

Dear Students of Social Work,

You may have been asked what social work aims to do that requires years of training when what a social worker does appears to be common sense or is often misunderstood as what volunteers and do-gooders can do. What then sets social workers apart is derived from their education and training.



First principles

A good start to talking about what social workers do could be the principles of wellbeing and prevention and the recognition that an individual, his or her family, and/ or carer must be enabled to make good decisions regarding their own care or their roles as parents and guardians. In practising social work, we are always mindful of cultural sensitivity and the respect of human beings. As much as possible, individuals should have a choice about their decisions and manage their own affairs and care. Social workers therefore have a role in safeguarding people's rights or civil liberty and in building relationships to support and empower children, adults and families to make important choices about the direction of their lives.

When we discuss the application of these principles in working with individuals or families who need help, the significance of the training shows up immediately as the dilemmas require creative problem solving, balancing ambivalence and ambiguity in the midst of action, and balancing between the individual's well being and that of any relatives involved in their care. A common decision that a social worker has to make is about protecting people from abuse and neglect and exercising individual choice.

As a profession, social work is very values driven in its practice. A social worker's primary duty is to use his/ her knowledge, skills and expertise, and best efforts, for the benefit of people requiring his/ her services. Social work is about building a relationship of trust and confidence. Social workers are trained to view the individual in the context of his family and community, and to draw on evidence and insights from a wide range of social, psychological, economic, legal, health and justice disciplines as well as social work and social care research for their interventions.



Assessment and empowering people to do things for themselves

In working with adults, a social worker's aim is generally not to do things to people, or for them, but to enable and empower people to do things, take decisions, and manage their lives, including taking risk, for themselves. Contrary to what most befrienders and volunteers might do on behalf of individuals, social workers recognise the importance of the individuals making decisions and help them by providing them with good information and support.

Assessing needs and making evaluations of situations are basic to social work practice. In doing this, where a person has complex or multiple needs, the social worker's analytical skills enable them to conduct in-depth and comprehensive exploration of those needs. Defining these complex needs can be difficult as it is not always possible to identify the full extent of needs. For example, older people and very young children do not always present their needs accurately on first or subsequent contacts. It is of course very helpful for early intervention if complexity is recognised early so that information and advice service can be given in a timely manner. It is also essential that the individual, carers and significant others are fully involved with the social worker in developing the care and support plan, in identifying priority outcomes, in assessing risks to be managed, and in suggesting informal resources that may complement state provision.

Social workers are needed when the complexity of an individual's or a family's circumstances require assessment, decision-making and intervention that are responsive to a range of *interacting factors*. These factors may be bio-social, emotional or psychological and they will often be unpredictable and may arise where there is conflict within a family. What is also often different in social work practice is the intentionality of social workers to identify strengths in people and tapping on them to help people to take charge of their lives and to live purposefully in the community.

There is usually a complex range of factors that a social worker must consider when assessing the needs and wishes of an individual. The assessment process should involve selecting, categorising, organising and synthesising data. This allows the social worker to prioritise issues, build a relationship and plan and review. Assessment is a continuous process, not a one-off event. A family's circumstances may fluctuate and so can an individual's physical, mental or neurological health condition which may require periodic reassessment. Such effective on-going assessments require highly skilled practitioners.



Case co-ordination – why social work training can help one to do this well

Situations where people have complex needs generally will also have involvement from other statutory, voluntary, private and community agencies. The role of a case coordinator is important where multiple agencies are involved in a plan. In the case of social care, the service user can “get lost” in the complex pathway of health and social care. *A case co-coordinator can help to ensure that services, support and advice are wrapped around the person rather than the person having to fit into a service model.* What is helpful is a multi-professional case coordination which involves a social worker or care coordinator focusing on following through the interventions and support.

