

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL WORK

- Chapter 1.** The Social Work Profession
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Social workers often use the skill of active listening.

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THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

1. Summarize the goals of the social work profession.
2. Explain the importance of diversity and advocacy in social work.
3. Describe the theories and values that inform social work practice.
4. Evaluate the education options for social workers.
5. Compare practice options for social workers.

MARY CHOOSES SOCIAL WORK

As a first-year student, Mary has completed hours for her service-learning course at a family success center. She has enjoyed working with the diverse array of people who came to the center, and clients there have told her that she has been a good listener, doer, and advocate for them. Mary's advisor has suggested that she might make use of her newly discovered skills by becoming a social worker, a versatile "helping" career that traverses multiple fields of practice.

Mary has conducted some research and has learned that with a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), she could work as a generalist practitioner or apply to an advanced-standing Master of Social Work (MSW) program and quickly become either an advanced generalist or a specialist. Mary also has explored the online website for the Board of Social Work regulations in her state. Once she receives her BSW degree, she knows she can send the board her transcripts and become credentialed. With great excitement, Mary has also learned that if she declares social work as her undergraduate major, she would qualify to be an advanced-standing applicant in a graduate-level MSW program. MSW-prepared social workers can work in a wide range of specialty fields of practice, such as hospice, veterans services, and behavioral health. They can work in policy, advocacy, or research in community-based settings; various types of institutions; state, federal, or local agencies; international disaster relief organizations; or political action campaigns.

Mary feels confident that she would enjoy social work, a profession where she could advocate for people and causes, help develop policies, and provide services and resources to people who really need them. As a student, you may be wondering which career might best suit your personal values and the life you envision for yourself. Social work is a versatile and worthy profession to consider. Integrity, decency, honesty, and justice are values held in high regard by social work professionals. If you decide to become a social worker, you will also join a field that provides considerable career mobility and opportunity.

Social work is a helping profession, similar to counseling, psychology, and other human services. Social work is different, though, and will likely interest you if you care especially about economic, social, and environmental justice and wish to advocate for individuals, groups, families, organizations, and communities that face socioeconomic disadvantages. To help groups and communities, social workers require an understanding of politics and power and the ability to assess human needs and the environment.

This chapter introduces the goals, competencies, and responsibilities of the 21st-century social worker. It describes social work's core values, roles, fields of practice, career paths, and employment opportunities to help you decide whether the profession of social work is right for you.

THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION: PURPOSE AND GOALS

Social work is categorized as a **profession** because it requires specialized, formal training and education that leads to credentialing (e.g., state licensure). Some of the other professions include law, medicine, accounting, teaching, and counseling. However, social work's unique purpose is to assist with and advocate for change in the lives of individuals and in communities to reduce or eradicate the effects of personal distress and social and economic inequality (Soydan, 2008).

Professional **social workers** generally graduate from a department, program, or school of social work with either a bachelor's or a master's degree (or perhaps a doctorate) in social work. Although some social work positions do not require a credential, a professional social worker is generally considered to be someone who has received a social work degree and has become certified or licensed by the state in which they practice.

Many social workers have achieved historical prominence, such as social work pioneer Jane Addams (who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1931), civil rights activist Dr. Dorothy I. Height, and Frances Perkins (the first woman to serve as a cabinet member, as secretary of labor in 1933). Social work pioneer Del Anderson transformed veterans services, Bernice Harper led hospice social work, Joan O. Weiss helped establish the field of genetic counseling, and Dale Masi developed the employee-assistance field (Clark, 2012).

Social work professor and researcher Dr. Brené Brown has become quite successful as a “public” social worker, offering the profession's perspective through books, television interviews, and online talks about shame, vulnerability, and courage. Others with social work degrees who have brought the profession's perspective to diverse careers include actor Samuel L. Jackson, writer Alice Walker, and personal finance guru Suze Orman. Their liberal arts-based social work education was a liberating experience that has served as the foundation for their life's work.

Throughout history, what people have seemed to need most are resources for living, as well as a sense that their life matters to others. Beyond feeling secure and accepted for who they are, people also hope to live a meaningful, healthy, and successful life. These are the central concerns of social workers. Their professional role is to work with people to secure the basic **human needs, rights, and values**: food, water, shelter, and such intangible resources as emotional, economic, and social support.

The purpose of professional social work was articulated formally by the **National Association of Social Workers (NASW)**, the voice for the profession:

Social work is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups, or communities enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and creating societal conditions favorable to this goal. Social work practice consists of the professional application of social work values, principles, and techniques to one or more of the following ends:

- Helping people obtain tangible services (e.g., income, housing, food)
- Providing counseling and interventions with individuals, families, and groups
- Helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services
- Participating in relevant legislative processes (NASW, 1973, pp. 4–5)

The NASW considers social work an applied science and art that assists and advocates for people who are struggling to function better in their world and that effects societal changes to enhance everyone's well-being.

NASW describes four major goals for social work practitioners. The CSWE, the body that accredits schools of social work, adds another goal that relates to social work education. These goals are presented in Table 1.1.

The general public often confuses social workers with other human service providers, among them school counselors, mental health counselors, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, public health workers and administrators, nurses, chaplains, and police or others involved in criminal justice and corrections. While the roles and settings for some of these occupations overlap, each has distinctive features, perspectives, methods, and areas of expertise. (See Table 1.2 for more detail on the similarities and differences between social work and some of these other

	Professional Goal	Social Workers' Roles
Goal 1 (Practice)	To enhance people's coping, problem-solving, and developmental capacities	<i>Facilitators</i> , who "meet people where they are" and assess clients' environments Coaches, counselors, educators, trainers, and culturally competent solution-focused guides
Goal 2 (Practice)	To link people with systems that provide opportunities, resources, and services	<i>Brokers</i> , who help build relationships between clients and service systems <i>Social media collaborators</i> , who help clients connect with their environment
Goal 3 (Practice)	To promote the effectiveness and humane operation of systems that provide people with resources and services	<i>Advocates</i> for cases and causes, who consider socioeconomic, political, and other contexts and who focus on the available resources for serving people <i>Administrative supervisors</i> , who oversee staff and ensure that services are delivered efficiently and effectively <i>Consultants</i> , who guide community organizations and agencies by identifying strategies to expand and enhance services <i>Coordinators and liaisons</i> , who enhance communication and coordination among social and human service resources to improve service delivery and who link an agency or program to other agencies and organizations <i>Program developers and evaluators</i> , who design and evaluate programs or technologies to meet social needs
Goal 4 (Practice)	To develop and improve social policy	<i>Activists or advocates</i> , who concentrate on the statutes, laws, and broader social policies that underlie the funding and provision of resources Policy practice analysts, developers, and planners
Goal 5 (Education)	To promote human and community well-being	<i>Activists</i> , who use education, research, and service delivery to alleviate oppression, poverty, and other social and economic injustices

Source: Adapted from Zastrow (2017, 2014, pp. 50–51) from primary sites. Goals 1–4 from NASW (1982, p. 17); Goal 5 from CSWE (2016).

occupations.) But social workers incorporate the knowledge and skills of these other occupations as needed to serve clients and communities. They are not limited to a single perspective or set of methodologies. Thus, at the undergraduate level, social workers are called **generalist practitioners**.

