social workers use today?

If we look back at the original definitions of social work, it is possible to see that another facet of social work is the recognition of the changes and developments that society needs to undergo. Although the COS could acknowledge the influence of poverty and the environment, they focused their interventions on the needs of individuals and families. However, among other people at the time, such as T.H. Green who lectured at Oxford University and influenced the emerging ideas of the Liberal Party (and later the Labour Party), the belief grew that the state had a responsibility towards its populace. He and other philanthropists highlighted the necessity not simply for people to change their ways but for the place of social reform in promoting the well-being, not just of those who needed assistance but of the whole population.

Other groups such as the workers’ guilds, particularly in the North of England, located the community rather than the state or the individual as the target for intervention, and many provided assistance within their local communities. In other parts of the country the rise of the settlement societies, where individual workers would go to live among the poorest members of society to enable communities to support and enable each other through educational, social and cultural events, led to another way of looking at social work which later became known as community work (Healy 2012).
At this stage we can start to see a number of threads which are being braided together to form the different elements that make up social work today. The work of the COS with its casework and emphasis on the importance of the ‘therapeutic’ relationship, individual home visits, assessment of needs and the provision of help and support (not necessarily material) to facilitate personal change or growth reflects pretty closely the processes of social work today.

The idea of targeting neighbourhoods or communities as both a point of intervention and a potential source of support is one that has been adopted by social work, and in the early days of integrated social work community workers were very often qualified social workers who were employed by the local authority to carry out work with the community. While today this function has largely been ceded to the independent and voluntary sectors, it remains an important component of social work and we will look at it further when we look at the modernization of social work in Chapter 2.

Ideals of citizenship and social reform also fed into the development of social work and this led to the recognition of social justice as a legitimate concern for social workers and a key principle which would inform social work activity. This was later taken up by the cause of ‘radical social work’ (Bailey and Brake 1975) and there are still campaigners who argue that the real purpose of social work should be to support the changes in society that are needed to promote equality and combat the disadvantage that many users of social work services experience rather than to engage in ‘casework’ with individuals and families. While these views have been instrumental in transforming the perception of receiving services for some people in society, for many the alleviation of pressing practical difficulties remains a more urgent focus (Coulshed and Orme 2012).

This variety of views around the role of social work led to the recognition in the early part of the twentieth century that social work was not a simple matter of ‘helping out’ by kindly but uninformed middle-class ladies, but could more accurately be seen as a skilled and complex activity which was based on a range of knowledge, skills and values that should and could be taught to potential members of this group of workers. The COS continued to develop their notion of social work through setting up the first social work training programme at the School of Sociology in London, soon to be renamed the London School of Economics.

Many aspects of this method of training would be familiar to social work students today. These included the construction of a ‘scientific’ knowledge base for social work which borrowed eclectically from other scientific disciplines, including the development of ideas from America about a psychological basis for casework, and an emphasis on practice placements to support the development of a distinct set of skills and values. Ultimately, though, social work, as today, was seen to be about people and their engagement with an individual social worker or practitioner at the point where a personal problem intersects with the concerns of society.

Social work can be defined as an exercise in engaging with people to facilitate the telling of their story around a particular problem relating to their well-being, that is to articulate what has happened to them and why. Its interactive base makes social work a relational profession.

(Dominelli 2004: 5, original italics)
The Charity Organisation Society (COS) believed strongly in the importance of the individual relationship between the practitioner and the service users, and this is still very much a keystone of social work today. Nevertheless, it is that pesky relationship between social work and society that keeps undermining the idea that it is simply a matter of a meeting of two minds with the aim of one helping the other. Those who supported the aims and objectives of COS realized that beyond the alleviation of individual problems social work could provide a moral impetus for the improvement of society. Influential socialists like Beatrice and Stanley Webb who supported the universal approach to reducing poverty also understood the importance of using social work as a stabilizing influence (Gray and Webb 2010).

These arguments, about the provision of welfare, about who should receive it and how it should be funded, continue today. In addition to the growing recognition of poverty and disadvantage that was becoming apparent as a result of the tumultuous changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution, concern about the poor physical state of volunteers involved in the Boer War (1899–1902) led to a number of significant pieces of legislation giving individuals rights in relation to school meals and medical inspection within the limited state education system (Powell and Hewitt 2002). In 1908, the Liberal Party introduced the Old Age Pensions Act, bringing in the first non-contributory benefit for older people who had no means of support. The early part of the twentieth century also saw the emergence of the Labour Party and thus an increase in the influence of those who believed that the state should actively intervene to alleviate poverty and disadvantage, potentially forming the basis for the development after the Second World War of the welfare state.

The welfare state

Some elements of the welfare state such as the universal provision of free health and education services are so inculcated into the way we live that it is hard to imagine a time when they weren’t there. Now we may argue about the cost, quality and extent of such services but it is important to remember that these benefits ‘available to all’ are fairly recent phenomena. Looking back as far as medieval times there had been some acknowledgement through the Poor Laws that the state should assume some responsibility for the ‘impotent poor’ (people who were ‘aged, blind, chronically sick and lunatics’ as classified by the Poor Law of 1601) but charitable organizations like churches and hospitals supplemented this meagre provision around health, education and welfare, and as we have seen from the earlier discussion about the views and values of society there was no consensus that all people should have access to services.

