2 THE VALUE BASE OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

2.1 Describe the six core values of social work practice and their associated ethical principles.

2.2 Describe the importance of social diversity and intersectionality in developing cultural competence as well as NASW guidelines for demonstrating cultural competence in social work.

2.3 Describe the role and influence of personal and social values in social work practice.

2.4 Explain activities that help ensure one practices value-based social work in practicum.

In Practice: Teresa Struggles With Social Work's Values at Her Agency

After I graduated from a Midwestern university, I moved to a large urban area in the South to take a job as a frontline child protective services (CPS) worker. Now that I've finished my first year, I can't help but reflect on my responsibilities as a social worker practicing with a multitude of client systems (e.g., individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and society) and the notion of human dignity.

Once I became comfortable with how my agency works, I continued to seek out more information about my community, such as the people who belong to this community, their values, community stakeholders, social problems, and available resources. It has been my quest to identify various populations in need and people served by human service agencies in the community. As a 23-year-old recent graduate, I admittedly have an emerging understanding and awareness of my community's values and needs, my agency's culture, and the influence of community stakeholders.
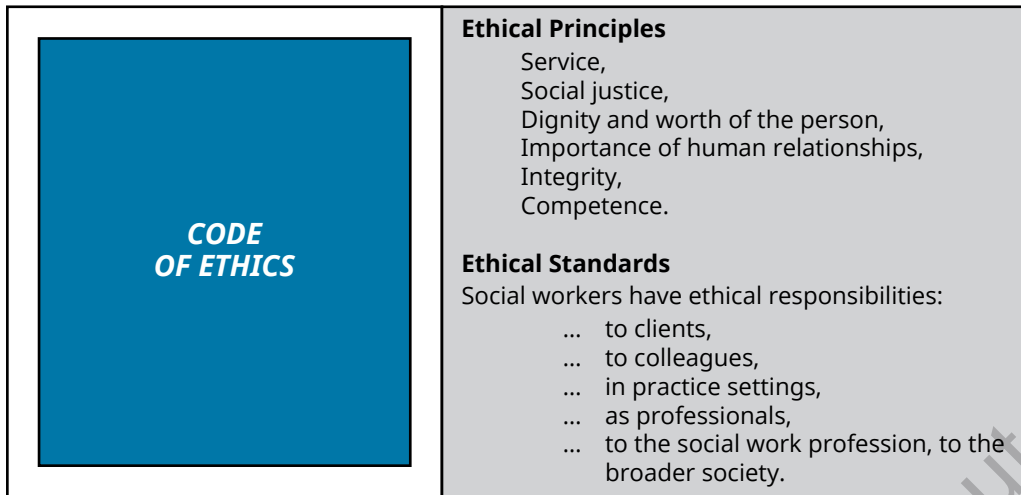
During this first year on the job, I have witnessed and struggled with how bureaucratic structures contribute to dehumanization of clients who struggle economically, and how this may disparately influence Black and Latinx clients. I observed these clients receiving little dignity and respect when they seek out services, such as judgmental attitudes. I've nonprofessionals exhibit such attitudes toward people living with incomes below the federal poverty level before, but I was a bit shocked to see staff and administrators at the agency exhibit these same attitudes. I voiced my concerns to my social work supervisor on several occasions. Luckily, she affirmed my observations are valid, extended empathy to my distress, and explained that not all staff members are social workers. For example, the director of our agency is a political appointee who is well connected in the community. The director has a business background and approach to leadership, which has led to some positive changes that have boosted the respect and professionalism displayed by staff. However, the director has no background in the professional values or ethics of social work (e.g., the respect for human diversity and dignity). The director tends to prioritize exercising fiscal responsibility, improving efficiency, and achieving quantifiable (numeric) outcomes. My supervisor and I discussed how to best promote the dignity of our clients in a very "business like" environment that often views parents belonging to underrepresented groups through the lens of harmful and damaging stereotypes.

Most recently, my supervisor and I met with other social workers to identify and document specific and detailed accounts of harmful staff–client interactions. We described how CPS employees disrespected, dehumanized, and maltreated our clients, particularly on the basis of race and ethnicity. In collecting this information, we made a conscious and concerted effort to protect the confidentiality and rights of our clients. Through the use of an external professional social work consultant, we currently are deliberating meaningful next steps for sharing our documentation with the CPS leadership to prompt organizational awareness and change. My supervisor also joined a community taskforce of social work supervisors who meet regularly to seek ways to facilitate organizational change, primarily through the use of constructive and collaborative strategies and means.

THE SIX CORE VALUES AND ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL WORK

The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) *Code of Ethics* (2021) begins with a Preamble and states the purpose of the *Code of Ethics*. The rest of the *Code of Ethics* is divided into two sections: **Ethical Principles** and **Ethical Standards** (Figure 2.1).

The first section, Ethical Principles, has six **core values**, which are fundamental beliefs as to how things should be and how social workers should behave, act, and think about people in need. It is important for new social workers to consider each core value in-depth, especially how these might be used when entering their social work practicum placement or practice. In addition to the core values in the *Code of Ethics*, the Council on Social Work Education (2022) Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) states in Competency 1 (Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior) that "Social workers

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Sections of the NASW *Code of Ethics*

CODE OF ETHICS

Ethical Principles
Service,
Social justice,
Dignity and worth of the person,
Importance of human relationships,
Integrity,
Competence.