TABLE 1.2 ■ Comparison of Social Work and Similar Occupations

Discipline and Similar Occupations	Similarities to Social Work	Differences From Social Work
<p><i>Psychology:</i> Study of behavior and mental processes; application of that knowledge to the evaluation and treatment of mental disorders</p> <p>Psychotherapists</p> <p>Psychologists (PsyD or PhD doctoral preparation)</p> <p>Psychiatrists (MD; physicians with an advanced specialty)</p>	<p>Is a practice profession</p> <p>Requires accreditation and postdegree supervision</p> <p>Requires graduate-level training for counseling clients (as psychotherapists)</p> <p>Allows practitioners to conduct psychotherapy</p> <p>Occurs in some of the same settings, with many of the same clients</p>	<p>Requires PhD or PsyD degree for practice</p> <p>Requires 2 years of supervised work experience before independent practice</p> <p>Focuses on client's psychological issues</p> <p>Administers psychological tests</p> <p>Allows practitioners to prescribe medications in some states</p> <p>Requires MD training/degree for psychiatrists</p>
<p><i>Counseling:</i> Practice of meeting with, listening to, and guiding individuals and groups with mental health, social adjustment, and relationship problems</p> <p>Therapists</p> <p>Marriage counselors</p> <p>Family therapists</p>	<p>Is a practice profession</p> <p>Requires a graduate degree</p> <p>Requires licenses and certifications</p> <p>Engages in psychotherapy</p> <p>Does not allow practitioners to prescribe medications</p> <p>Occurs in some of the same settings, with many of the same clients</p>	<p>Focuses mostly on the individual as a problem requiring assessment and intervention</p> <p>Does not typically include training in community practice (advocacy, organizing)</p> <p>Requires a graduate degree for practice</p>
<p><i>Sociology:</i> Study of characteristics and interactions of populations</p> <p>Sociologists (PhD)</p>	<p>Studies patterns of human behavior, especially origins of that behavior and societal development</p> <p>Shares interests in human diversity and oppression</p>	<p>Is a social science, not a practice profession</p> <p>Examines people's patterns (e.g., social behavior and organizations) and family groups, community, and societal contexts</p>
<p><i>Nursing:</i> Practice of caring for the physical and mental health of individuals, families, and communities to optimize quality of life</p> <p>Nurses (BSN, MSN, FNP, DNP)</p>	<p>Is a practice profession</p> <p>Has a caring/helping focus</p> <p>Is practiced in hospitals, clinics, and so forth</p>	<p>Offers RN and LPN designations denoting responsibilities and authority</p> <p>Focuses on health and well-being</p>

(Continued)

TABLE 1.2 ■ Comparison of Social Work and Similar Occupations (Continued)

Discipline and Similar Occupations	Similarities to Social Work	Differences From Social Work
<p><i>Criminal justice:</i> Practice of facilitating law enforcement, operating the court system, and investigating and preventing criminal behavior</p> <p>Law enforcement and correction officers</p>	<p>Has a practice orientation</p> <p>Occurs in some of the same settings, with many of the same clients</p> <p>Shares concerns about individuals and families</p>	<p>Often requires a BS in criminal justice or human services</p> <p>Focuses on the law and social order</p> <p>Supports authority structures</p> <p>Has a limited focus on the individual's environment</p>
<p><i>Public health:</i> Practice of researching epidemiological and environmental health trends and protecting the health of populations</p> <p>Public health clinicians, researchers, and officers</p>	<p>Has a practice orientation</p> <p>Focuses on groups and communities</p> <p>Is practiced in health clinics and community-based settings</p>	<p>Requires a BS in public health</p> <p>Requires training in epidemiology, biostatistics, and health policy and administration</p> <p>Focuses on health and the physical environment</p>

SOCIAL WORK AND HUMAN DIVERSITY

When assisting and advocating for people in need, social workers inevitably meet and interact with diverse people from multiple backgrounds. Many social workers would argue that one of the most interesting and rewarding aspects of their career is the ability to expand their knowledge and appreciation for human diversity. They have a chance to learn about the strengths, needs, uniqueness, values, causes, and traditions associated with various forms of human difference. Consider how much you like hearing people's life stories. When you hear people's life stories, you get clues as to what they need, value, and dream about. As a social worker, there are thousands of people and larger client systems that could benefit from your assistance. Social workers engage individuals, families, couples, groups, organizations, and communities. They work with veterans, medical and psychiatric clients, older adults, survivors of interpersonal violence, immigrant families, children in foster care, members of the LGBTQ community, and people experiencing homelessness. In addition, social workers empower and advocate for people with developmental challenges, behavioral health troubles, or trauma and people experiencing financial insecurity. On a large systems level, social workers form community advisory boards, attend neighborhood and town meetings, and help develop policies promoting social justice and social-economic opportunities. People of all races, ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and religious backgrounds seek help from social workers, so it is likely that each day in the life of a social worker will be an adventure.

SOCIAL WORK IN ACTION

DR. BRENÉ BROWN PROMOTES RESEARCH ABOUT VULNERABILITY

Dr. Brené Brown has a BSW, MSW, and doctorate in social work and serves as a professor and researcher at the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work. Before

Dr. Brown became a megaspeaker on the global circuit, she was a typical academic, Texan, and storyteller. Her 2010 TEDx talk “The Power of Vulnerability” catapulted her to fame. With more than 48 million views, it is one of the top five most viewed TED talks. Afterward, she became an Oprah Winfrey–approved author, coined the terms *whole-heartedness* and *whole-hearted leadership*, published two *New York Times* best sellers, and developed two companies. One of these companies, *The Daring Way*, is a training program that helps professionals implement Dr. Brown’s findings on courage, shame, vulnerability, and worthiness in their own work. Dr. Brown delivers national presentations on the concepts of courage, vulnerability, worthiness, shame, and empathy. In her videos “Power of Vulnerability” and “Listening to Shame,” Dr. Brown specifically discusses social work and emphasizes that social workers are called to “lean into the discomfort” and establish meaningful connections with people.

Dr. Brown’s critics, like civil rights activist DeRay McKesson, have urged her to read and consider concepts on the philosophy of race, such as philosopher George Yancey’s work, which postulates that white people think that it is normal, standard, regular, and the best to be white (Emerson & Yancey, 2011). Other critics suggest that Dr. Brown’s ideas put too much onus on the individual and that problems such as being poor cannot be easily fixed just by being courageous or vulnerable (Baker, 2018).

Despite these criticisms, Dr. Brown remains popular, and she concludes from her qualitative research that vulnerability is not weakness; vulnerability requires emotional risk, exposure, and uncertainty and fuels our lives. Essentially, vulnerability is our most accurate measure of courage: “Innovation, creativity, and change come from the birthplace of vulnerability.”

In her clip about shame, she concludes that although shame is not guilt, it is highly correlated with such behaviors as addiction, depression, suicide, and eating disorders. On her website, Dr. Brown (n.d.) is quoted as saying, “Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.”

