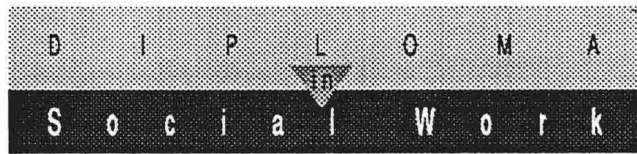


Social Work Practice I

An open learning package developed and published for the Department of Applied Social Studies

Chan Yuk-chung Chun Ping-kit Chung Kim-wah





Social Work Practice I

Chan Yuk-chung, Chun Ping-kit
& Chung Kim-wah

Volume 2



The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

**Department of Applied Social Studies
Educational Development Unit**

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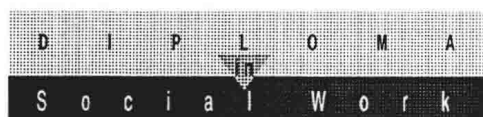
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Diploma in Social Work

Social Work Practice I

The components of this learning package are:

- Volume 1 (Units 1–10)
- Volume 2 (Units 11–20)
- Volume 3 (Units 21–30)



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11

The Social Worker as a Helper

Preview

Previous units have introduced the three basic areas of the social work practice — the values, knowledge and skills of social work; the question whether social work is a profession or not was also discussed in Units 9 and 10. It is clear that many social and political arguments colour the claim for professional status, and you will be developing your own ideas and viewpoints on the issue. In this unit, we will shift our focus to a more individual and personal level; to reflect on one's personal orientation towards social work.

Objectives

After working through this unit, you should be able to:

- describe and illustrate the images of social workers-created by the mass media and compare these images with the actual roles of social workers.
- define "helping person" and describe how a helping person should promote self-help and self-fulfilment.
- describe the general characteristics, qualities and important attributes of effective helper.
- list and describe the pressures and problems facing social workers in maintaining their role as helper.
- identify and explain the factors that motivate you to begin your career in the field of social work.
- describe the phenomenon of "burnout" and explain how it occurs and how it can be reduced.
- describe and illustrate the paradoxes facing a social worker in his everyday life.

Introduction

The main duty of a social worker is to provide help to those people who have problems in their everyday lives and wish to resolve them. The problems we face in our daily lives are many and various. How people in various social situations respond to these problems is also extremely different. Different skills and methods will be called for in relation to various demands. Yet the ultimate goal of "helping" is fundamental for social work practitioners. Offering help to those in need can be seen as representing our human love and concern for our fellow man. However, as a social worker it means more than this. As the social welfare system has become a social institution and social work has acquired a certain degree of professional status, many people assume that it is their social right to obtain help from social workers. As an activity largely endorsed and funded by the society, social workers are expected to give help. People are likely to have different perceptions of social work. As a result, it is necessary to build up a concrete image not only in the society but also among those entering the profession of social work. In order that an informed perception of social work as a helping career and the role of social worker as a helping person are clarified, three basic questions should be considered:

- What do we mean by "helping"?
- What are the characteristics of effective helper?
- How does one sustain and develop his role as a social worker?

Finally, you should understand that social work as a career denotes more than a mere helper; it entails different obligations and challenges.

Images of the social worker

Movies, television programmes and other media have created several images of social workers. Some of these images are quite appealing to the public but have created unrealistic role expectations for social work practitioners. Others have distorted the proper functions of social workers.



Try to recall the images of social workers you have seen from movies, television programmes or other media. Describe three different images of social workers, and comment on the extent to which they really reflect the jobs of social workers.

<i>Images of social workers</i>	<i>Remarks</i>

The following are examples of the images of social workers perceived by others. These images are not at all accurate, some are outdated and some are exaggerated stressing only the unconventional aspects of social work practice.

Charitable ladies with Christian devotion

There are some commonly held attitudes that the images of social workers have a historical origin. In its early development, social work had a close relationship with charity work. Indeed, social workers were often referred to those well off "charitable ladies" who worked with Christian devotion. Early welfare works were undertaken in association with bodies with a religious mission. People with Christian faith were often involved in early charity works, many of them were women from better-off families. Their affluent background, together with the traditional role of women in families, allowed them to work without payment while their faith in the brotherhood of man drove them to undertake friendly visits and to provide help to the less privileged. Many early formal welfare organizations in England were formed by these charitable ladies. It is therefore quite understandable that they have established an image which has coloured even the present perception of social workers.

Energetic young people with a strong sense of justice

In the mid 1970s, a Television series broke new ground when it was produced with a social worker in the youth service as the central character. There have been subsequent motion pictures and television programmes depicting social workers and their activities. However, many of these descriptions have been distorted. Social workers were typically shown as young and energetic people with a strong personal motivation and a strong sense of justice. They portrayed social workers as idealistic and even cynical of the status quo. Their daily activities were dramatized and bore little relevance to reality. They were shown as typically engaging in very exciting and even dangerous activities in an attempt to help their clients.

Devoted and altruistic young people engaging in unconventional works

The image of the social workers has also been influenced by the intentional and unintentional mystification of their job by social workers themselves. As the functions performed by social workers have become more and more important in our everchanging society, many attempts have been made to publicize the professional roles of social workers. However, much publicity focused on the unconventional aspects of social work activities — the extremely flexible working hours and work setting of some social work fields, the challenging nature of activities undertaken by outreaching social workers, or the radical aspects of community development projects. The conventional and ordinary aspects of social work as a career have not been adequately mentioned. For example, we are often involved in routine jobs, such as training the mentally retarded clients, organizing day to day programmes in a youth centre or an elderly social centre, and mediating family disputes and conflicts. Unbalanced publicity has resulted in an oversimplification of social workers' roles and functions and made it difficult to establish a realistic and appropriate image for social workers in general.

The nature of helping in social work

You may recall from Unit 3 "Goal and Functions of Social Work" that the goal of social work is to enhance social functioning. Helping, in social work, is accomplished by encouraging self-help and not by inducing dependency on others for help. Many different definitions of "helping" have been given. The definition proposed by Alan Keith-Lucas (1976) seemed to be the most appropriate to social work. He defined "helping" as "something tangible or intangible offered by one person or group to other in such a way that the helped person or group can use it to achieve some measure of self-fulfilment."

Such a definition may appear to be of little value as it is vague and general. As a result, it may be useful if we examine "helping" in detail. You should be aware that some actions which appear to be "helping" are, in fact, not promoting the social workers' objective of self-help and self-fulfilment. Some examples are:

- If helping creates dependency or indulgence, then "helping" is not actually achieved.
- If helping is for the helper's own gratification, then "helping" is not accomplished.
- If the helper seeks to control, manipulate, or seeks the conformity of clients, "helping" is not achieved and will not be achieved. (If control is necessary, it should always be used to help clients become self-reliant.)
- "Helping" is not solely about resolving the problems clients bring to social workers. It would be comparatively easy for one to help solve a