

SOCIOLOGY FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

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Sociology for Social Workers

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Sociology for Social Workers

This book is dedicated to Owen Parsons, a student on the BA (Hons)
Social Work course at Leeds Metropolitan University (September
2004–July 2006)

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Introduction

Social work is a socially constructed phenomenon . . . defined by the economic, social and cultural conditions in which it takes place.

(Payne, 1991: 7)

This book is intended as a foundational text, introducing social work students to sociology and the ways that sociological theories and perspectives can contribute to our understanding of the history, role and purpose of social work within contemporary British society. It is important that social workers understand the social conditions and processes within which they operate and sociology offers theories to understand these processes and the nature of the social world that we inhabit. It can help us to understand the world that we are part of, through the exploration of how institutions are structured, how power is distributed and impacts on individuals, and how individuals interact and make sense of social situations. In their day-to-day work, social workers encounter some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people and groups in society, and sociology helps us to explore and explain the nature of inequality in society and the construction of disadvantage and advantage and helps to inform 'anti-oppressive practice' and 'anti-discriminatory practice'.

Sociological perspectives in social work are useful in understanding the role of social work in society by helping us to understand:

- how and why social work developed as a profession
- the purpose of social work in society and the role and function of social work
- the nature of social problems that social workers may encounter
- social divisions, inequality and discrimination and the contribution of sociological perspectives in the development of anti-oppressive practice.

Social work is a contested area and has changed and evolved in relation to the wider political, economic, policy and social context. There have been specific times in history where different theoretical perspectives have dominated the construction of social work knowledge (see Chapter 1). In contemporary social work education, there remain some courses where students are taught discrete areas of sociological theory within a single module, whereas other courses may subsume sociological perspectives within broader theoretical subject areas, such as the social sciences. However, the significance of a sociological understanding for social work is reflected by the QAA Benchmarks, which, alongside the GSCC and Department of Health (DH) requirements offer a prescribed curriculum for social work education and training. This is exemplified in the following social work benchmark statements, outlining requirements that social workers should have an understanding of:

- The relevance of sociological perspectives to understanding societal and structural influences on human behaviour at individual, group and community levels.
- The social processes . . . that lead to marginalisation, isolation and exclusion and their impact on the demand for social work services.
- Explanations of the links between definitional processes contributing to social differences . . . to the problems of inequality and differential need faced by service users.

(QAA Benchmark Statement for Social Policy and Social Work, 2000)

Sociology can help social workers to think critically, reflecting on the context of practice and challenging the processes that lead to disadvantage and oppression. Social work and the social context within which it operates are dynamic activities and processes, and therefore are constantly changing. The policies that are used as illustrations throughout this book demonstrate how sociology can help us to understand the social context of social work practice, and the individual and structural influence on and impact of social change.

The book is divided into twelve chapters, which focus on different social institutions, processes and user groups that social workers will encounter in their professional practice. However, many of the areas overlap, and you will see that issues are cross-referenced throughout the book. You will also find a number of exercises, discussion points and case studies that will help you to understand the theories and perspectives, but will also help you to apply these theories and perspectives to different areas of social work practice. Discussion points can be found at the end of each chapter, to summarise the debates and to help with your further exploration of sociology. In addition, you will find guidance for further reading to help you to explore some of the key theories in more depth. Some suggestions for useful web sources and journals can be found at the end of the book, although these are by no means definitive or exhaustive.

1

Sociology and Key Issues

This opening chapter outlines some of the key sociological themes which permeate the rest of the book. Key issues and themes in this chapter help us explore the nature of sociology and understand, analyse and critically reflect on the nature of social work practice.

The key issues that will be addressed in this chapter are:

- The nature of social work and how sociology can inform social work practice.
- The development of social work in the context of broader social, political and ideological changes.
- The nature of sociology identifying broad perspectives within the discipline.
- The relationship between sociological perspectives and social work theory and practice.
- An introduction to key themes which permeate throughout the text.

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Identify the reasons for studying sociology and ways that this can inform social work practice.
- Discuss the historical development of social work and the social processes that influenced this development.
- Identify the key social issues that are relevant in contemporary social work practice with a range of user groups.
- Identify sources of power and oppression that impact on service user groups.

In August 1861, Peter Barratt and James Bradley appeared in court in Chester. They were charged with the murder of George Burgess, a two-year-old boy. Barratt and Bradley were described as neglected and uneducated.

George Burgess had been playing on some waste ground while under the care of a child minder. Both his parents were working in the local mill. According to witnesses, George was dragged to a local stream, stripped and beaten. He was found dead the following day. Barratt and Bradley admitted the murder, and after a short prison sentence, were sent to a reformatory.