Dr. Brown exemplifies how a social work education can propel you into a many-faceted future. She is teaching social work students and the wider world about social work theory and methods. Dr. Brown’s stories about courage, shame, worthiness, forgiveness, and vulnerability resonate with many. Now they are also adding richness to a social worker’s tool kit.

1. How do Dr. Brown’s ideas and stories help professional social workers eradicate personal distress and social inequality?
2. Consider what experiences make you feel vulnerable. How does vulnerability feel to you? What role might empathy play for social workers who counsel people who feel vulnerable?

Clients and collaborators are often quite different from social workers in some significant ways. A person’s life experiences and circumstances can influence how other people and situations are perceived. What social workers believe is true depends on their lived experience, personal values, and belief systems. Like everyone else, they are influenced by family, spiritual beliefs, culture, norms, race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as life stage, socioeconomic status, and abilities.

In social work classes, students learn about the concepts of culture, norms, life stage, and socioeconomic status. For example, **culture** is often thought of as the customs, habits, skills, arts, values, ideology, science, and religious and political behaviors of a group of people in a particular time period. In classes about diversity issues, culture gets explored in depth, as does the notion of norms. **Norms** are often defined as the rules of behavior—both formal and informal—and the expectations held collectively by a culture, group, organization, or society. In Latinx culture, a norm for a young girl turning age 15 is the *fiesta de quince años*, or *quinceañera*, a celebration of a girl’s 15th birthday, thereby marking her passage from girlhood to womanhood, amid an adolescent life stage. While social work offers no particular set of stages of its own, people generally think about six particular life stages: (1) infancy (ages 0–2), (2) early childhood (ages

3–8), (3) adolescence (ages 9–18), (4) early adulthood (ages 19–45), (5) middle adulthood (ages 46–65), and (6) later adulthood (older than age 65). In social work classes about human behavior in the social environment, major stages of the human life cycle are examined. The cycle starts with pregnancy, infancy, toddler and childhood years, puberty, older adolescence to adulthood, middle adulthood, and older adulthood (Barker, 2014).

Psychology courses are often required for declared social work majors. In psychology classes, famous theorists like Erik Erikson, Sigmund Freud, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Jean Piaget and their concepts are discovered. For example, Erikson's stage theory illustrates how every period of life, or **life stage**, is characterized by some underlying challenges and orientations that modify one's behavior and priorities. Each stage has characteristics that make it unique, and each higher stage incorporates many of the gains made in earlier ones. The degree to which a person reconciles the conflicts inherent in each stage largely determines the likelihood of coping successfully in subsequent life stages. Erikson's stage theory is also called psychosocial development theory; Freud conceptualized psychosexual development theory; Kohlberg created moral development theory; and Piaget established a theory of cognitive development (Carpendale, 2000).

When social work students are enrolled in an economics course, they gain knowledge about the variable of **socioeconomic status (SES)**. SES, or *socioeconomic class*, refers to a categorization of groups of people according to a specified demographic variable, such as level of income or education, location of residence, and value orientation. Sociologists often categorize classes as upper, middle, "lower," and working class. Other observers make further distinctions, such as "upper-middle class" and underclass.

Social workers go to considerable lengths to broaden their perspectives. They increase their self-understanding by reading and taking classes (in the arts and humanities, as well as on subjects such as psychology, sociology, sexuality, biology, neuroscience, and gerontology), learning foreign languages, engaging in personal therapy, participating in self-reflection, and receiving professional supervision and feedback (Green et al., 2005). Through seeking this type of self-knowledge, trained social workers are likely to become sensitized to the differences among people. They become better at appreciating other viewpoints and at developing and evaluating more creative policies and intervention strategies (Karger & Stoesz, 2018).

If you are contemplating social work as a career, you must look within and evaluate your readiness to **advocate** for the typical social work client, who may be vulnerable and possibly affected by social injustice. You will also be required to respond to human needs with flexibility and creativity, because resource availability and funding usually fall short of the need, although they vary across communities, regions, and states.

TIME TO THINK 1.1

How well do you know yourself and empathize with others who do not have your privileges?
How aware are you of how others perceive you and how you come across to others?

Diversity and Social Justice

As rewarding as the experience of human diversity can be, it can be troubling as well. Those who are different from the types of people with whom we are most familiar are often stereotyped as being inferior in some way. That prejudiced attitude may lead to actual discrimination in the

way those who are “different” are treated. They may have a deprived and constrained childhood, struggle to meet their needs as they age, and feel a reduced sense of self-worth. Professional social workers are aware of this discrepancy and work toward economic and social justice, the fair distribution of rights and resources among all members of society.

The bases for prejudice and discrimination, which are discussed throughout the book, include the following categories of difference.

Class

Some social work clients are marginally employable because of discrimination in the workplace, low educational attainment, and work records. As a result, they may experience all that comes with financial insecurity. The jobs that are available to them generally pay poorly, so these clients may struggle with transportation issues, affordable day care, mental health issues, physical challenges, and affordable health insurance. Since the beginning of the profession, social workers have advocated for services and programs for those who are socioeconomically impoverished and need support for a rewarding family life, stable housing, adequate nutrition, educational opportunity, and employability with adequate pay. Social workers recognize that use of public assistance is not simply a matter of personal shortcomings. Large-scale issues within the community or society as a whole (e.g., a shortage of jobs with a living wage and benefits, inadequate transportation systems, substandard schools, minimal child-support enforcement, or lack of quality, affordable day care) also undermine a person’s efforts to advance in life (Seccombe, 2011, p. 74).

Gender and Sexual Orientation

Although women have made important strides in our society, they still face lingering and highly ingrained gender stereotypes, which are overgeneralizations about behaviors and characteristics based on gender orientation. Social workers partner with women’s rights groups, educators, and other professionals to advocate for and develop positive and meaningful services and programs for women, especially in education, employment, reproductive services, child care, civil rights, and the political arena. Everyone has a gender identity. Recognizing gender identity as a person’s internalized psychological experience as a female, a male, a blending of both, or neither is important. Likewise, *gender nonconformity* is understood as referring to the degree to which a person’s appearance, behavior, interests, and subjective self-concept differ from conventional norms for masculinity and femininity. The term *transgender* connotes how to regard a person whose gender identity differs from the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth. *Transgender* is basically an umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. The term *transgender* is not indicative of gender expression, sexual orientation, hormonal makeup, physical anatomy, or how one is perceived in daily life. People who are non-binary identify as having two or more genders or no particular gender (Lerner & Robles, 2016).

In recent years, members of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community have been far more visible in the process of winning some degree of social justice for themselves. They have won the right in the United States to marry members of the same sex. It is becoming more acceptable in most quarters for LGBTQ persons to be themselves, although discriminatory behavior and interpersonal slights have not disappeared. Social workers counsel LGBTQ individuals facing prejudice and convene groups with them to discuss ways to cope with both subtle and aggressive discrimination. Social workers may also advocate for the LGBTQ population on a community, state, or national level through organizing activities and policy development.