Ethical Standards
Social workers have ethical responsibilities:
...   to clients,
...   to colleagues,
...   in practice settings,
...   as professionals,
...   to the social work profession, to the broader society.

Source: https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English

understand the value base of the profession and its ethical standards, as well as relevant policies, laws, and regulations that may affect practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities" (p. 8). This knowledge also serves as the basis for learning more about ethical practice and developing the skills necessary to resolve ethical dilemmas, which are discussed in Chapter 5.

Each of the six values and associated ethical principles are something to aspire to as a social worker. Social workers make a lifelong, professional commitment to advancing the profession. In everyday practice, social workers identify ways to hold themselves and each other responsible for adherence to the NASW's core values and ethical principles. When social workers join the NASW, each signs an oath of compliance to the *Code of Ethics* and its principles. Many social workers keep a copy on their desk or bookmark a link to the *Code of Ethics* to easily access and reference the *Code of Ethics* during practice. Even before joining the NASW, students entering their practicum agency or organization (their first practice experience), they often sign an agreement that indicates they will adhere to the *Code of Ethics*. Most state licensing boards that regulate social work practice use the *Code of Ethics* as the foundation for their practice standards. Thus, thorough knowledge of *Code of Ethics* is key to effective practice as a licensed social worker and in integrated social work practice and you are encouraged to print a copy or save a link now.

The Ethical Principles section of The NASW's *Code of Ethics* (2021) offers six core values:

- service
- social justice
- dignity and worth of the person
- importance of human relationships
- integrity
- competence

In the next sections, each value and associated ethical principal will be reviewed individually. Table 2.1 lists all the core values and ethical principles from the NASW *Code of Ethics* (pp. 5–6).

TIME TO THINK 2.1

Look at social work's core values. Do you think a social worker can be an "ethical and professional practitioner" if they disagree with these core values? Why or why not?

TABLE 2.1 ■ The Six Values and Ethical Principles of Social Work	
Value	**Ethical Principle**
Service	Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.
Social Justice	Social workers challenge social injustice.
Dignity and Worth of the Person	Social workers respect the dignity and worth of the person.
Importance of Human Relationships	Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.
Integrity	Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.
Competence	Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.

Source: NASW Code of Ethics. https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English

Service

> **Ethical Principle**: *Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.*

Many social workers undoubtedly enter the profession hoping to help people in need. **Service** refers to the ways social workers provide assistance and help people facilitate their maximum abilities, potential, and well-being. As social workers, service to clients is the highest and first obligation. Many social work students want to serve others, and specifically imagine practicing with individuals and families. However, one of the distinguishing characteristics of social work and integrated practice is a commitment to assisting individuals, families, and groups while also considering the influence of the larger client system levels of organizations and communities. Problems experienced by individuals and families often occur due to struggles at the larger system level such as issues of social, racial, economic, and environmental injustice. Hence, social workers are dedicated to both **cases** (specific individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities as clients) and **causes** (advancement of rights and opportunities for groups of people), as both may help prevent problems and address existing problems.

Practice and advocating for change with individuals and families is, of course, of great importance. However, in social work it is also important to address social problems through political advocacy, policy practice, advancement of legislative initiatives, and contribution to community development. With larger social system level change, it is often useful to think about populations at risk of a variety of problems and issues (e.g., mental and physical health, substance use issues, family discord, housing challenges, and cognitive or physical challenges).

Service to both cases and causes can be challenging in integrated practice. For example, social workers employed at agencies that focus on counseling and therapy for individuals and families frequently experience an organizational value orientation focused on maximizing fiscal profitability (e.g., increasing one's "billable hours"). In these instances, work and productivity are measured by the number of clients seen. This is because the agency bills for that service, which is how it obtains revenue and, in turn, pays employees. In this type of practice environment, social workers can become discouraged from participating in various causes to combat social problems confronting clients, especially during work time. For example, if a social worker sees a client who is about to lose their home because the city is tearing down their apartment building, working with that client individually on their specific plan is a billable service. However, if a social worker discovers this is a problem for several clients at the agency and wants to attend a community meeting organized to encourage the city to rebuild affordable housing, that meeting is likely not a billable service. Additionally, many organizations, communities, and societies experience value and cultural shifts that favor or disfavor member participation in social causes to effect social change.

Social Justice

> *Ethical Principle*: Social workers challenge social injustice.

