



The History and Development of Social Work

Is becoming a social worker primarily to be understood in terms of the 'helping', 'caring' or therapeutic content of the job, or according to the official, bureaucratic, legal and even potentially coercive powers and responsibilities it entails? (Jordan, 1984: 13)

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the establishment, growth and development of social work in Britain, from its origins in the nineteenth century to its position at the start of the twenty-first century. It is written on the assumption that understanding the history of social work is helpful when seeking to explore options for its future direction. This is particularly important when the social work role is under question, as it undoubtedly is in relation to work with older people. Ensuring that forms of practice are developed that pay full attention to its history and potential might form a useful corrective to the overwhelmingly 'administrative' nature of much contemporary social work.

As the above quotation from Jordan (1984) indicates, there are different ways of interpreting the growth and development of social work as an organised activity. Following Seed (1973), three strands in its development are charted. The first of these is the focus on *individual casework*, which originated in the work of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) (Woodroffe, 1962; Lewis, 1995). The second is the role of social work in *social administration*, particularly (although not exclusively) involving various forms of relief from poverty. Although much of this originated from the Poor Law (Jordan, 1984), it was also promoted in some of the work of the COS. The third is the focus on *social action*, which has been particularly identified with the growth of the Settlement Movement, both in Britain and the United States (Rose, 2001).

Although these three strands will be addressed separately for analytical purposes, they have often been interconnected. If one examines the origins of social work, for example, many key figures spanned these themes. For example, Octavia Hill was closely associated with both the COS and the Settlement Movement

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(Bell, 1942), while Canon Barnett was originally a supporter of the COS before establishing the first settlement at Toynbee Hall in East London as an example of what he then considered to be the most effective way of bringing about social change (Mowat, 1961). Both Hill and Barnett actively engaged in more general processes of social reform, meaning that they were at different times ‘case-workers, group workers and reformers’ (Cormack and McDougall, 1955: 21). The close complementary working of the Poor Law and charity was a vital prerequisite for the effective operation of the COS (Bosanquet, 1914), while some practitioners – notably hospital almoners (Bell, 1961) – brought together casework and financial administration. These links and connections have reappeared throughout the history of social work, albeit in a range of different guises.

INDIVIDUAL CASEWORK

Most historical accounts identify the COS as the initiator of the social theory that led to the formation of the occupation of social work (see, for example, Seed, 1973). A particular element of the work of the COS was its focus on individual casework. As this section will demonstrate, this has been perhaps the most consistent theme running through the entire history of social work. This section will therefore examine the ways in which individual casework developed, starting with its origins in the COS before moving to consider how it flourished in the years immediately following the Second World War into the present day.

One of the key contributions of the COS to social work was its clear – if perhaps partial and misguided – view of the cause of many social problems in Victorian Britain. London, as graphically portrayed by Bosanquet (1914: 5), was seen as beset by a ‘mass of chronic pauperism, beggary and crime’, behind which lay ‘an appalling amount of genuine misfortune’. In the view of the COS, existing services for the relief of poverty actually made matters worse (Bosanquet, 1914), due to the inadequacy of the Poor Law combined with the counterproductive impact of the vast growth of charitable organisations. In the view of the COS, this combination stripped people of the will to fight against the circumstances in which they found themselves; by not making any distinction between those who did and did not merit support, it was held that the system in effect encouraged all people to throw themselves onto the combined ministrations of the Poor Law and charity rather than maintain their independence. The COS maintained that this weakened the family and hence had a profoundly negative impact on society at large.

To put their social theory into effect, the COS established systems and structures that enabled action in accordance with its principles. First and foremost, it insisted on proper coordination of charitable endeavour to avoid overlap and competition between organisations (Webb, 1926). To support this, an understanding was reached about the respective roles and purposes of the two arms of

welfare, charity and the Poor Law (Bosanquet, 1914; Lewis, 1995). Charity was to be the first port of call for people in need, with the Poor Law and its institutions functioning as a general safety net beneath the charitable institutions.

The next priority for the COS was to establish an organisational structure and a system to assist people who appeared to have some level of need. While the COS did not originally intend to provide charity directly, but rather to coordinate the charitable provision of other organisations (Mowat, 1961), District Committees of the COS soon became established to provide relief on their own account (Bosanquet, 1914). The critical task was to oversee a process whereby a judgement could be made concerning the eligibility of applicants for support. This was accomplished by judging whether an applicant was considered to be 'deserving' or 'undeserving' (Seed, 1973) of assistance. Even though the terminology used by the COS changed in later years (to 'helpable' and 'unhelpable'; see Lewis, 1995), a moral dimension is clearly evident; this has had a continued impact on social work.

It is in this process of investigation where the roots of social work practice can be clearly divined. If charity was to be properly directed, there needed to be a full, 'scientifically' organised (Woodroffe, 1962) examination of the circumstances of individuals and families who presented for a service. The basic techniques of 'casework' that the COS instigated have continued applicability. For example, judgements had to be based on a detailed assessment of the applicant's circumstances, requiring home visits. The COS termed this 'taking down the case', a process that is clearly analogous to the preparation of assessments in contemporary practice. The COS issued guidance about how the process of 'taking down the case' should be organised; again, this role is broadly analogous to the guidance routinely issued by governments and employers to assist organisations and managers come to grips with changes in policy and practice. Following the assessment, a judgement was then to be made concerning an individual's eligibility to receive a service, which has its exact parallel in the existence of defined 'eligibility criteria' in current practice.