Race

Race equality remains an issue in the United States, despite decades of social action and legislative and judicial remedies. Thus, opportunities to promote diversity and social justice for people with African, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, or Native American heritage are an important part of social work practice. Social workers who work toward cultural humility effectively help Bosnian refugees find employment and enroll in ESL (English as a second language) classes and advocate for Latinx clients who have a mental illness such as schizophrenia to avoid repeated hospitalizations because of language barriers and cultural misunderstandings. By 2050, the U.S. population is expected to increase by 50%, and people identifying as being non-white will make up nearly half that population. One quarter of people in the United States will be Latinx, and 1 in 10 will be of Asian or Pacific Islander descent. The Black population is projected to increase from 41.1 million to 65.7 million by 2050, going from 14% of the U.S. population to 15% (Poston, 2020). Social workers show their desire to increase racial and cultural awareness, sensitivity, and humility by avoiding and confronting stereotypic images and generalizations; examples include recognizing that not all people who are of Chinese descent like Chinese food, not all Black Americans are good athletes, and not all Latinx men are macho. There are many forms of bias, discrimination, and oppression based on race, country of origin, and cultural and group affiliations. Social workers engage in and promote lifelong learning to advance cultural awareness and education and to advocate for social justice for population groups.

Ethnicity

Many people adhere to at least some of the traditions and beliefs of their ancestors. In the United States, a “nation of immigrants,” many ethnic subcultures can be found. However, ethnocentrism, believing that one’s own ethnic group and way of life are superior to those of others, can create intolerance and prejudice. In contrast, social workers promote respect for and understanding of all ethnic groups and cultures. For example, social workers frequently support ethnic centers, immigrant enterprises, language diversity, and cultural events that showcase ethnic pride and provide a forum for the public to learn about specific ethnic values and traditions. And well they should: In the coming decades, immigration will account for increased amounts of the nation’s population growth (Horowitz et al., 2019). People tend to think about ethnicity in four ways, focusing on different qualities. For example, there is “ethnicity as class,” suggesting a distinctive lifestyle (e.g., Chinatown, Little Italy); “ethnicity as politics,” relating to common experiences of oppression or stigmatization (e.g., civil rights movements); “ethnicity as revival,” connoting a consciously focused return to traditions, foods, celebrations, and clothing styles that a group may have brought to the United States (e.g., moving from a melting-pot to a tossed-salad notion); and “ethnicity as symbolic token,” thereby expressing a remembered and sentimentalized identity (Rothman, 2008). Immigrants who do not speak English and are undocumented are vulnerable groups often exploited by business operators, landlords, and so forth and via human trafficking, and they have little access to health care, education, or social services. Public discourse on the “rights” of undocumented people and government’s obligations toward them has become an increasingly prominent issue. Immigrants from Middle Eastern countries and Arab Americans face suspicion and harassment, are regularly profiled at airports and on highways, and are frequently seen by law enforcement and the general public as either potential terrorists or people who support terrorism. Membership in the First Nations group is based on percentages, and generally one must be 50% Native American to be a member of this protected group and to receive federal government benefits associated with membership.

Age

Older adults, who have some of their basic needs addressed through Medicare and Social Security, often struggle with fixed incomes, housing, health problems, and loneliness. Services such as home-delivered meals, transportation, and medical coverage for problems associated with the aging process may be underfunded or unavailable for practical reasons. Being acquainted with older adults and attentive to their specific desires and needs enables professional social workers to work with older adults to improve or rectify life situations. As the population of older adults grows in the 21st century—by 2050, the population of older people in the United States (ages 50+) is expected to more than double—social workers will find themselves more and more challenged to help ensure “good aging” (Cire, 2014; Lieberman, 2011, p. 137).

Historically, social workers have advocated for justice and human rights for all people, despite their age, ability, class, gender identity, race or ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. Social workers must endeavor to use first-person language and challenge “isms”—such as ageism, ableism, classism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, and sexism—as they advocate for vulnerable individuals and groups. Although we live in a society that perpetuates biases and “isms,” social workers can work to lessen stigma and promote strengths and contributions related to diversity. It is imperative that social workers examine and acknowledge their biases prior to direct practice with clients or in the development of social policy. Checking biases ought to be considered a lifelong commitment.

Intersections of Diversity

Social workers typically encounter multiple forms of diversity in a single individual. For instance, a woman experiencing a physical or mental challenge may also be an older adult who is economically disadvantaged, living paycheck to paycheck. For example, Rachel, a 72-year-old retired cleaning woman, may have trouble walking because of severe knee pain, yet she is unable to afford surgery because SSI (Supplemental Security Income) and Medicare health insurance will not completely cover the cost. This gap between Rachel’s income and her medical coverage impedes her ability to receive the health care treatment she needs. Holes in medical coverage (gaps in the combined coverage received from private insurance, Medicare, and Medicaid) may leave Rachel without needed treatment and medications. The ever-changing complexity of medical protocols and health insurance coverage further complicates matters. In turn, the medical issues are an impediment to older, economically disadvantaged people’s ability to make doctors’ appointments, keep themselves and their homes in good repair, and buy medicine or even healthy food. On a regular basis, social workers find themselves creatively seeking to identify resources and fill gaps in services for clients with needs that span categories of difference.

Intersectionality, a term coined by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to the entirety of a person’s dimensions of difference and social identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Most diversity includes a complex range or intersection of issues, not simply one. A person may be a white, gay, Jewish, older adult who was born with polio and lives in an urban environment. Or a person may be a single, middle-age, Christian woman who emigrated from India and works as a nurse in a rural setting.

Some of those diversity differences may create problems in meeting one’s needs, but others may create advantages. For example, a man who is a retired middle manager has enjoyed some of the privileges of gender and class, but if he is also gay or lives with a mental or physical challenge, he may have faced difficulties in his life that require access to social services. His multiple aspects

of diversity have likely sometimes placed him in the role of being the oppressed and sometimes the oppressor (Jani et al., 2011).

As a social worker, you must understand the complex interrelationships that exist across all social identities so that you can work with clients to devise strategies that will make a difference and create social change (Adams & Joshi, 2010; Collins, 2010). Keep in mind that people are more than labels or any of their categories of difference.

INFORMING PRACTICE

Theory and Practice

You may be starting to realize how complex the practice of social work can be. It requires knowledge of human development and behavior, as well as social, economic, and cultural institutions, social welfare policies, and the interaction of these various factors. The social work profession not only provides this knowledge but also educates its members to be proactive advocates for client systems. The essential lessons for aspiring social workers involve both theory and practice skills.

Social workers draw on ideas and theories to guide their assessments, interventions, and advocacy decisions. These perspectives emphasize the importance of resilience, strengths, solutions, social justice, and safe, sustainable communities. Professional social workers may adopt a primary practice theory that fits their views about human nature, particularly for the purpose of assessing a client, a situation, and the results of efforts to make changes. Chapter 3 describes these theoretical foundations in more detail.

In addition, social workers are committed to **evidence-based practice**, which is, simply stated, using a select intervention for an issue, problem, or condition based on the results of research (O'Hare, 2020). Social workers base their methods on the results of previous studies, because they need to be accountable regarding effectiveness to clients and third-party payers (such as insurance companies). In addition, they want to use best practices as documented in their profession's knowledge base. Social workers are obligated to ask themselves, "What evidence do I have that my proposed idea, intervention, or policy initiative will best serve my client(s)?" Your reasoning skills will be enhanced by taking classes in research methods, policy, and statistics.