Wars such as the Boer War and the Second World War seem to have exerted particular influence in terms of the development of welfare. After the grinding poverty and unemployment characterized by the Depression of the 1930s, the physical condition of recruits once again raised anxieties about their fitness to fight when the call came at the start of the Second World War in 1939. For a number of reasons, the end of the war in 1945 led to a radical departure in our understanding of the meaning of the role of welfare in society and the ways in which a range of services were provided, not least the role and remit of social work.
There is an underlying perception that as a result of the Second World War the population felt that they had undergone a common experience. Men and women from different sectors within society had found themselves in close contact with one another and formed friendships within the army and through war work that would have been impossible in the class-bound structures that operated prior to 1939. Many people had been injured in the war, both men in the army and women at home, so that it was felt that these people, disabled through bombing, were owed something by the nation they had sacrificed themselves for. Children had been evacuated and homelessness was a common result of the aerial bombardment. There was a recognition that the war had been won through the collective efforts of people working together, and a feeling that collective effort could, as it had done in winning the war, have the potential to bring about the changes that could improve society and make it ‘a land fit for heroes’. It also brought another dimension to the debate about whether and how much the state should be involved in the provision of welfare benefits, including health, social work and social care (Blakemore 2003).

The Labour Government elected in 1945 at the very end of the war heralded a period of rapid and intense change in British society. At any time (as we shall see later when we look at the modernization of social work) there is a close relationship between the political beliefs or ideology of the party in power and the social policies they choose to implement (Bochel et al. 2009). Building on some of the legislation introduced in the earlier part of the century by the Liberal Party but with a strong commitment to the ideals of equity and fairness for all its citizens, the views of the Labour Party formed an ideological basis for the implementation of the legislation and policies and practices that underpinned what came to be known as the welfare state.

Enduring notions of the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor had not been completely eradicated by the war. Not everyone agreed that it should be the responsibility of the state to provide for all the welfare needs of its citizens, and even at the time there were those such as a number of Conservative politicians who expressed concerns that such a system could lead to an overarching level of control by the state and the potential for increased dependency on the state. Lord Beveridge himself, the author of the Beveridge Report which underpinned the changes that were to take place in Britain after the end of the war and who produced the Beveridge Report in 1942, actually preferred the term welfare system to welfare state as the former term suggested that although ‘a structure of welfare services and social security exists, … it is not provided or organised solely by government’ (Blakemore 2003: 275).
Nevertheless there was an unprecedented level of consensus that what Beveridge called the ‘five evil giants’ that were held to be responsible for the ills of society could and should be tackled through a system of government intervention. He called these ‘evil giants’ disease, squalor, idleness, ignorance and want (Alcock et al. 2003). Even these terms now sound old-fashioned and even archaic. But if they are restated as chronic illness and disability, poor housing, unemployment, lack of education and poverty, we can see that they are still very much part of the picture of our present society, and they are issues that loom large in the perspective of social workers trying to engage with people who still experience many of these areas of disadvantage.

In the latter part of the 1940s legislation was introduced to deal with all of these elements as part of the wider vision of universal provision for everyone. The idea was that people paid in (through National Insurance) when they could afford it and then were entitled to payments through unemployment or sickness benefit if they needed it. This entitlement or right to benefit was the really radical idea, and removed from many the sense of shame or supplication that had been a key fixture of previous welfare programmes. The Beveridge Report effectively reversed the idea of ‘less eligibility’ so beloved of the Poor Laws by proclaiming that the payments, although never over-generous, should be sufficient to take account of food, clothing, fuel, light, rent and household sundries (Kennett 2001). Although the link to National Insurance contributions meant that not everyone was entitled to these benefits, with women and older people particularly unlikely to be in employment at the time, this was a genuine attempt to develop ‘a new birthright, a part of citizenship not a deprivation of it, paid as of right’ (Powell and Hewitt 2002: 38) for people anywhere in the country who needed to claim support from the state.

Legislation introduced the concept of free, accessible health and education for all. In relation to social work, the introduction of the National Assistance Act in 1948 brought together perhaps for the first time recognition of the state’s responsibilities towards a group who could be loosely defined as ‘vulnerable adults’ (Wilson et al. 2008). Under section 47 of this Act, power was given to the local authority to provide services to promote the welfare of adults, i.e. in the words of the Act those individuals

aged 18 or over who are blind, deaf, dumb or who suffer from mental disorder of any description and other persons who are substantially and permanently handicapped by illness, injury or congenital deformity or any such disabilities as may be prescribed.