If services were to be provided, they could be of many different types, as is evident in the case histories that the COS cited in support of their work (see Bosanquet, 1914). The COS did not simply dispense financial charity, but also sought to find creative ways of maintaining and enhancing people's independence as such approaches were more in line with their governing philosophy. Although there was considerable variability between District Committees in terms of the number of people served and the quality of the investigations undertaken, the number of cases which the COS investigated was surprising to many, indicating that the organisation was uncovering a large amount of unmet need within society (Mowat, 1961). However, its general approach was not popular, as is evident from the defensive tone throughout Bosanquet's (1914) history. While the COS took pride in the efficiency of its system, for many others it appeared harsh in the extreme. In addition, the COS was markedly hostile to

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other organisations involved in the provision of charity, as well as to other perceptions of the causes of poverty (Webb, 1926). It was apparently difficult to criticise the work of the COS – even in relatively mild terms – without provoking an antagonistic response; for example, the differences of view between the COS and Canon Barnett were addressed in a peculiarly arrogant and defensive manner (see Bosanquet, 1914: 297).

In addition, the success of the COS in fulfilling its mission was also called into question, despite the robust way in which it sought to protect its position (see Bosanquet, 1914: *passim*). Throughout its period of peak influence – up to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 (Lewis, 1995) – it was never able to escape from a paradox that it had itself created: ‘The fact remained that the “unassisted” might be those who most needed help but least deserved it . . . while those helped, the respectable and provident, ought least to have needed help’ (Mowat, 1961: 37). In addition, it was claimed that the perceived harshness of the COS approach actually promoted rather than curbed ‘unscientific’ charitable activity (Lewis, 1995). It was also argued that the COS had not actually managed to classify the deserving and undeserving poor accurately, and that the charity that was dispensed was quite inadequate to combat need. As Webb concluded: ‘the administration of the Poor Law . . . supplemented by charitable assistance according to the tenets of the C.O.S. . . . had next to no effect either on the poverty or on the misery of the poor’ (1926: 251). These were powerful criticisms, which the COS struggled to combat successfully. In addition, the tide of opinion was shifting against the belief that the relief of poverty and distress was primarily an individual responsibility. In British society, following the cataclysm of the First World War, there was a much stronger level of acceptance that the provision of welfare was a matter for the state as much as the individual and the family. However, the influence of the COS on the development of social work was vast; in fact, it effectively created the occupation of social work, as well as defining many of its core tasks. The COS also recognised that effective work required a level of training of those people undertaking it. Indeed, one of its most significant legacies to social work was the development of systematic programmes of education and training for the role of the social worker. (As we shall see, it has this in common with the Settlement Movement.)

With a diminution of the influence of the COS, a separation therefore appeared between the practice of individual casework and the social theory from which it originated. This was certainly a difficult time for social work in Britain (Seed, 1973), as it sought to establish a role and function that was separate from the specific ideas of the COS. One of the effects of the separation of social work methods from a broader social theory was a fragmentation in the occupational processes that sustained it (Seed, 1973). For example, different branches of social work – psychiatric social workers, hospital almoners, etc. – operated separate systems of education and training, and in effect created parallel routes into

the occupation. The search for an alternative rationale for social work was a preoccupation for much of the next part of its existence (Lewis, 1995).

The importation of a collection of ideas from the USA was to have a particular importance in this respect. The first of these was the detailed codification of the process of 'social diagnosis' undertaken by Mary Richmond (1917), which was an early attempt to establish a common base for all social work practice. Richmond asserted that: 'in essentials, the methods and aims of social case work were or should be the same in every type of service' (1917: 5). Central to this was the act of assessing needs, which should be based on a systematic process of gathering 'social evidence' from a range of sources – the individual, family members (individually and collectively), and outside sources such as schools, doctors, employers, etc. The key contribution of Richmond to the development of social work was in the detailed, 'scientific' organisation of data that she propounded, which represented a major step forward along the path first outlined by the COS.

The second major import stemmed from the popularity of psychologically-based theories in American social work from the 1920s onwards. Cormack and McDougall (1955) suggested that the introduction of treatment methods deriving from related disciplines did little to suggest that a social worker possessed unique expertise and was hence worthy of professional status; it appeared that a social worker was doing nothing that could not equally well be accomplished by many other occupations – and even mature people of good sense lacking any qualification at all. Nevertheless, the adoption of psychologically-oriented insights increased the focus of social work on the workings of the mind, as is apparent from the content of one of the most significant post-war textbooks on social casework in Britain (Morris, 1955).