The knowledge base for social work is constantly evolving to match developments in other disciplines and changes in living conditions. Contemporary social workers embrace technology and neuroscience (Farmer, 2009). Environmental social work (Gray et al., 2012) and models for social work in a sustainable world (Dominelli, 2012, 2018; Mary, 2008) now provide additional ideas and paradigms for social work professionals. Neuroscience recognizes that the brain/mind is dependent on ongoing social relations throughout our lives (Shapiro & Applegate, 2018; Siegel, 2013). Children exposed to ongoing stress and trauma, such as exposure to community violence, may develop schemas (models) of the world as a hostile place and experience changed attitudes about people, life, and the future. There are three types of sustainability in social work: economic, environmental, and social. Social work has focused on the social, touched on the economic, and largely ignored the environmental. Social workers are becoming increasingly involved with social sustainability, which recognizes that individual health and well-being, nutrition, shelter, education, and cultural needs must be met.

Social Work Values

The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values that undergird social work's unique purpose and perspective (NASW, 2017):

1. Service: to provide assistance, resources, and benefits to help people achieve maximum potential
2. Social justice: to uphold equal rights, protection, opportunity, and social benefits for everyone
3. Dignity and worth: to see every person as unique and worthwhile
4. Importance of human relationships: to value the exchange between social worker and client
5. Integrity: to maintain trustworthiness
6. Competence: to practice within the scope of known skills and abilities

The NASW Code of Ethics

Social work values are reflected in the *NASW Code of Ethics*, which serves as a social and moral compass for social work professionals. This code has four sections—Preamble, Purpose, Ethical Principles, and Ethical Standards—which are summarized in the appendix of this book. The *Code of Ethics* serves six purposes (NASW, 2017):

- Identify core social work values
- Summarize broad ethical standards
- Identify professional obligations when conflicts arise
- Hold the social work profession accountable
- Socialize new practitioners to social work's mission, values, ethical standards, and principles
- Define unethical conduct

Ethical decision making is a process. Often, social workers struggle with complex scenarios, and the guidelines help direct their actions. In addition, although the *Code of Ethics* cannot guarantee ethical behaviors, and a violation of standards in this code does not automatically imply violation of the law, these principles stipulate ideals to which all social workers should aspire. Beyond NASW, many states have developed social work licensure and/or ethics boards to promote, monitor, and reinforce ethical social work practice.

Conscious and Mindful Use of Self

The term *use of self* often confuses beginning students. In a nutshell, this concept means you are combining knowledge, values, and skills gained in social work education with aspects of your personality traits, belief systems, life experiences, and cultural heritage. To help you integrate your authentic self into skills you will need in your social work field placement, and ultimately your social work career, it will be helpful to view yourself from five different perspectives: use of

personality, use of belief system, use of relational dynamic, use of anxiety, and use of self-disclosure (Dewane, 2006; Gordon & Dunworth, 2017; Kaushik, 2017; Walters, 2017). In the social work literature, the concept of *use of self* means consciously using knowledge, skills, and values in interventions. Self-awareness is a crucial skill used to be cognizant of one's hidden personality traits so that relationships with other people may be enhanced.

TIME TO THINK 1.2

How do your ethics stand up against social workers' professional ethics? In the workplace, what might make it difficult to adhere to a professional code of ethics? Refer to the National Association of Social Workers website to access the NASW *Code of Ethics*.

Professionalism

In addition to valuing a code of ethics, social workers identify as professionals. With that status comes a set of characteristics that help ensure the highest standards of practice: a culture of professionalism, a professional authority setting standards, recognition of that authority by the community, a systematic body of theory, and a code of ethics (Greenwood, 1957).

Professional identity does not come ready made; it is an extension of one's social identity by virtue of embodying three key qualities—connectedness, effectiveness, and expansiveness (Forenza & Eckert, 2018; Webb, 2017). The roots of social work are in medicine and science; therefore, social work is constantly searching for its evolving professional identity (Forenza & Eckert, 2018, p. 18). A strong predictor of professional identity is membership in a professional organization, such as NASW, and pursuing leadership opportunities in professional organizations. It takes time for professional identity to develop, and it requires strong mentors who care about investing their time and energy in teaching, leadership, and advocacy. Professional identity results from a developmental process that facilitates a growing understanding of self in one's selected career. When a social worker can articulate their role to others, within and outside of the discipline, the process has begun. Next, developing social workers must learn how to merge the personal and professional by knowing themselves well. Social workers must be in tune with their own personal values and beliefs and understand how their life experiences and gender role expectations have shaped them. As a social worker's professional identity develops, every area of their life will be reflected on.

Likewise, **self-awareness**—the ability to clearly understand one's own strengths, weaknesses, thoughts, and beliefs—is a process that is worthwhile yet not always easy to achieve. Much of the journey to becoming an effective social worker involves developing your own self-awareness—with classmates, professors, and clients who continuously challenge your thinking. Getting in touch with your values and feelings is extremely important. As you deepen self-understanding, both professionally and personally, you can develop a greater capacity to attend objectively to your clients' wants and needs. Being aware and secure in thoughts, values, and feelings leads to good physical and mental health, moments of joy, and contentment, which is something every social worker should be mindful of.

Advocacy

A key element of social work values that is stressed in this introduction to the profession is **advocacy**, simply defined as activities that secure services for and promote the rights of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (Tice et al., 2019). Advocacy covers everything

from ensuring special educational services for a child with different learning abilities to presenting facts about people who are socioeconomically disadvantaged before the U.S. Congress. Social workers intercede in not only cases but causes.

SPOTLIGHT ON ADVOCACY

SUZE ORMAN TALKS CANDIDLY ABOUT HOW SOCIAL WORKERS CAN GET SMARTER ABOUT MONEY

Suze Orman is an outspoken, straightforward financial advisor who in the past has helped NASW celebrate its “March Is Social Work Month” and professional image campaigns. When Orman was young, she earned a social work degree, before her life took off in other directions. Although she never formally worked in a social work agency, Orman has enthusiastically promoted the profession, saying, “Social workers are vital to the fabric of the United States of America. . . . Those who enter the social work profession know about the low pay, so they need to ‘stand in their power’” (Wright, 2011).

When Orman helped NASW celebrate Social Work Month in 2011, she discussed how her social work studies helped her understand how people think and feel about money and enabled her to talk about money on a personal level: “You have to understand people to understand money” (Wright, 2011). Decent salaries can be earned in the social work profession, so she also offered social workers some financial advice. While not all people who complete social work education will become like Suze Orman, graduates who possess degrees in social work will locate meaningful work and be able to move from setting to setting quite easily. In some respects, social work is a business, and your degree is your ticket to success.