Use of self

One of the key principles in social work is “the use of self.” People often wonder what this is all about. Acknowledging that there is no set formula to refer to requires social workers to use their knowledge, skills and values in adopting the role of an enabler, facilitator and negotiator when working with individuals and their families. Social workers are uniquely trained and placed to deal with such ambiguity. Instead of relying on set techniques, the social worker's greatest tool is his or herself in understanding and supporting others to achieve their self-selected outcomes.

This is often how social workers go about doing collaborative work to promote independence and autonomy wherever circumstances allow it.

- Where a person is severely constrained by a circumstance and requires co-ordinated support to achieve at least a reasonable degree of independence and autonomy, social workers can lead in getting various parties to collaborate in the interest of the client.
- Where people need to overcome social and practical obstacles and challenges to manage their lives, social workers will work in a person-centred way to enable the perspective of the client to be considered. A person's problems may be episodic or long-term and particularly so in the case of care management. This often requires multi-agency case conferencing for creative and personalised solutions drawn from each particular set of circumstances. We can see this being practised in long term care and public guardianship situations.



Community social work and prevention

Community social work here will become increasingly important in enabling people to live as active citizens in their communities despite reduced abilities that result from a variety of circumstances including deteriorating health. This is where preventative services should also be a priority. To some extent, the work of Social Service Offices is about refocusing teams towards community minded initiatives.

One of the collaborative type of work that can be developed at local communities is the bringing of older people together through key voluntary, private and statutory services to identify how to collectively meet the needs of a group of people who may require more neighbourly support even if they do receive social care.

While the Agency for Integrated Care helps to bring a multi-disciplinary team approach, there is a need for local communities to step up in neighbourhood level support for daily mutual support and befriending. Such an approach is extremely helpful as it brings people together to provide support through monitoring the circumstances in their neighbourhoods, and thus allowing services to be accessed in a timelier manner wherever possible.

Bridging the gap

Such local efforts can help people facing issues such as loneliness or isolation, living on a low income, being a carer and living with or caring for someone diagnosed with dementia. The social work response involves a mix of preventive and community work, education, reducing social isolation, promoting and fostering health and wellbeing, as well as safeguarding clients. Advice and referral is at the core of such a service with social workers playing that critical role in strengthening access to appropriate support services, thereby bridging the gap between the person and a service which the person may otherwise have never accessed. We should not underestimate the thinking work that such an important process involves. The local team may conduct telephone reviews for people assessed at a low or moderate need who are not receiving a service and give advice and signpost individuals to a range of services. This process can result in critical referrals, domestic abuse interventions and referrals to vulnerable persons' risk assessment case conferences.

Social work enables and empowers



Guided by the principles of wellbeing and prevention and the recognition that an individual, his/her family, and/ or carer must be enabled to make good decisions regarding their own care or decisions about their roles, social work is about building a relationship of trust and confidence. When it comes to trust, we all know that it takes time, commitment and an open heart and spirit built upon competence. Social workers are trained to draw from social science and learning, from economics, ethics, religion, and medicine to view the individual in the context of his/ her family and community.

Analytical, integrative and collaborative skills

Assessing needs and making an evaluation of situations in social work practice requires analytical skills in order to conduct in-depth and comprehensive exploration of the complex needs. Assessment as a continuous process in oftentimes circumstances that are fluctuating demands analytical and integrative skills in skilled practitioners. When it comes to interventions, it is equally demanding when it is about involving individuals and families in the care and support plan and in identifying priority outcomes.

Unlike other professions which are generally about doing something to another being, social work requires collaborative skills. Instead of relying on set techniques, the social worker's greatest tool is their use of self in understanding and supporting others to achieve their self-selected outcomes.

So the years required to train a social worker can be explained by the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills that straddle the social side of medicine, law, justice and economics. The training done well breathes a new spirit into such learning to develop highly skilled practitioners. Most of the time, the social worker's value proposition includes respecting the client's point of view to empower ownership and responsibility and safeguarding of these for those who are vulnerable.

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