1 INTRODUCTION

- The nature of social work
- Recognising our limits
- Using this book

This book is about coming to judgements about what needs addressing in a given situation (assessment), and about providing a service (intervention). It is about how you decide what needs doing, in other words, and what you actually do. Since these two activities arguably encompass most of the job of a social worker, the book could almost just have been called 'Doing Social Work'.

The book is aimed in particular at social work students who are on placement, or are writing about their placements. This book does not offer a comprehensive 'how to do it' guide, and does not pretend to offer comprehensive cover of all the literature, but I hope it will help you to think about what you are seeing and doing, and support you in using your own eyes, ears and critical faculties. Part of being a good social worker is being awake to what is around you, thinking for yourself, and not just repeating formulas provided for you by others, whether those others be your employers, your teachers, your colleagues or even your service users.

As I will mention more than once in the course of this book, social work intrudes into the personal sphere and involves interactions with human beings that can sometimes completely transform their lives, for better or for worse. This places a heavy obligation on social workers to think as clearly as possible about what they are doing and why. (The fact that social work deals with people who are relatively marginalised in society – physically frail old people, children, people with disabilities, young offenders, people with mental health problems – increases this obligation.) What makes social work particularly challenging, though, is that it combines this potential for transforming lives (think of a child being removed from a parent and placed for adoption, to give one extreme example) with an

absence of a precise science to guide it, or even anything approximating to a precise science. This means that in trying to decide how best to approach a problem we cannot fall back on certainty and cannot rely on formulas. We can often only do the best we can, trying to be as clear-headed as possible about the implications of what we are doing.

It is my belief that a book is more interesting to read if the writer invests something of himself in it, and is prepared to express his own views. I therefore offer here a particular perspective. Mine is of course only one person's perspective, with all of the blind spots and limitations that implies, but I think the most useful thing I can do is to try to present that perspective honestly – to try to be honest about how I see things – rather than to try to offer some sort of bland consensual view. The reader is of course most welcome to disagree with me.

THE NATURE OF SOCIAL WORK

My grandmother disapproved of social work. She felt that the sort of work that social workers do ought to be left to family, neighbours, churches, volunteers, not done as a job for pay, not professionalised, but carried out as a basic moral duty, an expression of being human, as she believed had happened in the past.

Actually I don't believe there was ever a time, prior to the advent of organised profes-sional social work, in which everyone was wonderfully looked after by these informal net-works. If you read novels from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (look at Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*) you encounter a world in which mentally ill people could be locked away out of sight in institutions or in back rooms in their own homes, children could endure abuse alone with no one to turn to for help and people who could not support themselves could end up in the workhouse. We should be really under no illusions that a golden idyll of mutual care existed in the past into which social work intruded, like a bossy and unwelcome guest at a happy party. Nor does such an idyll prevail, as far as I know, in those present-day societies where professional social work (at least as it is understood in Europe and North America) still does not exist, though it *is* true that people from developing countries are often shocked by the way in which (for instance) white British people allow strangers to care for their elderly relatives.

The fact remains, though, that social work *does* intrude into the personal area of life, into family relationships, into people's homes. And social work *can* be an unwelcome and sometimes bossy guest, not only offering but sometimes even *imposing* alternatives to the informal networks of family and neighbourhood. My grandmother's unease about the whole enterprise is still widely shared, as is demonstrated by the prevalence of various negative stereotypes of social workers as 'interfering busy-bodies', as 'do-gooders', as bureaucratic tyrants imposing 'politically correct' dogma, or as 'bleeding hearts' making excuses for bad behaviour. And, while no social worker likes these labels, I think many social workers actually to some extent share the underlying unease. Any good social worker will at some point wonder if they are making things worse for people rather than better.

RECOGNISING OUR LIMITS

Intrusion into the personal sphere feels uncomfortable – and so it should do – but it can quite properly be justified in many instances where vulnerable people would otherwise suffer hardship, oppression and even sometimes death without outside help. What I think social work should be careful not to do, though, is to *colonise* the personal, to claim for itself as its own special territory the functions of caring for others, or of advocating for the excluded, or of supporting the vulnerable. You do not need a degree in social work to be caring and empathic, or to be helpful, or to be supportive and encouraging, or to stand up against injustice. It would be a sorry world if you did.