The attraction of 'universal applicability' for social work approaches was obvious, particularly given the occupation's fragmentation in the first half of the twentieth century. A focus on social casework informed by psychological theories offered the prospect of unifying these disparate elements. Indeed, the first 'generic' training course for social workers was established for precisely this purpose (Younghusband, 1955). The increased confidence that this gave to the social work world should not be underestimated – it suffuses all the contributions to Morris' seminal text (1955). For example, Younghusband is somewhat patronising to the pioneers of social work practice who (somehow!) managed to operate without the knowledge of 'unconscious motivations, behaviour patterns, the transference situation, client-worker relationships, social maladjustment, obsessional behaviour, the need to express feelings of guilt and aggression, reactions to deprivations in childhood' (Younghusband, 1955: 198) that were the stock in trade of the 'modern' practitioner. She is clear that social work practice had developed for the better as a result of the increased knowledge that social workers had of the innermost workings of people. In addition, she is in little doubt of the greater levels of skill and knowledge that could be required of the

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social worker. The scope of the social work task, as Younghusband (1955) defined it, was greatly increased – indeed, it was ambitiously framed. However, there was an element of unreality in her description: only a small minority of people could receive the sort of service she identified (Lewis, 1995). It was difficult for social workers in statutory agencies to accommodate these requirements into their daily work, as Rodgers and Stevenson (1973) made clear. Even in voluntary organisations, the ideals of individual casework were difficult to put into practice. However, the way in which the social work task was theorised represented an elaborate updating of its key elements.

However, it was this very ambition that caused one of the most notable attacks on the developing occupation of social work. In her book *Social Science and Social Pathology* (1959) Barbara Wootton excoriated what she saw as social work's obsession with methods drawn from psychiatry and psychology. The essence of her critique was that the fascination with psychology and psychiatry created a 'fantastically pretentious façade' for the occupation, resulting from 'a tendency to emphasise certain aspects of social work, while playing down others that are potentially at least as valuable' (Wootton, 1959: 271). She identified the rhetoric that accompanied descriptions of social work practice as particularly worrying, and mocked the idea that social work could actually achieve the sorts of change its advocates appeared to propose. Her preferred remedy was that social work should rediscover a more modest focus on helping people by acting as what she termed a 'middleman': mobilising, organising and coordinating the services of a huge range of other professional colleagues, and by guiding people through the mass of legislation and policy that could affect them. In this way, Wootton suggested that the social worker could once again be essential to the effective functioning of the welfare state.

While this was a witty and stimulating critique, Wootton's analysis did not engage fully with the reality that confronted social workers. Her conception of the limited role of social work offered little that could assist, for example, an abused child, a person with a mental health problem, or people who had experienced bereavement (Lewis, 1995), all of whom would require an approach that was more in line with that suggested by the advocates of individual casework. In addition, Wootton's perception of the role of social work did not accord with the reality of what practitioners actually did – vividly conveyed by Rodgers and Stevenson (1973) – but related more closely to the rhetoric of those whose role it was to promote the development of social work. In reality, practice already contained much that drew on social work's administrative origins, as I shall explore in the following section. Younghusband (1955) certainly recognised that social workers required knowledge of resources and the ability to coordinate them effectively, even if she downplayed this aspect of the social work role. In that sense, Wootton's critique was built on somewhat insecure foundations. However, it strongly influenced subsequent attacks of social work from the political

Left (Bailey and Brake, 1975) and Right (Brewer and Lait, 1980). These will be addressed in a forthcoming section.

With the benefit of hindsight, the 1950s represented the period where individual casework was most highly prized within social work. However, as we have seen, one key problem with this formulation was that it did not equate to much of the actual practice of people employed as social workers, particularly those working within statutory settings. For such people, there remained an emphasis on the efficient administration of relief; this will be the focus of the next section. In addition, it moved the occupation a long way from its origins as a social movement (Seed, 1973); the idea that social work can be seen as a movement interested in securing social change is the focus of the section after that. In terms of work with older people it had relatively little impact; the role of social worker has always had more of an element of administrative requirements.

SECTION SUMMARY

The section has engaged with the following themes:

- The establishment of the COS and its enormous influence both on general social policy but also the development of the occupation of social work.
- The differences between the COS and its critics about the causes of social problems, and hence the most appropriate ways of responding to them.
- The fragmentation of social work in the early part of the twentieth century, following the reduction in influence of the COS.
- The attempt to establish a common base for social work practice.
- The increased influence of theories deriving from psychology and psychiatry within social work practice, and the argument that these could be universally applied within all social work settings.
- The various ways in which such an approach could be subjected to criticism, focusing particularly on the devastating critique of Barbara Wootton (1959).