Social justice is an abstract, broad, and encompassing concept that is commonly referred to as "an ideal condition in which all members of society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits" (Barker, 2014, p. 399). Committing to promoting justice and challenging social injustice may seem overwhelming. However, incorporating thoughts on social justice into social work practice using the integrated approach can be facilitated by considering the five key, interrelated concepts of "*meaning, context, power, history, and possibility*" (Finn, 2021, p. 22). Using these terms, contemplate the following:

> Take a minute to consider the following questions: How do we give *meaning* to the experiences and conditions that shape our lives? How do structures and relations of *power* shape people's lives and their choices for individual and collective action? How might *history* and a historical perspective help us grasp the interplay between sociopolitical structures and human agency, the ways in which struggles over meaning and power have played out, and the human consequences of those struggles? What are the *contexts* in which those experiences and conditions occur? How might an appreciation of those struggles help us claim a sense of *possibility* for transformative social work practice? (Finn, 2021, p. 23)

Social workers possess a deep sensitivity and commitment to vulnerable and disenfranchised population groups. Social and economic justice for people experiencing oppression (e.g., incomes below the federal poverty level, discrimination, illness, and abuse) often begins when communities commitment to increasing knowledge, shared understanding, and respect concerning human diversity and strife. The challenge to truly understand human oppression and injustice is deliberate and both cognitive and emotional. Of course, social injustice can take many forms and occur at many levels. For example, at an interpersonal level, social injustice can involve inequality and oppression on the basis of a number of factors (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, economic status, and physical or mental health challenges). Social injustice at the group level can involve issues of inequality, unfair treatment, and attainment of rights based on group membership. At the organizational level, policies and practices often contribute to social injustices by disadvantaging various groups of people and providing advantages to other people. In communities, social injustice becomes engrained in historical practices, power differentials, segregation, and the unfair treatment of some community members. Globally, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW; 2018) proposes that this principle can best be adhered to by challenging discrimination and institutional oppression, respecting diversity, challenging unjust policies, and building solidarity.

In practice, social workers are mindful to identify and document instances of social injustice and also seek opportunities with clients to thwart, challenge, and eradicate social injustice. The knowledge, perspectives, and strengths of clients are vital in these efforts. Clients are much more aware of the intricacies, details, and dynamics associated with the various forms of social injustice they have experienced and can describe and help social workers understand the causes and consequences of them. Making room for clients to tell their stories and centering those stories in practice is necessary and requires cultural humility. Strategies for doing so are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Dignity and Worth of the Person

> *Ethical Principle*: Social workers respect the dignity and worth of the person.

For social workers, every person or group of people deserves respect, which means treating others with goodness as well as valuing and recognizing their strengths. At times, this core value can include social workers respecting and valuing individuals who express attitudes and behaviors that are different from their own. Although dignity and worth of the person may seem an ethical principle easy to implement, social workers recognize that as humans, each person holds and carries biases about others.

Additionally, personally reflecting on one's own biases is not sufficient to identify attitudes and behaviors that threaten the dignity and worth of clients in social work practice. Consequently, social workers frequently look to supervisors, colleagues, ethics panels, professional mentors, consultants, and educational and training opportunities, to challenge and facilitate reflection about respect for the dignity and worth of people. Additionally, clients are an excellent source for feedback (verbal and nonverbal) regarding how well a social worker demonstrates respect for their dignity and worth.

For many people, including social workers, disrespect for others often involves unconscious and unintended biases exhibited through one's thinking, attitude, language, behavior, and disposition toward others. **Cultural competence** (to be discussed in detail in a later section) is an important factor for respecting the dignity and worth of others. Many social workers and social service organizations place a priority on demonstrating cultural competency by encouraging social workers to engage in diversity and inclusion seminars, educational forums, and mentorship programs. Teresa, from the opening In Practice feature, is particularly struggling with her organization's lack of commitment to diversity, cultural competence, and respect for the dignity of individuals.

In an ongoing way, social workers learn to question and challenge themselves concerning respect for the dignity and worth of all people. Although a lofty goal, it is an important commitment to routinely question and reflect on the ways one engages in practice with a variety of people (e.g., a person having committed elder abuser, a person sentenced for child pornography, a person with a substance issue, or a person convicted for killing someone) and how to value their dignity. Notice that **person-first language** was used to describe each person in the previous sentence. Recognizing and referring to people in a person-first manner is a valuable initial step toward setting an outlook and tone for respect and dignity of others.

TIME TO THINK 2.2

Consider people from your everyday life to whom you may have had an initial negative reaction (e.g., people who use foul language, have differing political views, or wear clothes different from your own). How can you push yourself now, in your everyday life, to communicate dignity and demonstrate the inherent worth of people in these instances?

Importance of Human Relationships

Ethical Principle: Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.

Social work is a profession that respects and promotes the importance of human relationships in everyday life and the helping process. While using the planned change process within the integrated approach to social work practice with individuals, families, and groups, a primary focus involves nurturing, establishing, and maintaining meaningful, productive, and professional human relationships.

A saying often used in social work is "*Clients don't care what you know until they know you care.*" The root of this statement is that a social worker's first task is to form a relationship with their client. Every role and function of the social worker is grounded in and predicated on the ability to build and value the importance of human relationships. Teresa from the In Practice feature has already begun to appreciate the significance of her supervisor and coworkers at CPS. She will need to be mindful and intentional in identifying and viewing current and prospective professional contacts (e.g., clients, volunteers, professionals at other agencies, community stakeholders and leaders, donors, and politicians) as potential allies and sources of support in the helping process.