As part of the Social Work Month 2019 series, NASW interviewed Orman on the NASW *Social Work Talks* podcast (Episode 27; McDonald, 2019). Some of the highlights from Orman’s interview include the following snippets. First, she tells listeners that “you are smart about money when you pay yourself first.” Second, she suggests that people learn the tenets of saving—the three laws about living below your means, needs versus want, and getting pleasure out of saving versus spending. Third, regarding investments, Orman says to have a Roth IRA: “Use the Roth 401(k)s or 403(b)s that your employer possibly has. Use the Roth model versus the traditional because when you’re not making that much money anyway, the tax write-offs don’t really matter. Also, make sure your money is all in a situation where, when you do need it in retirement, you don’t have to pay any taxes on it. If you’re going to buy a home, buy a home that’s a small home that you can afford, that you have paid off by the time that you know you are going to retire. A number-one goal ought to be paying off a mortgage as soon as possible.” She also discusses student loans and much more.

1. What role can social workers play when working with clients to be financially literate and good stewards of their money? How financially literate do you consider yourself to be?
2. What do you think about Orman’s crediting her social work training for her success, specifically in terms of her ability to understand how people think and feel about money?

One of the key differences between social workers and other service professionals is that social workers are expected to know and care about clients’ environments. That is what undergirds and gives force to much of their advocacy.

On a broad level, clients’ environments include issues of economic, environmental, and social justice. As a professional matter, then, social workers embrace a political vision based on democratic values. They are also guided by the NASW *Code of Ethics*, which is influenced

by the beliefs and tenets of the three great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Social workers envision solutions and engage in problem solving designed to protect legal and personal rights and to ensure a dignified existence for everyone. With a worldwide perspective, social work professionals must also understand social and economic conditions at all levels of government. They must understand how economic downturns, the changing balance between conservatism and liberalism, capitalism, and globalization affect their clients and their practice.

To become a more effective professional advocate, you should seek to expand your worldview. Social workers who have studied sociology, economics, political science, public health, and other social sciences can better help clients navigate social service systems and approach decision makers to advocate for changes in social policies.

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Nearly every state in the United States requires that social workers have a social work degree from an accredited school. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the professional entity that accredits social work programs by monitoring social work educators and ensuring that high educational standards are met. CSWE is the authority that officially articulates the goals, values, and training objectives within the profession and oversees curricula development (CSWE, 2017). Its mission is to ensure that social workers are trained to work at a professional level in many different dimensions of practice.

Major Social Work Competencies From the EPAS

In 2015, CSWE delineated nine social work competencies that students in the discipline must acquire and demonstrate before they graduate. These competencies reflect common practice behaviors and social work ethics and are measurable. They are intended to ensure that every social work graduate has “sufficient knowledge, skills, and values” to practice effectively. These nine core competencies, known as the **Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS)**, are accompanied by related practice behaviors that social work educators and field directors and instructors assess:

- Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior
- Engage in diversity and difference in practice
- Advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice
- Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice
- Engage in policy practice
- Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
- Assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
- Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
- Evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (CSWE, 2016)

Social Work Degrees

Social work education is provided at both the undergraduate and the graduate level. CSWE has accredited undergraduate departments, programs, and schools in colleges and universities that offer social work training. If you complete an undergraduate degree in social work, you may proceed to graduate social work programs or immediately take social work positions in agencies.

Since 1971, CSWE has authorized “advanced standing” for students who have finished approved undergraduate social work programs, and some schools of social work have made it possible for such students to obtain their master’s degrees within 2 years, with some requiring only 1 year of graduate work. Graduate training programs for the master’s degree in social work in the United States usually take 2 years and combine instructional classes with fieldwork practice in agencies.

The social work profession, like the psychology and nursing professions, is legally regulated by state licensing boards and offers specialized credentials and practice certifications. Unfortunately, in some states, no licensure certification exists for social workers who hold undergraduate degrees in social work. This means that people who possess other academic degrees can occupy social work positions and sometimes incorrectly call themselves “social workers,” thereby confusing the general public. Too often, the media blame social work for an act carried out by someone who never received a social work degree but still works in a human service agency.

Bachelor of Social Work

The **Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)** degree readies graduates for generalist social work practice, which will be described in more detail in Chapter 3. The BSW, the BA in social work, and the BS in social work are the entry-level degrees for the profession. The academic credential is precisely defined: a bachelor’s degree from a college or university social work program or department that is accredited by CSWE. Once declared social work majors complete their degree, they may choose to send a copy of their transcript, along with a completed application from their state’s Consumer Affairs or Board of Social Work Examiner’s website, and apply for their license credential (e.g., CSW or LSW). Many states also require license applicants to pass a written national social work examination.

Important goals of social work education are not only to cover social welfare content and practice skills but also to provide a liberal arts education so that students can become informed citizens. The liberal arts–oriented BSW curriculum introduces student learners to social welfare history, communication skills, human behavior theories, and critical thinking about diversity and the human condition. Courses with an emphasis on human biology, economics, statistics, and political science enhance knowledge about human behavior and social policy development. Increasingly, BSW students also choose or are required to learn American Sign Language or a foreign language.

Master of Social Work

A **Master of Social Work (MSW)** degree readies graduates for advanced, specialized professional practice. It must be obtained from a program or department accredited by CSWE. The MSW degree is viewed as a terminal degree, meaning that select social work programs may hire MSW social workers as faculty to teach clinical or policy courses or as non-tenure-track faculty—especially in fieldwork instructor roles.

The curriculum of master’s degree programs builds on generalist BSW content. MSW students develop a concentration in a practice method or social policy area; alternatively, some

master's degrees focus on advanced generalist practice. Thus, the MSW social worker should be able to engage in generalist social work practice and also function as a specialist in more complex functions and tasks.

The basic program for the MSW degree typically includes in some fashion five core areas:

- Human behavior and the social environment
- Social work practice or methods
- Social policy
- Research methods
- Human diversity

Decades ago, social work education at the master's level placed considerable emphasis on specialization in fields such as psychiatric (mental health) social work, medical (health) social work, and school social work. Since the 1960s, some graduate programs have centered on a generalist curriculum. Students complete a 2-year educational program that qualifies them to work in some agencies, such as child welfare. Additionally, at some schools, the research methods course requires students to complete an individual or group thesis, a research project, or multiple research classes. MSW programs also offer elective courses to provide a well-rounded program for graduate social work students. Dual-degree programs and certificates are also offered at the master's level.

Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work or Doctor of Social Work

For most social workers, an MSW degree is sufficient for advanced study and professional development. Although the number of doctoral programs has been growing, only a small percentage of NASW members hold one of the two doctorate degrees:

- Doctorate of Philosophy in Social Work (PhD): Prepares graduates to teach or conduct research or to specialize in clinical practice or policy development
- Doctorate of Social Work (DSW): Prepares graduates for advanced practice and administrative positions or other leadership in social work

Some MSW degree holders who are satisfied with this terminal degree or are working on their doctorates gain employment teaching at community colleges or in universities as part-time adjunct instructors or sometimes in non-tenure-track clinical and teaching faculty positions. Other doctorate-level social workers assume administrative positions at agencies or enter **private practice** as clinicians or therapists.

These degrees involve advanced and specialized study, a focus on research, and completion of a dissertation, and they promote a commitment to continuing education credits—especially in the areas of clinical work, **cultural competence**, and ethics.