SOCIAL WORK AS SOCIAL ADMINISTRATION

As various commentators have noted (Seed, 1973) social work has its earliest roots – even pre-dating the formation of the COS – in the work of the Poor Law relieving officers, whose duty was to administer the system that had first been created through the Poor Law Act of 1601. The importance of their role was

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given additional stimulus by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which emphasised the element of deterrence through the formal introduction of the concept of 'less eligibility'. This meant that the conditions of relief would consciously be made no better than was available to the lowest paid worker, in order not to make such relief more attractive to those who might be eligible for it and hence discourage their desire to engage in productive labour. The Poor Law was administered on a local level by Boards of Guardians, which gave rise to considerable variation in the way in which it was managed across the country. All Boards of Guardians required some basis of making judgements about the eligibility of applicants to forms of relief, which were generally financial. Relieving officers were widely employed to accomplish this end in the early years of the nineteenth century. By contrast with the COS or the Settlement Movement it was not generally argued that these officers required a formal period of education and training to accomplish their tasks: as a result their quality was variable. Although a National Poor Law Officers' Association was formed in 1884, seeking to improve the status and quality of the occupation through better professional training, this had little effect on the low public esteem in which it was held (Crowther, 1981). However, the 1929 Local Government Act did manage to achieve some degree of change for this group of staff, as the responsibility for managing the Poor Law transferred to the direct control of local government, with the relieving officers redesignated as public assistance officers (Crowther, 1981). In their location, as well as in some of their work, the influence of these staff on the development of social work is considerable. Elements of social administration were also contained in the role of workers within the COS. For example, although much assistance was other than financial, direct financial support was provided in some instances. In addition, the role of hospital almoners – addressed more fully in Chapter 5 – contained elements that were explicitly concerned with financial administration (Bell, 1961), which was a staple of their work until the establishment of the NHS in 1948.

As noted in the previous section, even where the rhetoric of casework most affected social work in the 1950s it was accepted that the social worker needed to have a good understanding of the range and scope of resources that could be made available to an individual or family (Younghusband, 1955). Indeed, the conception that the social work role was, at least in part, concerned with humanising the administration of social services (Rodgers and Stevenson, 1973) was well accepted. This general perception lasted through reorganisation in the early 1970s, which coincided with a rapid increase in the numbers of qualified social workers. In reality, irrespective of the rhetoric of individual casework (or, indeed, the rhetoric of the later radical social work) much of the practice of social workers was concerned with responding to the minutiae of people's lives in a practical and pragmatic fashion.

Throughout this period, there is little doubt that the administrative elements of the social work role far outweighed the elements that derived from casework, particularly in respect of older people (Younghusband, 1978). It was in recognition of this that very little practice with older people was actually carried out by qualified staff until the passage of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 (Lymberry, 1998a). Even though this legislation increased the numbers of qualified staff employed to work with older people, care management – the dominant form of social work practice with older people – particularly emphasised the administrative role of the practitioner (Sturges, 1996). The social work role was increasingly restricted to the act of assessment, leading to the establishment of care packages and the rapid closure of the ‘case’ (Lymberry, 1998a). Arguably, these trends have made social work with older people into a particularly dispiriting enterprise for many practitioners (Carey, 2003; Postle, 2002).

Although the ‘administrative’ elements of social work have a long history, it is the development of ‘casework’ that has been more frequently cited as the main contributor to the development of the occupation of social work. However, the origins of social work in social administration are apparent, and this focus for practice remains evident. This is in direct contrast with the conception of social work as a form of ‘social action’, the subject of the following section, which is relatively little in evidence.

SECTION SUMMARY

This section has discussed the following issues:

- The development of an administrative approach to social work.
- The persistence of this orientation to practice throughout the twentieth century.
- Its particular dominance in the delivery of social work to older people following the introduction of community care.

SOCIAL ACTION: THE SETTLEMENT MOVEMENT AND BEYOND

The earliest example of social work as a form of collective social action in Britain can be found in the work of the Settlement Movement, established by Canon Barnett in the 1880s. The Settlement Movement was underpinned by a

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number of beliefs that it shared with the COS. Both were based on similar moral principles, even though different forms of practice stemmed from these principles; a belief in the value of education and example underpinned the values of both. In addition, both accepted that financial assistance was insufficient to combat problems within communities and individuals. Similarly, both had their origins in the sense of obligation of the more privileged to those less fortunate than themselves, and shared a strong belief in the purpose and value of education, establishing training courses in conjunction with universities (Jordan, 1984; Seed, 1973).

Gilchrist and Jeffs (2001) have indicated that the movement was based on three linked ideas:

- The need to develop scientific research on the causes and effects of poverty.
- That the 'settlers' could help to broaden the lives and horizons of people and communities through education.
- That they could also enhance leadership within local communities.

As this outline indicates, its practice differed from the work of the COS. For example, it was not predicated on resolving immediate individual needs, but rather sought to work through the community and the group to improve general social conditions. Critically, the vision of Canon Barnett was different from that of the COS on one key point, relating to the social theory that underpinned the Settlement Movement. Barnett came to believe that the root causes of poverty and distress could be located in social structures more than in the defects of individual character; he termed the action that followed this diagnosis 'practical socialism' (Barnett, in Lewis, 1995). His vision was that people of education – the movement attracted women as well as men (Matthews and Kimmis, 2001) – could establish a relationship with people of a different class to their mutual benefit. The residence requirement for 'settlers' was critical for this; while most worked outside the community for their paid employment, they spent other time undertaking forms of community service and development (Rose, 2001).