Importantly, social workers must develop a comfort level with themselves as professionals as well as their ability to act, interact, and collaborate with a variety of people in their practice. Practice affords social workers the opportunity to help others while learning about people and the human condition. Humans, human interactions, and human relationships are interesting and involve a dedication to ongoing, lifelong learning about people and building relationships. However, for social work practice, social

workers must establish and maintain professional relationship boundaries, as noted by the NASW *Code of Ethics* and examined throughout this text. It is often the positive aspects of personal interaction in professional practice that can make the "work" of social work engaging, exciting, and rewarding.

Integrity

> ***Ethical Principle****: Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.*

Integrity is strongly connected to professionalism in social work. People may speak in general of integrity as if it is a trait someone has or lacks. For social workers, integrity is closer to a personal and professional choice and challenge to hold oneself to consistently high standards of professional behavior.

People seek professional help when in need. However, many people do not seek assistance until faced with dire circumstances. Social stigma, pride, rugged individualism, and denial often inhibit people from asking professionals for help. Hence, clients are often emotional, desperate, and vulnerable when looking for and first meeting social workers. This places the social worker in a powerful position in relationship to the client, which may leave the client vulnerable to exploitation. Given this context, it should not come as a surprise that a common violation of ethics in helping and health professions involves misuse of professional boundaries (e.g., personal and sexual relationships). Hence, special attention needs to be given to checks and balances of social workers and others so that social workers neither knowingly or unintentionally take advantage of clients or exploit their vulnerabilities.

Clients come to social workers in pursuit of professional, honest, reliable, truthful, and objective relationships that will assist them in moving forward in their lives. Social workers are educated and trained to be both client-centered, excellent listeners and to be reflective, nonjudgmental advocates for client self-determination. If the social worker betrays a client's trust, it can be detrimental to both that particular client–social worker relationship, to a variety of future relationships, both professional and personal. Hence, a fundamental responsibility for the social worker is to be trustworthy and to act in a trustworthy, professional, value-driven fashion.

Competence

> ***Ethical Principle****: Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.*

Competent social workers possess the knowledge, values, skills, and sense of professional self to effectively assist and work with clients. As professionals, social workers are committed to utilizing evidence-based information to help clients and contribute to the knowledge base of the profession. Social work embraces competence and expertise in a variety of ways, including through research, professional development, and being aware of effective skills and techniques in planned change.

Social workers demonstrate the nine core competencies (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2022) in practice across multiple system levels (e.g., individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities). They have a strong foundation of beginning-level knowledge, values, and skills (KSV) for interventions that enhance client functioning and they advocate for needed social change. Graduate-prepared social workers (MSW, DSW, and Ph.D.) possess the same foundational KSV, but also develop advanced, specialized competencies beyond the same nine core competencies outlined by Council on Social Work Education (CSWE; 2022) for baccalaureate social workers. They may focus on individual therapy, family therapy, medical social work, group work, organizational change, community organizing, policy practice, research, or some other specialty. Graduate coursework and subsequent continuing education provide specialized education and training to perform unique tasks and interventions focusing on specific population groups, roles, and problem areas in social work practice. It is the responsibility of the graduate-level social worker to practice within their

areas of documented education, training, and competence. They must also continue their education and professional development in their area(s) of specialization.

Practicum is the first opportunity for social workers to apply the KSV developed in their coursework to demonstrate the core values. It is also in practicum that students develop specialized KSV specific to their practice setting. Engaging in a curricular review with one's agency supervisor, identifying specialized learning needs, and creating a plan for developing specialized KSV is a helpful task early in the practicum experience (Larkin, 2023). For instance, if a student is entering an agency that provides addiction services, developing their understanding of the dynamics of addiction, types of drugs and alcohol used, and the effects of those substances on clients is critical to their ability to provide service to the clients.

All professional social workers share a commitment to pursue and engage in life-long learning. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, including the following:

- Engage with formal continuing education and training (e.g., participation in workshops, courses, conferences, online continuing education units, certificate programs, practice-focused research, and reviews of literature on best practices).

- Seek out experiential and informal learning opportunities (If they are open to it, social workers can learn so much from their clients).

- Participate in consultation and mentorship with supervisors and colleagues.

Students currently in a placement should consider asking an agency supervisor how they work to embrace and enhance their professional development on an ongoing basis.

SOCIAL DIVERSITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Learning about and embracing social diversity is a life-long endeavor for social workers. Many social work students have likely been introduced to and critically examined *social diversity* and intersectionality in the classroom. Social workers strive to understand oppression and value social diversity in social work education and practice. Diversity refers to "variety, or the opposite of homogeneity" (Barker, 2014, p. 124). The term social diversity reflects the ways that people, society, and relationships view differences. Social diversity is often defined in relationship to factors such as race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, mental or physical ability, religion, immigration status, economic status, and political belief. The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2022) grounds Competency 3 (Engage Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion [ADEI] in Practice) in an understanding of "how diversity and intersectionality shape human experiences and identity development and affect equity and inclusion" (p. 9).