Once again the language used may feel uncomfortable to modern ears but in many ways this Act paved the way for many of the changes that have informed the development of social work policy and practice in relation to older and disabled adults over the next 50 years. Services such as meals on wheels and residential care for older people, alongside day centres, home adaptations and hospitals for disabled people and access to psychiatrists and asylums for those with mental health problems, meant that people who needed assistance were not left to struggle alone. Help was available.
Despite the apparent consensus that social work was a ‘good thing’ for society, helping people and developing psychological and sociological perspectives towards meeting the needs of those who accessed services, the shame and stigma attached to applicants for services, established over so many years, were hard to remove despite the changes that had been introduced. While health and education, those universal services accessed by almost everyone, became fully embedded in British culture, social work struggled to develop its own sense of identity. One of the problems was that at this time social work was fragmented, with Children’s Services, Mental Health Services and Welfare Services (which dealt mainly with the needs of disabled and older people) being administered from different government departments. Initially each of the separate elements of social work – the Charity Organisation Society with its emphasis on individual casework, the Settlement Movement and its commitment to community regeneration, the hospital almoners (who had in fact provided some of the earliest forms of social work for people in hospital) and the other established areas of practice within probation and aftercare and within psychiatric social work settings – had all seen themselves as specialists within their own fields. This question of the relative merits of general and specialist practice in social work informed the debate about the role of social work throughout the 1960s (Wilson et al. 2008).

The problems with social work at that time were held to be that as a result of these specialisms, practice was fragmented, with poor communication among practitioners. As many as three different practitioners might be visiting one family at any time (one in relation to the children, one looking at the needs of grandparents and another addressing mental health needs, for example) and this was seen as a duplication of resources as well as being confusing and uncoordinated for the family. Unification also, importantly, related to the belief that Social Services should be meeting the needs of the whole community and that a single, accessible point of contact would help to combat the stigma that stubbornly persisted about people seeking assistance.

In 1970, the recommendations of the Seebohm Report were accepted. From this point, social work was to be amalgamated into one unified Social Services Department which would be run by each local authority. Social workers at the time were termed ‘generic’ workers, which meant that they worked with groups across the spectrum of those who sought services. This had the advantage that one individual could be the contact person for all members of a family or group but it also placed a high expectation that the social worker would have knowledge of all specialist areas as well as general knowledge of social work policies, principles, theories and procedures across a range of service areas.

Another problem was that those who had developed their specialisms felt that these were being undermined by those new ‘generic’ social workers, and within the new departments there was felt to be a hierarchy of importance, with children and families practice being given priority over work with adults. Partly as a result of these tensions there was some disagreement or at least lack of clarity about what the role of social work should actually be. The apparent consensus about social work which had been anticipated through its role within the wider welfare state system was beginning to be seriously undermined by, among other things, the development of radical social work. This brings us back to the question we first started with: what is social work?
Among others who believed that social work should go back to its social justice mandate, Bailey and Brake (1975) argued cogently that social work should be working to transform the social conditions that placed people in a position where they needed help from social workers and vehemently countered the idea that social work was merely about the use of the psychological perspective of ‘therapeutic casework’ to meet individuals’ immediate needs. The 1970s also saw the development of a more rights-based model of community work which reflected many of the ideals of the Settlement Movement of the 1880s, when Canon Barnett and his supporters set up the first settlement in Toynbee Hall in Whitechapel (Wilson et al. 2008). Community work drew on the strengths within the community to facilitate change and the promotion of social progress rather than expecting the change to come from the individual through the effects of the relationship with an individual social worker.

The discussion of what social work is cannot really be divorced from the notion of what social workers do. Throughout the chapters in this book, particularly in those which focus on the experiences of practitioners and service users, the connections between what social work is and what social workers do will become more explicit. To return to the question of why social work is necessary, it should be apparent by now that the reasons for the existence of social work cannot be explained without understanding the relationship between social work and society. And in order to understand this relationship we need to acknowledge the complexity of the relationship social work has with itself.

If we look at the two definitions highlighted at the start of this chapter, it is possible to discern the two tributaries that form the social work river. Clearly these two elements – whether social work is about the transformation of society or the changes required from the individual – continue to inform discussions and debates about the role and remit, indeed the very nature, of social work. Although it would be fair to say that in many ways the COS’s relationship-based model of casework is more common within social work, there are also elements of the radical agenda – including areas such as the empowerment of service users, the model of social workers and service users working in partnership and a social construction of disability and vulnerability – that can be seen to inform the developments that took place in the latter part of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. This has raised huge challenges but has also opened up immense opportunities for the development of the role of social work with adults. These we will explore in more detail in Chapter 2 – the modernization of social work.

Looking back now, the changes that needed to be made in relation to the welfare and well-being of adult service users could not have taken place without these changes in laws and attitudes but at the inception of the welfare state there was still a very long way to go. Many people with physical and learning disabilities were still living mere ‘half-lives’ in hospitals and institutions, as you will see explored in other chapters in this book. There may have been a move to provide universal benefits for all but that did not mean that society had reached the stage where people with disabilities and mental health problems were not still considered at best objects of pity and at worst dangerous and ‘a threat to established notions of discipline and normality’ (Swain et al. 2005: 23).
References and further reading