To the modern reader, there seems at least as much unifying as dividing the COS and the Settlement Movement – and some early pioneers like Octavia Hill supported both (Bell, 1942) – but the division was deeply felt by the COS at least (Bosanquet, 1914). The explanation for this can be located in the clarity of the COS vision: if the analysis on which it was based was accurate, then only one possible set of responses could logically follow. Any divergence from this path was treated almost as apostasy.

Although the Settlement Movement initially expanded quite quickly in Britain – and with even more speed in the USA – its growth did not outlive the main establishing pioneers. By 1914 there were 46 settlements; these were a mixture of women-only, men-only and mixed establishments. However, as the education

and training of 'settlers' developed, the pioneers tended to be replaced by 'professionals', who saw their role as consolidating the innovations that they inherited, rather than devising new ones (Rose, 2001). As a result, as Seed (1973) pointed out, the nature of the movement gradually changed, losing much of its radical edge.

With the decline in significance of the Settlement Movement paralleled by the advance of individual casework, there was little connection in social work practice in the middle years of the twentieth century to the strand of social action and community development that had motivated Canon Barnett and his followers. Indeed, the 1950s and early part of the 1960s represented the almost total eclipse of collective action as part of social work. However, a coherent critique of the contemporary state of social work was mounted from the late 1960s onwards, focusing on the failures of a practice that 'pathologised' the individual while ignoring the material and social causes of poverty and disadvantage. The establishment of the radical journal *Case Con* in 1970 was a key moment in this process, providing a focal point for an alternative conception of the potential of social work.

This was more fully articulated in a variety of texts in the late 1970s and early 1980s, of which Bailey and Brake (1975), Jones (1983) and Simpkin (1983) are a representative sample from the UK. They are part of a movement that became known as 'radical social work' after the title of Bailey and Brake's important text. Although there were differences amongst the proponents of radical social work, particularly in the way in which they addressed issues of inequality that were other than class-based, they shared an understanding of the causes of human problems that sought to shift the focus of social work intervention in a profound way, moving away from an individual to a collective response to problems.

While influential within the academy and within certain areas of practice, ultimately radical social work as a 'movement' foundered on some barely recognised contradictions. For example, while its analysis of social problems was a necessary corrective to the highly individualised understandings within 'casework', it was much less effective in guiding social workers towards alternative models of practice. As Cohen (1975) observed, the emphasis on structural causes of disadvantage did not necessarily enable individuals to address the specific problems that they encountered. In addition, the radical social work agenda appeared to assume that social workers had more capacity to challenge and change policy than was realistic, given their occupational location (Langan, 2003). Certainly, employers did not expect their staff to foment revolution, despite the apparent inducement so to do within some radical social work material! This was particularly true from the 1980s onwards, a difficult period for the development of more progressive forms of social work. Finally, the early analyses of the radical social work movement were heavily class-based (see Jones, 1983), with relatively little attention devoted to issues of race, gender, disability,

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sexuality, etc. This meant that it did not connect sufficiently well with groups of people – practitioners and service users alike – who could have been allies.

It is perhaps significant that the radical social work movement was relatively short-lived, failing to surmount either the challenges provided by the changed social and political climate of the 1980s or the different sorts of critique mounted by Black people, women and disabled people. It had less impact on social work than it had intended, but the sorts of analysis that it engendered have proved to have a continuing influence. Its impact on social work with older people was particularly limited (Phillipson, 1989). As an attempt to re-focus social work onto its potential to operate as a social movement it was only partly successful, but it certainly helped to draw attention to various issues – the impact of poverty, the potential of community – that had been long neglected.

SECTION SUMMARY

This section has focused on the following issues:

- The origins of a more community-oriented approach to social work through the development of the Settlement Movement.
- The lengthy period in the middle of the twentieth century when there appeared to be little emphasis on social action as a part of social work.
- The rebirth of social action in the 1970s and beyond in the form of community development, influenced by the thinking of the radical social work movement.
- The failure of radical social work to have a lasting impact on social work practice.

THEMES AND ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL WORK

The purpose of this section is to analyse key elements of contemporary social work, drawing on themes that were identified in the previous four sections. It represents a condensed version of a complex debate, focusing on specific controversies in social work in the recent past. It starts with a consideration of the politically inspired critiques of social work that were generated in the 1960s and 1970s. It continues with an analysis of the Barclay Report (1982), concentrating particularly on the debate engendered by the dissenting reports by Pinker and Hadley et al. It then moves on to consider the ways in which social work has been challenged by groups of the people it exists to serve, fuelled by the growth of the ‘new social movements’ from the 1980s onwards. Finally, the section suggests a way in which

the various types of social work practice can be understood that provides a conceptual framework for the remainder of the book.

The political critique of social work that had particular force from the 1960s on was from the 'radical social work' movement, the outline of which was sketched in the previous section. It rejected what it saw as the pathologising elements of individual casework, notably the common assumption that poverty was the result of personal failure rather than economic forces. (In this respect, the argument replays themes that were explored in the disputes between the Fabian Society and the COS in the late nineteenth century.) It pressed for the establishment of a form of practice that re-engaged with the economic basis of disadvantage, drawing on ideas of community development and social action that are traceable to the Settlement Movement. Radical social work largely rejected the notion of individual casework, believing that this distracted from the central mission of social work, which it saw as combating poverty and disadvantage.