Intersectionality, or the intersections of diversity, highlights the relevance and complexities associated with individuals possessing several or multiple forms of diversity and recognizes "the entirety of a person's dimensions of difference and social identities" (Cox et al., 2019, p. 9). In social work practice, clients often experience oppression and a variety of challenges based upon their unique combination of social diversity statuses and influences, not just single attributes.

TIME TO THINK 2.3

Consider the following scenario. Anita is a new client. She is a single, 20-year-old woman, recently migrated to the United States from Mexico, uses a wheelchair, and is meeting with you at an agency to discuss housing options. Anna's gender identity, age, and disability status are each worth consideration in relationship to her presenting situation. How might the combined intersections of Anita's social diversity influence your work with her?

Perhaps the best way to learn about social diversity is by interacting and forming personal and professional relationships with others, especially those that may seem very different from oneself. Hardy-Desmond (2003) calls this an adaptive process where social workers exercise respect and humility for others by deliberately thinking of themselves as learning from their clients. Active, intentional listening is essential to envisioning the position and plight of others in relationship to diversity. Doing so involves attempting to place oneself in the position, role, and circumstances of others. In the adaptive process, one recognizes the power differential between social worker and client. Social workers always have, at minimum, more perceived power than their clients. Still, social workers can mentally place themselves "lower in status or station" than clients in an effort to build knowledge based on a long-term commitment to learn with and from others through their personal narratives and stories (p. 42).

The Role of Language

People frequently assert that appreciation for social diversity is simply "political correctness," or being "woke" to appease the wants and desires of certain groups of people. These statements and assumptions are unfounded, as words can be unusually and surprisingly powerful. Language defines and provides meaning to one's sense of self and defines the importance of situations, circumstances, and how people are viewed and treated. Words are value-laden (packed) and carry power, privilege, and bias. Sometimes bias in language is unintentional. Other times, it is not. For example, when working with older adults, a social worker may inadvertently refer to the client as "cute" or "darling," not realizing that these words are more often associated with children. Using such words to describe older adults potentially infantilizes them.

Words and language are also key elements when people are labeled in negative and stereotypical ways. Becker (1963) is credited as the originator of labeling theory. Labeling theory suggests that when people are assigned a negative label they often then behave in ways that fit that label (Barker, 2014). Becker's work brought attention to the power of using language to label people as *undesirable* or *outsiders*. Social workers should become attuned to analyze motivations behind those who label other people in ways that are problematic by considering a few questions:

- Who bestows labels on others?
- What is the source of power of the person or group doing the labeling?
- For what reason(s) do they label others?
- Most importantly, does the use of words and terms degrade people and undermine services and programs for population groups?

This protest sign stating "No Human Being is Illegal" is a phrase used to communicate the rights of undocumented persons.

TIME TO THINK 2.4

A term often used when speaking of migrants who come to the United States to live and work is *illegal*. The alternative term that advocates use is *undocumented*. How might the use of the label *illegal* be used to influence public opinion against migrants seeking entry into the United States versus the term *undocumented*?

For example, consider the differences in labels that may be assigned to groups of different socioeconomic statuses.

- People who qualify for public assistance programs like Food Stamps (SNAP), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or Medicaid may be labeled negatively or be said to be "taking advantage of" these programs when using such services.

- Meanwhile, wealthy Americans who derive benefit from misusing various tax codes are referenced as people "testing tax loopholes." Using these examples, contemplate how people use language to exert power and construct realities to gain or preserve political or economic power, status, and gain.

There are a few strategies to use when working with clients, since language has the potential to do harm:

- Avoid labels as much as possible while speaking with and about clients.

- Use person-first language when using labels is unavoidable. For example, when discussing a client with a supervisor, one can say "My client experiencing alcohol use disorder" rather than "My alcoholic client." Putting the client as a person first reflects their dignity and worth as a human being.

- Ask clients to designate their preferred identifiers. For example, if one must complete demographics on clients, ask them how they identify (e.g., "What is your race, sex, gender, national origin, pronoun(s), etc.?") This practice aids in reducing the possibility of misidentifying a client and demonstrates respect for diversity.

Cultural Competence

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has developed a valuable and informative working document to assist social workers in their quest to develop cultural competency entitled *Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* (2015). These standards are applicable for social work practice across various system levels (e.g., individual, family, group, organization, and community) and emphasize a broad, inclusive respect for and understanding of social diversity, culture, and cultural differences. Cultural competence is not to be viewed as a product to obtain (e.g., an attained outcome), but as an ongoing educational process involving growth and reflection that social workers reflect in their attitudes, behaviors, language, and expressions. Barker (2014) defines cultural competence as the "possession of the knowledge, attitudes, understanding, self-awareness, and practice skills that enable a professional person to serve clients from diverse socio-ethnic backgrounds" (p. 102). As the United States experiences increasing diversity because of changing immigration patterns, special attention needs to be given to changing demographics (e.g., particular groups in the population) as well as new and recently arrived people (Cox et al, 2019). Thus, cultural competence is more than just appreciating diversity. It is developing the skills and mindfulness necessary to integrate knowledge of diversity into effective practice. This will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4. Table 2.2 lists standards and indicators for cultural competence and provides a brief description of each (NASW, 2015).