Wilson (2006) remarks that there are clear similarities between this case and the murder of Jamie Bulger in 1993. Barratt and Bradley, however, received a shorter sentence and the judge noted their circumstances.

What does this have to do with sociology? Sociology offers some important social theories, which provide explanations and critiques of human behaviour, social action and interaction and the institutions and structures of society. The fact that social workers are concerned with social change and problem-solving is precisely why sociological theories are so important to social workers. It follows that, if we are concerned with the relationship between the individual and society, then helping people to problem-solve will be connected with structures, institutions and systems within society. Cree (2000) discusses the historical relationship between sociology and social work where many social work courses have been based within sociology and social policy departments in universities.

Industrialisation refers to methods of production within manufacturing and agriculture. A region, nation or culture becomes more economically dependent on manufacturing than on traditional methods of farming.

Social work arose because of concerns about people being marginalised and impoverished as a result of industrialisation. As discussed below, the Victorian philanthropic tradition focused on changing society, and education, housing, health and employment were all key institutions for achieving social change. Mary Richmond formulated the precursor of modern social work assessment (Richmond, 1917), identifying social factors as well as psychological ones as key to understanding a given situation.

Thompson (2005) has argued that social work is sometimes viewed by society as a profession that mops up society's problems and deals with the failings of social policies in the areas of education, crime, health, housing and income maintenance. This relates to work with a variety of user groups who experience social policy changes and trends, e.g. work with the unemployed, the poor, the homeless, the mentally ill, or the disabled. This can be seen to reflect the early origins of social work where philanthropy was concerned with the 'fallout' from nineteenth-century economic and political conditions. It may be viewed as a little simplistic for the complexities of contemporary social work, in that it does not necessarily reflect the whole range of roles of the social worker, but it is a useful starting point for a discussion of the fact that social workers are often engaged with individuals, groups and communities who suffer some form of social disadvantage. The fact that the title Social Worker starts with Social is not coincidental

(Thompson, 2005). The nature of social work is fundamentally located in and influenced by social factors, processes and ideas in the following ways.

Many problems and disadvantages have their origin in social processes. For example, poverty and disadvantage result from processes of stratification. Societies are not just divided into two opposing parts, where you are either one thing or another, but are made up of a plurality of different groups and divisions.

- The solutions to individual problems may lie within wider social and community processes. The case study of Barratt and Bradley demonstrates societal concern about their lack of education and the failure of society and the local community to adequately provide for them.
- Individual behaviours and experiences do not operate in a vacuum, but are located within wider social contexts. As discussed below, risk is an important concept in contemporary societies, but wider social and structural processes influence individual decisions and behaviours. Furthermore, individual actions and experiences may be related to processes of interaction, and social action theories (see Chapter 2) will be explored throughout this book, to examine issues such as identity and stigma.
- Social work itself does not operate within a vacuum, but is located within the wider social organisation and is impacted on by social, economic and political factors and sets of dominant ideas.

These issues will be discussed throughout the book in relation to different user groups.

What is social work?

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

(IASSW (International Association of Schools of Social Work), 2001 – available at www.iassw-aiets.org/)

While the above definition of social work implies that there is an agreed definition of what social work is, the role and function of social work has always been contested, with social work being the subject of competing claims of definition and practice (Asquith et al., 2005). Many authors, social workers and commentators recognise that there are a range of activities, which are carried out by social workers, which may be either contradictory or complementary. These activities may be summarised as ones that include:

- counsellor or caseworker
- advocacy
- partnership
- assessment of risk and need
- care manager
- *agent of social control* (Asquith et al., 2005).

There may be conflicts, for example between the roles of advocacy and case management. On the one hand, the social worker may have a role in their supportive relationship with clients, facilitating access to services and empowering. On the other hand, they have a role within a bureaucratic organisation, with responsibilities in terms of policy, procedures and economic management. There may also be conflicts between the roles of protection and risk management and enablement and empowerment. These conflicting roles within social work are described in the following chapters.

Case study

Susie (28) is a white English mother of four children: Sara (10), Ryan (8), Kristy (5) and Rio (3). Sara and Ryan share the same biological father, with whom they have no contact, as he was violent towards Susie and their relationship ended. Kristy's father is unknown, whereas Rio's father has regular contact with Susie and the children and often stays at the family home.

Social services and other agencies have provided family support for long periods of the children's lives. Recently however, the children's school has reported increasing concerns to social services regarding the children's welfare. They note that the children often appear hungry and dirty. Sara has become quiet and withdrawn, Ryan is prone to aggressive outbursts and Kristy often falls asleep in class. Rio has a full-time place at a day nursery but usually only attends for two or three sessions per week. Although Social Services and other agencies are involved with the family and provide a package of family support, the family's social worker has noted that in the last few weeks Susie is appearing more lethargic and 'low' and she has concerns about her relationship with Rio's father.