The critique from the right was of a different order, focusing on the fundamental ineffectiveness of social work. Brewer and Lait (1980) contended that social work was imprecisely defined, encompassing too broad a range of roles and functions. They argued that it should be much more narrowly focused and defined, and followed Wootton (1959) in questioning the essence of social work's claims for professional status, believing that social workers were 'valued but *essentially subordinate* employees of the traditional health and welfare agencies' (Brewer and Lait, 1980: 8; emphasis added), whose role was basically to carry out the practical work of such agencies. Brewer and Lait (1980) further suggested that the diffuse, over-ambitious and ill-defined aims of social services departments ensured the futility of much practice, and that the poor quality of the education and training offered to social workers further compounded the problems. Their conception of social work had the practitioner occupying a predominantly bureaucratic position, with 'professional' training replaced by a form of apprenticeship.

These criticisms of social work found a ready audience within certain sections of the media and politics, not to mention the medical profession. However, their analysis is contaminated by the prejudiced language in which it is conveyed, with constant disparaging barbs directed to all and sundry within social work and a dismissive tone towards all knowledge that is not based in hard, scientific certainty. For example, in discussion on the selection of students, the authors suggested that 'only graduates in maths, physics or chemistry, with firsts or upper seconds, should be accepted for training, since to attract them one would need to put on courses with intellectual content' (Brewer and Lait, 1980: 41). In addition, their insistence that social work training had taken a strongly psycho-analytical direction is largely out of line with the realities of the late 1970s, however true it might have been of the 1950s. Indeed, their insistence that the influence of radical left-wing academics was such that students were 'having to

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regurgitate their tedious and irrelevant nostrums to obtain a certificate in applied social studies' (Brewer and Lait, 1980: 114) appears to contradict their very claim of psycho-analytical dominance within the social work academy.

The debate that this critique engendered concerned the essence of social work; it was extended through the process of the Barclay Report (1982), which sought to clarify the role and tasks of social work. As is often the case with large committees, not all the parties to the Barclay Report were able to agree. The majority report contained a strong focus on the elements of 'social care planning' within the social work role, which was contrasted with the element of 'counselling' that the report identified as its other core strand. The most far-reaching recommendation of the majority report was for the creation of what it termed 'community social work', where practice and policy would become more responsive to the needs of a community, defined in terms either of locality or of 'shared concerns' (Barclay Report, 1982, 13.38–13.41: 208–9). In the committee's view, this would require a change of attitude and orientation by social workers (Barclay Report, 1982, 13.38–13.41: 209–11).

Critical areas of contention were laid out in two contrasting minority reports, one of which was largely the work of Roger Hadley (Brown et al., 1982), the other being solely the work of Robert Pinker (1982). Hadley and colleagues advocated for the extension of the notion of community social work, the most controversial of the recommendations of the main report. They argued that the central role of social work should be to support informal caring networks; in order to do this, they suggested that a community-oriented approach had to be developed. In their view, such an orientation required four conditions to be met:

- *Localisation*: 'statutory services must be local enough to operate at street and village level' (Brown et al., 1982: 227).
- *Integration*: three kinds of integration were suggested – integration within each social services department, integration between the department and other service-providing agencies, and integration between the department and social networks.
- *Wider roles*: to accomplish this fundamental shift, staff roles had to be defined much less narrowly than before.
- *Greater autonomy*: 'local social services teams will need a larger measure of discretion to develop these approaches than they have been formally accorded' (Brown et al., 1982: 229).

There had been a number of projects that had explored this sort of practice (see, for example, Hadley and McGrath, 1981), and the alternative view adopted by Hadley and colleagues was firmly in this tradition. However, this conception of the social work role did not fit comfortably with the increasingly coercive nature of social workers' activities, particularly in respect of child protection. Pinker

took a diametrically opposite position, contending that social workers had no mandate for the sorts of activity that could be grouped under the banners either of 'community social work' or 'neighbourhood social work'. He argued that both the majority report and the minority appendix of Hadley and colleagues were based on fundamentally flawed premises. The concept of 'community' on which they founded their analysis was not clearly defined, there were fatal ambiguities in the concepts of accountability that were deployed, and unresolved tensions between the principles of 'specialism' and 'genericism' within social work practice. By contrast, Pinker recommended that social work would be more securely defined in a manner that was limited by its statutory remit. In a memorable turn of phrase he characterised community social work in the following terms:

It conjures up the vision of a captainless crew under a patchwork ensign stitched together from remnants of the Red Flag and the Jolly Roger – all with a licence and some with a disposition to mutiny – heading in the gusty winds of populist rhetoric, with presumption as their figurehead and inexperience as their compass, straight for the reefs of public incredulity. (Pinker, 1982: 262)

While the Barclay Report did not have the impact on social work that had been widely anticipated, it encapsulated an ongoing debate within social work between those who argued for a wider involvement of the occupation in social action and those who took a more limited view of its role and functions. Although framed in different terms and language, this dispute echoed earlier debates about the essential nature of social work. Given the political climate into which the Report was catapulted, it is little surprise that the more restricted vision of Pinker was to characterise social work practice in the following years.