Field Education

Whichever level of social work education you pursue, you can anticipate spending time in the “real-world classroom.” Referred to as social work’s “signature pedagogy,” **field education** is the

part of the social work curriculum that students most eagerly anticipate. In the field, you finally get a chance to apply what you have learned, under the supervision of a credentialed social worker who is approved by the college or university's social work program.

The placement settings for field education range widely. Students might be placed in hospitals, courts, domestic violence shelters, prisons, schools, mental health facilities, child welfare agencies, nursing homes, or community planning sites or with political candidates or NASW chapter offices. In these placements, students engage in practice, conscientiously applying theoretical concepts and intervention skills learned in the classroom. When students have completed field education, they are expected to be able to demonstrate all the competencies required of the generalist social work accredited curriculum.

TIME TO THINK 1.3

How many hybrid or fully online (distance-learning) classes are you currently taking? How many of these are social work courses? What are the advantages and disadvantages of learning about the profession of social work through an internship experience that is online rather than in person?

Certificates and Certifications

In pursuit of their social work degrees, BSW students may complete minors or certificates that verify specialized knowledge and skills; for example, certificates in child welfare and gerontology are very popular, as are minors in psychology or sociology. After graduation, social work professionals may also wish to obtain special certificates or certifications. Social work programs, departments, and schools collaborate with continuing education partners to offer special certificates and 1- to 2-hour courses that provide continued education. State regulatory boards approve credentials such as the following:

- Certified social worker (CSW)
- Licensed social worker (LSW)
- Member of the Academy of Certified Social Workers (ACSW)
- Licensed master social worker (LMSW)
- Licensed independent social worker (LISW)
- Licensed clinical social worker (LCSW)

Beyond the social work degree and professional license, credentials (professional certifications) are often voluntarily sought by social workers to demonstrate professional commitment, achievement, and excellence in social work at the national level. The NASW Credentialing Center supplies information about credentials, as they vary by state. NASW specialty credentials are open to all qualified applicants. For example, a CSW credential is available to case managers who possess only a BSW degree. The majority of other professional credentials (e.g., ACSW, LMSW, LCSW, LISW) typically require an MSW degree. The ACSW credential, established in 1960, is available to members and social work leaders in all practice areas and is a widely

recognized and respected social work credential. If a social worker is 2 or 3 years beyond receiving their MSW degree and has accumulated a significant number of supervision hours and taken a standardized examination, they may qualify for the LCSW credential. LCSWs must have either an MSW, DSW, or PhD degree. Many LCSWs pursue a clinical or mental health counseling path because they can bill insurance companies for services—whether in private practice or with an agency (NASW, 2014, 2018).

An organization called the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) processes social work license applications, as well as social work license exam preapprovals. It is a nonprofit organization composed of and owned by the social work regulatory boards and colleges of the 50 United States, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and all 20 Canadian provinces. It is the only nonprofit organization devoted to regulating social work. ASWB maintains and owns the social work licensing examinations used to test a social worker's competence for practicing ethically and safely.

In addition, NASW offers credentials such as the Certified Advanced Social Work Case Manager (C-ASWCM), which was created in 2000 as a specialty practice credential. People who obtain this credential do so because they want to meet complex client needs and have a strong sense of professional identity and commitment to core values found in the NASW *Code of Ethics*, the NASW *Standards for Social Work Case Management*, and the NASW *Standards for Continuing Professional Education* (<http://socialworkers.org>). Social workers hope that securing such credentials will enhance their professional and public recognition and increase their visibility as a specialized professional social worker. To obtain specialized credentials, a person must have an MSW degree from a CSWE-accredited graduate program; document more than 2 years of paid, supervised, post-MSW case management experience; pass an ASWB MSW-level exam; and adhere to the NASW *Code of Ethics*.

Sometimes when students are completing their MSW programs, they also pursue dual degrees or graduate certificates. One example is a Graduate Certificate in Aging Studies. In some MSW programs, if a student concentrates their electives in gerontology (e.g., Biology of Aging, Psychology of Aging, Social Aspects of Aging) and completes their internship in a setting connected to gerontology, they can also obtain this Graduate Certificate along with their MSW degree.

In all 50 states, social workers have options for becoming certified or licensed at various levels of social work practice. In fact, it may be illegal to practice social work without a license, depending on the state and practice setting. Because licensure requirements are not always sufficiently taught to undergraduate students, those majoring in social work will want to consult handbooks, state statutes, written resources, and websites (Boland-Prom et al., 2015; Groshong, 2009; Monahan, 2013; NASW, 2011; Whitaker et al., 2006). Master Educator Dr. Dawn Apgar publishes a series of exam guides and practice tests that cover all four areas of social work certifications: bachelor's, master's, clinical, and advanced generalist (Apgar, 2018).

Social workers must be cognizant of four distinct sets of requirements and guidelines: constitutional law, common law, executive orders, and statutory law. And social workers' decisions should be morally defensible and aligned with the ethical standards of the social work profession (Reamer, 2005). For example, in New Jersey, hospital-based and MSW-degreed social worker Jessica may assist inpatient clients with discharge planning, information, and referral; however, without her LCSW credential, Jessica is not legally able to bill patients additionally for the time she spends assessing and counseling. In Florida, mental health social worker Ameda finds that the LMSW credential she received in New York will not suffice; by virtue of Florida law, practicing social workers must possess an LCSW credential and complete and document a specific number of continuing education credits in HIV and domestic violence before they can practice and bill insurance companies in the state.

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The social work profession has a dual purpose and responsibility of supporting individual and social change. Knowledge from a variety of disciplines, integrated from formal classes and personal learning, helps social workers assess complex situations and determine effective interventions. Many people benefit from and appreciate these interventions, and our society is better for them. However, social work professionals often work with individuals and organizations that are not ready for or capable of change. So social workers also have to use such practice skills as assessing, strategizing, brokering, collaborating, intervening, linking, listening, motivating, and responding in their professional lives. In addition, they must be ready to pose alternative solutions, seek consensus, negotiate, and mediate (Theriot, 2013). It is no wonder that social work is considered a “doing” profession and that it is taught through experiential approaches such as service learning, internships, and field education.

The multidimensional approach to social work education gives graduates at all levels the knowledge and skills they need to work in a variety of settings at various levels of practice. It also helps them prepare for a professional career that offers much personal satisfaction and a promising future, with many opportunities to grow, advance, and blaze new paths.

Social workers must act ethically and help clients make decisions that are ethical. Author Holly Nelson-Becker (2018) has developed an ethical decision-making framework to help practicing social workers think through how to “do ethics” for particular clients (see Figure 1.1). The framework considers the context or setting of the dilemma, the type of client, values, and risks.