Garran and Rozas (2013) offer an important point, which is that ultimately a commitment to culturally competent practice "must acknowledge and ultimately combat the existence of systems of power that form the foundation of many of the domains of social identity" (p. 100). For social workers, understanding and being aware of how power (often based on identity and privilege) influences cross-cultural encounters, communication, and service delivery is vital for identifying ways to promote social justice for all people.

Learning about cultural diversity directly from the voice(s) of clients is valuable and impactful. Social workers and social work students can learn about various aspects of culture (e.g., values, perspectives, beliefs, the meaning of behaviors, and power differentials) from their clients, be they at the

TABLE 2.2 ■ NASW's Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice

Standard	Brief Description
1. *Ethics and Values*	Reinforces the importance of social workers conforming to the NASW Code of Ethics as well as the centrality of understanding culture and cultural diversity in practice.
2. *Self-Awareness*	Promotes social workers recognize and understand the relevance of their own cultural identities and the cultural identities of others.
3. *Cross-Cultural Knowledge*	Calls for social workers to develop specialized knowledge to promote the understanding of various, pertinent cultural groups.
4. *Cross-Cultural Skills*	Emphasizes that social workers should develop and acquire cross-cultural skills so that they may be used in practice, policy development, and research.
5. *Service Delivery*	Describes the need for social workers to be knowledgeable about services and resources that serve multicultural clients, groups, and communities as well as skillfully use such services.
6. *Empowerment and Advocacy*	Promotes awareness about the influence of social systems on multicultural client populations and use this awareness to advocate for and empower clients and client populations.
7. *Diverse Workforces*	Highlights the responsibility of social workers in promoting and advocating for a diverse workforce through recruitment, hiring, and retention policies and practices.
8. *Professional Education*	Notes that social workers have an obligation to participate in and advocate for professional education and training to advance cultural competency.
9. *Language and Communication*	Specifies the need for social workers to effectively communicate with clients from all cultural groups, with special attention given to people with limited English proficiency or challenges with communication.
10. *Leadership to Advance Cultural Competence*	Indicates that social workers should assume leadership and become change agents to promote effectiveness in practice and organizational settings and communities to promote cultural competency.

Source: National Association of Social Workers. (2015). *NASW standards for cultural competence in social work practice.* https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English

individual, family, group, organization, or community level. Sometimes, such learning is obtained through informal discussions and conversations. At other times, learning from clients takes place via more formalized and structured opportunities. For example, Long and associates (2019) document the merits of a university-based refugee speaker series for students and local service providers to learn about the challenges and sources of support for refugees migrating to the United States as well as how professionals can enhance their practices with refugees (e.g., needed services and action).

THE VALUE BASE OF INTEGRATED PRACTICE

Chapter 1 introduced the integrated approach to practice with individuals, families, and groups. Foundational to that approach is multilevel clients and practice. This refers to both developing an understanding of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities as potential clients and developing competent practice skills with each client system level. The integrated approach requires that one develops the skills necessary to consider all issues, needs, and potential interventions from each client system level and apply those to the target system level. This should occur in a seamless fashion, regardless of the level of focus. The integrated approach brings together direct and indirect practice. **Direct practice** involves interpersonal interaction with clients. **Indirect practice** refers to

macro-oriented change with larger systems. The work of Porter Lee in the 1920s offers another way of understanding the mission of social work. Rather than emphasizing categorization and methods of practice (e.g., casework, group, work, community organizing, and administration), Lee proposed two practical terms: cause and function (Blau & Abramovitz, 2004). Cause refers to the organizing, policy, advocacy, and social reform functions of social work intended to deal with social conditions. Function relates to work with individual clients and their problems.

When considering the application of social work values, the integrated approach can be a valuable conceptual tool. One could simply assert that professional social work values are applicable to social work practice across system sizes (e.g., with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities), both as client and target systems. Although such an assertion is correct, such a statement is difficult to break down for use in everyday practice. Instead, it is helpful to think about the application of social work values as a matter of dealing with *cause in function*, where practitioners simultaneously are committed to "pursue social justice and deal with issues of power and oppression in a clinical context" through adherence to service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (Vodde & Gallant, 2002, p. 439).

Although social work values are abstract ethical principles, the NASW (2021) *Code of Ethics* also includes Ethical Standards, which are the social work profession's practice guidelines for action and behavior. The *Code of Ethics* Ethical Standards are clear that social workers have value-based responsibilities in practice settings and as professionals as well as to clients (regardless of the system size), colleagues, the social work profession, and broader society. Hence, social workers are well-advised to think about professional values as having relevance to all clients, settings, forms of practice, and one's sense of self as a professional.
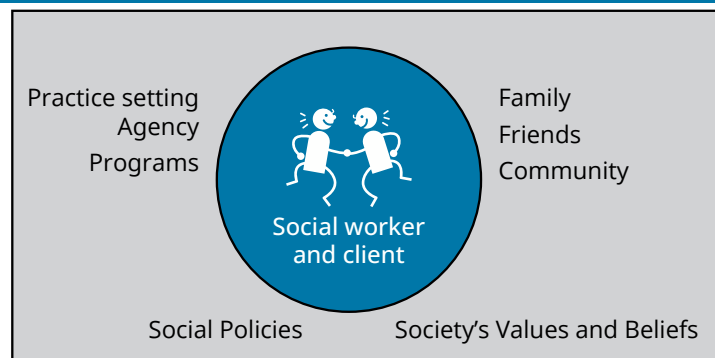
The Social Work Environment

Social work practice does not occur in a bubble. Even when working with one client individually, the social worker, their client, and their relationship with that client are influenced by the surrounding environment. Figure 2.2 provides an overview of the social work environment in which a social worker practices.