In the 1980s there were challenges to social work from groups – women, Black people, service user groups (including people with disabilities and people with mental health difficulties), the advocacy movement, etc. – who had been subject to the services of social workers. These challenges have been usefully summarised by Taylor (1993), who argued that the groups share common purposes, despite their obvious differences, in their focus on issues such as diversity, universalism, power and rights. The tests that these movements have posed for social work served to expose fundamental elements of the occupation's self-image.

- A key underlying theme is that their criticisms highlight the fact that social work has often failed to live up to its more lofty ideals. Given that an important principle of social work has always been its ability to respond positively to the most disadvantaged sections of society, this condemnation highlights a dismal failure within the occupation.
- The groups have also highlighted social workers' inability to work effectively in practice with individual disabled people, black people, gays and lesbians, etc.

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In combination, these concerns helped to create a climate of uncertainty and doubt within social work, attesting to the fact that it was an occupation in some disarray.

The final part of this section will seek to understand how the various themes that have characterised social work through its history can be placed into a conceptual framework that will help to govern the subsequent discussion. Working on the assumption that disputes about the nature of social work are really disputes about the nature and causes of, and solutions to, social problems (Jordan, 1984), the different perspectives on social work therefore represent alternative views on the role that the occupation plays within society. In this respect Mullaly (1997) has differentiated between broadly 'conventional' and 'progressive' perspectives on the role and functions of social work. In the 'conventional' view – which he suggests is, and always has been, held by the majority of the profession – the structure of society is believed to be fundamentally sound. The broad role of social work is therefore either to help people adjust to existing social structures, or to amend those structures in a limited way. In the minority 'progressive' view the purpose of social work is different, being primarily to contribute to a fundamental social transformation, on the basis that the problems of individuals are caused by inequitable social structures rather than individual inadequacy or weakness. In the foregoing debate about the origins of social work, the efficient administration of relief and most individual casework can be placed within the 'conventional' perspective. Indeed, support for the *status quo* was a central part of the role of the COS. In addition, there is relatively little in the literature on individual casework that argues for a more radical social vision. By contrast, the Settlement Movement contained the seeds of a more critical perspective; it is therefore no surprise that many future socialist politicians – including the future Prime Minister Clement Attlee – were active in this movement in their youth (Matthews and Kimmis, 2001). This critical perspective became more explicit in the radical social work movement.

An alternative way of conceptualising different perspectives on social work has been devised by Payne (1996). He has suggested that three 'general perspectives' on social work can be identified: 'individualist-reformist', 'socialist-collectivist', and 'reflexive-therapeutic' (Payne, 1996: 2). The discipline of social work is held to contain elements of these three perspectives, with one or another being influential at different times. For example, the reflexive-therapeutic perspective was particularly powerful in the USA in the early part of the twentieth century (Woodroffe, 1962), being imported for British consumption in the years following the Second World War (Morris, 1955). The socialist-collectivist perspective was especially prominent in the radical social work literature in Britain in the 1970s and early 1980s (Bailey and Brake, 1975). By contrast, most

social work in contemporary Britain is more within the individualist-reformist tradition, which has been influentially articulated by Martin Davies, who claimed that, 'although social workers have many roles . . . they are all subsumed under a general theory of *maintenance*' (Davies, 1994: 57; his italics). That this has become the dominant perspective is far from being a matter of chance, as it accepts the basic structures of society and sets limits to the social work role that circumscribe its focus.

While these are helpful ways of conceptualising the place of social work, they do both over-simplify some of the inherent contradictions that characterise daily practice. To take Mullaly's (1997) split, even if a practitioner were to espouse a 'progressive' view of social work, s/he must necessarily frequently *act* in ways that support the framework of society: the legislative and statutory basis of social work requires no less. Similarly, it is at least conceptually possible for a social worker to practise in accordance with all of Payne's (1996) 'general perspectives' on social work at different times: they are not mutually exclusive. In reality, the bulk of what a social worker actually does in practice with older people in Britain will fit within the individualist-reformist perspective, simply because the key statutory and policy requirements of the agencies within which most of them operate – carrying out community care assessments, arranging for safe and speedy hospital discharges, etc. – lend themselves to this orientation to social work. However, a social worker should not forget that there are other perspectives on which to draw. For example, s/he might recognise that an older person needs additional support to come to terms with loss and bereavement, or that a carer for a person with dementia has a particular need for counselling to come to terms with the changes that dementia engenders. Both examples are of work that fits within a more therapeutic tradition. Similarly, on different occasions a social worker might perceive the need for collective action, for example by supporting a group of carers to meet, or by enabling the formation of service user groups to argue for better services.