For this reason I am a bit suspicious of sweeping statements about social work's mission, like the often-quoted International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) definition of social work, which includes 'The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being … etc.' (IFSW, 2000). It's not that I disagree that social workers should try to empower and liberate people; it is just that I don't think that is particularly the job of social workers any more than it is the job of school-teachers, or doctors – or indeed of anyone else, not least the recipients of social work services themselves. (Anne Wilson and Peter Beresford, 2000, make what I think is a related point when they point out the paradox of 'anti-oppressive practice' being claimed as an expert specialism by social work academics.) It seems to me that if we really believed that it was *uniquely* our role to right wrongs, challenge injustices and empower the powerless, then we would be in danger of becoming precisely the bossy, interfering busy-bodies that the jokes and stereotypes portray. We know from history that those who set themselves up as liberators can very easily become tyrants.

I think it is important to remind ourselves that what social workers do in their daily work is to perform certain rather specific and (we hope) useful functions. Some social workers try to help physically frail elderly people to cope in their own homes, others try to prevent children from being abused or neglected by their carers, others work with disabled people to maximise their ability to participate fully in society … and so on. In my view, it is only when we look at social work in these specific local terms that we can start to really think about what is entailed in doing it well.

It can be difficult, after all, for social workers to perform even these relatively modest tasks well, given the inevitable constraints that are imposed by limited resources, by organisational structures, by politics, by competing principles and competing claims, not to mention our own personal limitations. It is often all too easy to make things worse, to become part of the problem instead of part of the solution. That being so, I do not think it is necessarily helpful to be bombarded with sweeping generalisations about a reified, mythical, idealised 'social work', or about what social workers ought to do, *if only* they could operate without any of those boring everyday constraints that actually exist. In fact that kind of advice is often about as helpful as the advice given to the apocryphal traveller who asked a local for directions and was told 'Oh I wouldn't start from here.' Certainly I found it very difficult when I was a newly qualified social worker to be clear about what was my

job and what was not, because my head was full of grand ideas about how I ought somehow to be able to fix *everything* (and that at a time when I had hardly learned to lead my own life!). I have no doubt I confused many service users as a result.

It is often easier and more fun to construct elaborate castles in the air, than to engage in the struggle that is typically involved in building even quite modest structures in the real world. But I think we have a duty (Beckett and Maynard, 2005: 97–101; Beckett, 2007), not only as social workers but as human beings, to try to deal with the world as it actually is, not the world as we might like it. After all, if the world was perfect, there would be no need of social work, so social workers, of all people, really should not expecting ideal conditions in which to work.

When you consider the work of the agency where you are placed, or reflect on your own work, you need to think not only about what people in that agency would like to do, or would like to think they do, or would do if only they had the time, or even what they *say* they do, but about what they really do in practice. What is important to the recipients of a social work service is *what is actually delivered*, not the good intentions and noble sentiments of the agency and its staff.

USING THIS BOOK

This book is written so that (I hope) it can be read through from cover to cover without being too tedious, but each chapter also makes sense on its own, so the book can be dipped into, as students normally do with textbooks, or read in any order. I have grouped my material under single-word chapter titles, each covering a topic that seems to me central either to how we come to judgements about human situations (assessment), or to how we respond to them (intervention), or both. So, while there are chapters headed 'assessment' and 'intervention', which give an overview of these subjects, all the chapters should be relevant to one or other, or both, of these two topics of the book.

'Placement questions' inserted in boxes are intended to provide you with a prompt to relate the discussion to what you are seeing and doing in practice. I hope they may help you too when you have to write about your placement. In some chapters there are also 'Case examples' in which (as in my other books) I offer fictional illustrations intended to illustrate the point I am making. Of course the amount of information given in these examples is much less than you would want to have if dealing with real-life people, and it has to be acknowledged that in this respect they are not realistic, but I hope they give at least a sense of the kinds of issues that real-life situations raise.

Each chapter begins with a list of main headings and (except for this short introductory chapter) ends with a summary of the discussion for quick reference.

FURTHER READING

The following is a forthcoming book on this subject to which I have also contributed:

Walker, S. with Beckett, C. (2011) *Social Work Assessment and Intervention* (2nd edn). Lyme Regis: Russell House.

I would recommend the following as a general introduction to social work assessment:

Milner, J. and O'Byrne, P. (2009) *Assessment in Social Work* (3rd edn). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

For further thoughts on methods of intervention, I would strongly advise the reader to seek out books that are specific to the particular area of work that they engaged in (if you are on placement in an agency that works with people with physical disabilities, for instance, then seek out books about this area of work). But for a general overview, books on social work theory are useful and I would recommend that this book is read in conjunction with such books. Payne's is probably the most comprehensive text in this area. I have written a shorter text which is (unsurprisingly) more similar in style to the present book.

Beckett, C. (2006) *Essential Theory for Social Work Practice*. London: Sage.
Payne, M. (2005) *Modern Social Work Theory* (3rd edn). Basingstoke: Palgrave.