Social Welfare Values in the United States

One aspect of the social work environment to consider is the society within which social workers practice. The values and beliefs of society tend to change and are powerful, yet rarely stated outright. Social work researchers, educators, and practitioners have recognized that economic, environmental, political, and ideological shifts influence societal values in the United States. These shifts help shape how people and key decision makers in society (e.g., leaders, stakeholders, politicians, and legislators) view populations in need, social welfare, social services, social policy development, and the need for social workers. Over time, public sentiment tends to change concerning social justice, human dignity, needed social services, and competent social work practice. This, then, influence clients and social work practice.

Long et al., (2006) suggest that the following can be powerful influences in shaping beliefs, attitudes, and values about the role of social welfare in a society:

FIGURE 2.2 ■ The Social Work Environment

Practice setting
Agency
Programs

Social worker and client

Family
Friends
Community

Social Policies   Society's Values and Beliefs

- Catastrophes (environmental disasters, such as flooding and fires)

- Economic downturns (recessions and depressions)

- Demographic changes (immigration, age structure, and family structure)

- External threats of war and terrorism

For example, this text is being written following the global COVID-19 pandemic, which caused significant changes in the lives of individuals, families, and groups. The pandemic also contributed to vast changes in the functions of larger social institutions, such as the health-care system, the educational system, and the economy. A social worker cannot adequately serve individuals or families as they navigate these changes without factoring in all the significant larger system factors and changes.

Values may conflict and be influenced by the values of particular groups. For example, broader societal values can conflict with professional values, especially with controversial issues of any given time (Reamer, 2014). Currently, attention to the rights of refugees, violence against women, and voter rights are areas of societal divisiveness; these may potentially cause discord between societal and professional social work values. Also, the sets of beliefs held by people in power play an influential role in social work practice and social welfare policy development. Consider, for example, the policy of welfare reform in the 1990s. The societal values and beliefs of prioritizing governmental fiscal responsibility, reducing spending, promoting individual self-sufficiency, and advancing the primacy of work influenced legislative initiatives, funding sources, and ultimately the role and expectations of social workers (Long, 2000).

TIME TO THINK 2.5

Think about political discussions you have seen or heard. Based on this, do you think politicians are trying to advance legislation and expand resources to support services that benefit populations that are at risk or in need? Do you believe it is within your professional responsibility to engage in political processes to support professional social work values? Why or why not?

Contemporary social work values in the United States are not immune to social and political influence. When considering a specific time and place for social work practice, social workers need "to recognize that there is an essentially political aspect to their identification and endorsement of core social work values" (Reamer, 2014, p. 42). Social work values are reflective of dominant societal ideologies and are grounded in political beliefs. For example, Reamer (2014) suggests America's political embrace of individualism aligns well with social work's value of client self-determination. Conversely, consider how non-Western, socialistic societies often place greater importance on collectivism and societal responsibilities in decision-making processes. Simply stated, the professional values of social work in the United States have formed and developed within the midst of a distinct sociopolitical context. As a result, people from other countries may view these professional values with a lack of familiarity and understanding and a sense of skepticism.

Value Conflicts

Importantly, everyday practice needs to be grounded in and guided by social work values and principles, not personal values and opinions. Putting professional values into action can be complex for social workers, as experiencing tension between personal and professional values in social work is common. Regularly, a social worker must engage in critical thought and self-reflection to raise self-awareness as to how professional values should and can guide their perceptions and judgements of a client's strengths and the challenges they face. At times, conflicts between personal and professional values may not

only be difficult, but irreconcilable. When professional values of social work are placed in conflict with the social worker's personal values, social workers must be able to uphold and enact profession values. Remember that viewing and appreciating problems and issues from and through the perspective of the client and reinforcing client self-determination will be helpful.

Value tensions and conflicts can also take place when the worker's personal and professional values align. For example, a social worker could be both personally and professionally invested in advancing social justice for women. However, they may work with a client who is a woman and who, due to cultural and religious beliefs, acts in a subservient fashion toward men, including her spouse and his male friends. The client may even defend her spouse's domineering and belittling attitudes and actions toward women. Working with this client would prompt a tension and conflict between the professional value involving client self-determination and the social worker's personal and professional value orientations involving social justice and the dignity and worth of individuals. When value conflicts occur, Reamer (2013) suggests social workers may experience difficulties serving as an effective listener and sounding board for the client. With such conflict, the ability of the social worker to support client self-determination can be called into question and compromised.