This book makes an argument for a broad view of social work, encompassing all three perspectives identified by Payne (1996). It argues that it is unrealistic to construe social work as simply about a process of social reform, as individuals in genuine need require more immediate help to assist them with their problems. However, to perceive social work simply as a succession of individual 'cases' is likely to lead to safe but sterile practice. Indeed, not all of the problems confronting older people can be seen as relating to the individual, as identified in Chapter 1; such a conception ignores the collective experiences of older people, and the structured oppression that they experience within society (Bytheway, 1995). A skilled social work practitioner must be able to identify the approach that most suits the circumstances with which s/he is confronted, being sufficiently flexible to respond to them in different ways according to their nature and cause.

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Therefore, to adjust the terminology deployed in this chapter, drawing particularly on Payne (1996) and Seed (1973), social workers need to be capable of working in three different but complementary approaches:

- Working with individuals, in both problem-solving and therapeutic ways. For the purposes of this book, I have labelled this the *individualist/therapeutic* approach.
- Working as a go-between, ensuring that resources are mobilised to meet need, with particular stress on the tasks of liaison and coordination. In this book, this has been termed the *administrative* approach.
- Working with groups and communities, to construct creative and new types of response to problems, including the development of new services and resources. This has been termed a *collectivist* approach.

This approach recognises that human problems are complex and that the ways of responding to them are manifold. An *individualist/therapeutic*, an *administrative* or a *collectivist* response may be indicated at different times; the practitioner has to retain the capacity to identify what approach is more likely to be effective, and at what time. In addition, and this is particularly true for practice with older people, the functions of agencies need to be constructed in ways that allow for this element of flexibility on the part of the social worker. As I will explore further in Chapter 6, the way in which social work with older people is currently constructed forces the practitioner into an administrative response, irrespective of need.

It is apparent that, in taking this line, I have also defined my position in relation to Mullaly's (1997) 'conventional' and 'progressive' orientations. In his terms, this would be within the 'conventional' camp, since it does accept the legitimacy of the present social order. This is less a statement of personal political beliefs than it is a recognition of the nature of social work practice within British society. Pinker (1982) was surely correct in pointing out that social workers have no mandate to work against the system that employs them; in addition, most service users would not necessarily appreciate their concerns being transformed into political tools. However, in the context of social work practice with older people, the approach advocated does move beyond the limits of what has customarily been accepted as normal for this group. There has historically been scant opportunity for the development of therapeutic approaches to practice, and little evidence of collectivist work. It can be argued that these failures are an expression of the low value accorded to older people within society at large as well as within social work (see Chapters 1 and 6).

SECTION SUMMARY

This section has examined numerous debates within contemporary social work, including:

- The politically inspired critiques of social work that led to the development of the radical social work movement.
- The publication of the Barclay Report (1982), and in particular the debate that was engendered by the two minority reports.
- The critique of the effectiveness of social work that was mounted in the 1980s, particularly through the impact of vocal groups representing the very people served by social work.
- Various ways in which the practice of social work can be understood, drawing particularly on Mullaly (1997) and Payne (1996).
- It concludes by proposing a way in which social work can be analysed that forms the conceptual framework that governs the rest of the book.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has engaged with the history and development of social work, identifying the main strands that have contributed to contemporary policy and practice. It has suggested that there are three dominant traditions of social work – *individualist/therapeutic*, *administrative* and *collectivist*. It has argued that social workers need to be enabled to use all of these approaches, and to make a judgement about which one would be more effective in different sets of circumstance. Although this argument would potentially apply to all aspects of social work, in this book it is applied specifically to social work with older people.

In respect of social work with older people, as Chapter 6 will demonstrate, there has been relatively little history of the use of any approach to social work other than *administrative*. Since the implementation of community care policy in particular, this has led to sterile and unimaginative forms of practice. It is the contention of this book that this should not continue: that the needs of older people will be more effectively met if social work practice draws on the *individualist/therapeutic* and the *collectivist* traditions as well. However, for this to happen there would need to be an overturning of much of what underpins contemporary practice. It is also suggested (in Chapter 8) that a fundamental shift in the way social work is organised could help to facilitate such a change.

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CHAPTER SUMMARY

The chapter has addressed the following issues:

- The influence of the Charity Organisation Society in the development of social work, with particular attention to the way in which social work practice was seen as the way of putting the social theory of the organisation into practice.
- The gradual decline in the importance of the COS, the fragmentation that this engendered within social work and the post-Second World War growth in therapeutically-oriented social work practice.
- The critique of such practice mounted by Barbara Wootton (1959), alongside a recognition of the reality that not all social work practice approached the 'ideal' promoted by many within the social work academy.
- The roots of social work in forms of social administration, focusing particularly on the role of the social worker in arranging for services and resources to be provided for service users.
- The development of a conception of social work as a means to affect social change, focusing on the principles that underpinned the Settlement Movement, moving on to the development of the radical social work movement in the late twentieth century.
- A range of themes, issues and critical debates (Adams et al., 2002) within contemporary social work, touching upon the critique of social work from the political left and right, the split within the Barclay working group, and the growing influence of service user voices on the development of social work.
- The chapter has suggested that there are three main elements in the development of social work – the *individualist/therapeutic* approach, the *administrative* approach and the *collectivist* approach.
- It has further suggested that these approaches are not inherently in conflict with each other, but that the *administrative* approach has come to dominate practice with older people.