- What social problems and issues can you identify here?
- What roles and activities might the social worker be involved in?

The conflict between the key tasks and roles of social work has been summarised in a report by Blewett et al. (2007), which highlights the constantly changing nature of social work. These contradictions impact directly on all areas of social work practice.

Social work therefore can be understood by the way in which practice operates within any given context. This suggests that the

social work role is dependent upon the nature of social problems as they are identified, the perceived solutions to those problems and the societal and organisational context in which it is practised.

The IASSW definition of social work has been adopted as a working definition of social work by many countries, including the UK. While this may not adequately reflect the social control aspects of social work, it does highlight the fact that social work operates at the interface between the individual and their environment and highlights the relationship that social work has with individuals in their social context. Sociology helps us to understand these competing and contradictory discourses, as well as the nature of the society that we inhabit.

What is sociology?

Sociology is not a single discipline offering one set of theories, but is a complex range of theories offering explanations and understandings from different perspectives. No one theory is more valid than others, but all can contribute to our understanding of the social world.

Exercise

The social world

- How does the social world differ from the natural world?
- In small groups, discuss what you mean by the social world.
- Compare your list with other groups. Are there common elements? Is the social world made up of individuals and institutions? What is the relationship between these different elements?

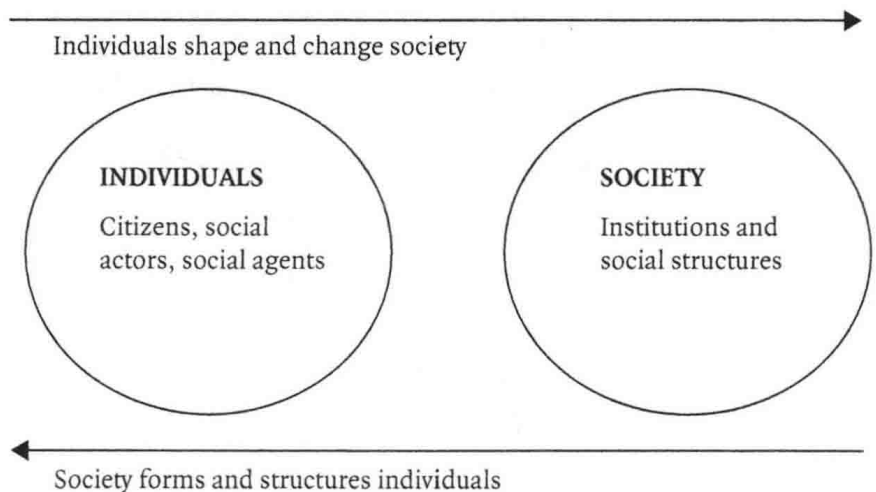


Figure 1.1 Diagrammatic representation of the relationship between individuals and social structures.

There are numerous examples of individuals influencing social structures and institutions both historically and in contemporary society, such as Elizabeth Fry's work to improve conditions in prisons in nineteenth-century Britain, or Octavia Hill's campaign to improve social housing. A more recent example is Esther Rantzen's establishment of Childline, providing a forum for children to discuss issues of concern, such as abuse and bullying, which has been significant, not only in the development of policies in relation to child abuse, but also in challenging the taboo of incest and childhood abuse. In the twenty-first century, the work of Sir Bob Geldof and Bono (among others) has been instrumental in raising awareness about Third World poverty, and the resulting Make Poverty History campaign has gathered momentum (www.makepovertyhistory.org/).

Exercise

Make a list of other individuals who have had influence over the nature of society or social institutions.

Institutional racism a theory that racism exists within public bodies, organisations (institutions) such as the Police or Social Services.

The institutions and structures of society also influence the lived experience of individuals within society. For example, the patriarchal organisation of society impacts on the nature of women's experiences, both within the home and within the paid labour market (see Chapters 5 and 8). Institutional racism within the Criminal Justice System has impacted on the experiences of black people in their encounters with the police, the judiciary and the prison system (see Chapters 4 and 6). Both the family and the education system have influence in the primary socialisation process (see Chapter 8), and in shaping people's expectations, beliefs and values.

Individuals also occupy social roles within society. From a functionalist perspective, these roles serve to maintain the smooth running of society, whilst Marxists see roles from a conflict perspective (See Chapter 2). People may occupy a number of different roles in terms of work, social relationships and positions in society.

Exercise

Make a list of the different roles that you occupy.
Is there any potential conflict between these roles?

Frequently we have to balance competing roles, based on our own priorities and those of the wider society to which we belong. In policy and managerial circles there has been much recent discussion about