IN PRACTICUM: VALUES IN PRACTICUM

Practicum is where the social work student directly interacts with the values of the profession. This experience is pivotal in your development as a professional social worker in several ways. First, you will experience the values of the profession in actual practice situations. No longer will these values be merely words on a page. They will be expressed in the actions of social workers through their practice. Second, you will better discern the intersection of your own values and the profession's values, which helps you determine where there is synergy and where there is dissonance. Third, you will inevitably be exposed to practice situations in which the values of the profession are challenged by the actions of social workers, their clients, or the agencies and organizations in which social workers serve.

As a student entering practicum, consider how the values of the profession will be expressed in that particular setting. For instance, a student doing their placement at Child Protective Services (CPS) may question how to manage the values of human relationships when investigating instances of child maltreatment. This value may be even more important to consider given the challenges of working in this type of setting. The news often describes cases in which children have been severely injured or even killed at the hands of their parents. Some of these stories include the potential misconduct of CPS workers in these cases, reflecting the complexity of this type of work and the responsibility social workers have to the children and families they are serving. At the same time, you will also have the knowledge base to know that children fair better when raised by their families and that the trauma of removal is often long lasting. Thus, the value of competence and integrity will also be brought to life as you apply knowledge to a case and experience firsthand the challenges of balancing the profession's overarching values. These challenges are not unique to CPS; in fact, all settings will involve challenges to value-based practice.

There are four things you can do to prepare yourself for value-based practice as you enter practicum. First, consider the values of the organization in which you are placed and see how they align with those of social work profession. This is an excellent task to complete during orientation. Doing so will help illuminate the value synergy and potential dissonance found in various settings. It is not uncommon to find obvious differences between the values of the setting in which you are placed and that of the social work profession. Talking with your agency supervisor and discussing how they have managed this dissonance in their practice will be a useful task. This discussion alone will be helpful in beginning to navigate the intersection of the values of the profession in practice settings.

Second, engage in self-reflection to consider your personal values and how they align with the profession's values and those of their setting. Developing the ability to identify your personal values is foundational to competent value-based practice. You must recognize your values and when they are coming into conflict with professional values. Social workers have to be able to check themselves to ensure that their actions are being guided by the values of the profession and not their personal values. Sharing your values with your agency supervisor and discussing how they align with the profession provides an opportunity for the supervisor to better understand where you are coming from and, thus, illuminate those practice situations that may be especially challenging for you.

Third, find avenues to discuss and explore value conflicts you encounter. It is likely that you will observe practice situations in which the values of the profession may come into question, either through the direct actions or inactions of social workers. It is critical that you discuss these situations with your supervisor to help you process and understand them. Sometimes, these discussions will result in better understanding of the nuances and challenges of practice. Other times, they may result in agency leaders rethinking the practices and actions of their social workers. As you enter placement and prepare for practice, reach out and establish relationships with professional mentors (e.g., supervisors, experienced colleagues, faculty members, so on) who can serve as informal consultants, sounding boards, and role models. This will help you build and maintain a sound professional value base in practice. Your program may also have a seminar course that coincides with your practicum. If so, this class can be a great place to share your observations about the intersection of personal and professional values in your practice.

Finally, identify ways to challenge your own value orientation and the value orientations of others. Embrace professional literature and find ways to participate in continuing education opportunities.

TIME TO THINK 2.6

How do you currently engage in self-reflection? How can you be sure to illuminate and address actions that are unknowingly guided by your personal values, rather than professional values in social work practice?

SUMMARY

Values, knowledge, and skills are three separate but highly related components of the education and professional development of social workers. The NASW's six core values, *Code of Ethics*, and guidelines for cultural competence serve as beacons and guiding principles for the social work practitioner's ongoing professional education, training, and development. The major takeaway of this chapter involves a commitment to learning about one's self, one's personal values, and the professional values that undergird competent practice. After practicing social work for an extended amount of time, it is likely that a colleague, client, supervisor, student, agency, or organization will question or contest a social worker's professional judgement, behavior, actions, or decision-making. Social workers should be prepared for such occasions by forming a sense of a professional self that is grounded in competence, integrity, self-awareness, learning from others (including clients), and respect for differing outlooks and opinions. Doing so is likely to result in value-based social work practice.

KEY TERMS

cases

causes

core values

cultural competence

direct practice

ethical principles

Ethical Standards

indirect practice

intersectionality

person-first language

service

social diversity

social justice

DEMONSTRATING COMPETENCY

This section gives you the opportunity to practice skills related to topics covered in this chapter. Each prompt correlates to a specific CSWE EPAS competency to help you build specific skills you'll need demonstrate in order to become a social worker.

1. Competent and ethical social work practice requires caring for yourself, both personally and professionally. What is one thing you can start doing now to better care for yourself personally? What is one thing you can start doing now to better care for yourself as a student? (Competency 1)

2. Reflect on and describe your personal values. Now describe one to two client populations who hold values that are different from yours. What challenges might you encounter because their values conflict to your personal values? What strategies might you use to embody professional values in order to effectively serve these populations? (Competency 1)

3. Language has been used to label, disrespect, distance, and/or oppress people with diverse social identities. How might person-first language be used to be respect and recognize the unique intersectional identities of clients? (Competency 2)