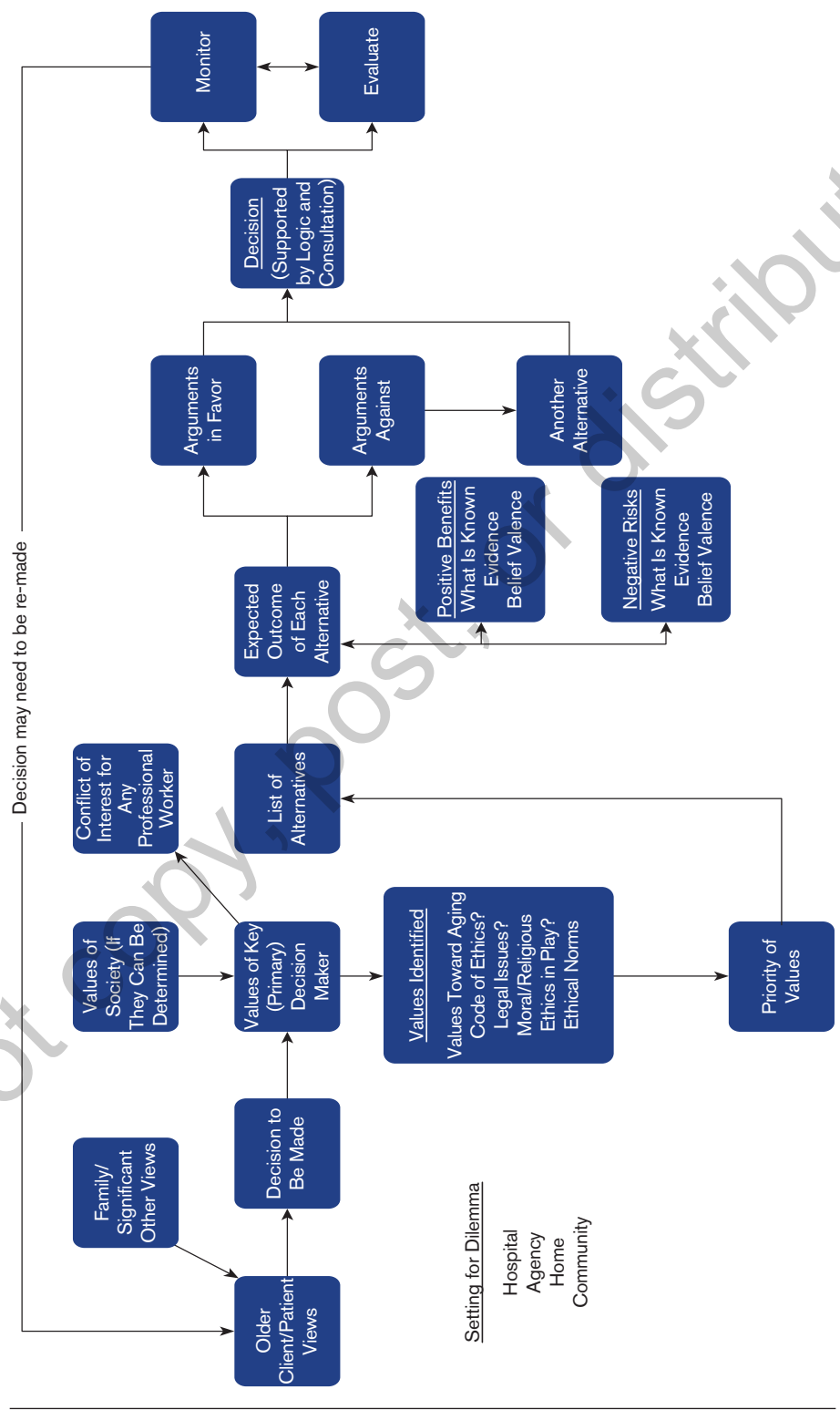
Social Work Roles and Settings

Traditionally, social workers have provided charity, created agencies and resources, developed or advocated for policy changes, and delivered services to people and communities in socio-economic distress. Historically, as Chapter 2 describes, they have been key to the development of social welfare policies, such as child labor laws, fair pay and work condition standards, and services for older people and those with health or mental health challenges. Today, the main purpose of social work remains much the same: to empower people to grow and live healthy, productive, and meaningful lives. Social workers accomplish this purpose by working directly with people, organizations, communities, and government entities and by advocating for societal change. Most people who consider social work as their career choice do so because they want to work with people and make a difference.

Social workers’ activities within their practice are more diverse than ever. They support people to increase their capacities for problem solving and coping. They assist people to obtain needed resources, facilitate interactions between people and their environments, and change organizational responsiveness to people. Social workers are also professional social **activists** or advocates, working to influence, develop, and evaluate social policies and legislation affecting clients and in their communities (Swank, 2012). Here are some examples of the broad array of practice activities they might undertake:

- Presenting people with ideas and relevant research findings on how to raise and nurture children through training and small-group meetings
- Caring for older adults through case management services and visits to residential facilities, senior centers, and hospice facilities
- Offering private counseling to couples with relationship issues

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Ethical Decision-Making Framework



Source: Nelson-Becker [2018, p. 68].

- Modeling how to maintain constructive, safe, and caring households through in-home visits and courses with family members
- Advocating for policy changes within institutions and local and state governments and for supporting the rights of persons advocating for themselves, by organizing and leading meetings or writing letters and articles
- Advocating with the national government for service members and veterans by writing position papers, speaking in public forums, and testifying before committees

Social workers undertake these activities in a wide variety of settings: medical facilities, government and nonprofit agencies, corrections facilities, home health and long-term care settings, state and federal government, schools, community-based mental health agencies, faith-based organizations, the military, service member and veterans programs, corporations, and private practice. Social workers may also find employment in banks, theater groups, law firms, community gardens, police stations, and international agencies (Gambrill, 1997; Gibleman, 1995; Singer, 2009).

Levels of Practice

No matter the precise setting, social workers also categorize their work on the basis of the **level of practice**, or the size of the client system with which they intervene: micro, mezzo/meso, or macro. Table 1.3 delineates these three levels, with examples of each (Gasker, 2019). The particular issues that enter into practice at each level are discussed in Chapter 3.

Professional social workers often operate on multiple intervention levels. Certainly, across a career, a professional social worker is likely to experience all three levels of practice. In addition, rarely does a situation involve only one level at a time. For instance, a woman who has been sexually assaulted on campus and feels traumatized may need individual counseling, and the social worker may also schedule a meeting with her and her parents to ensure that they are sensitive to the woman's concerns; the social worker may also intervene with campus authorities (e.g., the Title IX officer) to appropriately and ethically alert officials to a problem that may affect other female students and the need for specialized campus programming and services.

Social Work as a Career Opportunity

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), the median annual wage for social workers was \$50,470 in 2019. The lowest 10% earned less than \$31,790, and the highest 10% earned more than \$82,540. In social work, the pay varies depending on

Level	Subject of Intervention	Examples
Micro	Individual or couple	Counseling a traumatized woman who has been raped or a couple who are debating divorce
Mezzo/meso	Family, group, or organization	Facilitating a cancer support group or delivering a presentation on the needs of military families
Macro	Community or society	Working for a political campaign or advocating for legislative changes

where you work. For example, salaries for BSW-degreed social workers may start lower at non-profit agencies than at government-funded child welfare agencies. In order of annual median wages from high to low, these industries employ the most social workers:

1. Federal executive branch
2. General, medical, and surgical hospitals
3. Local government
4. State government
5. Individual and family services

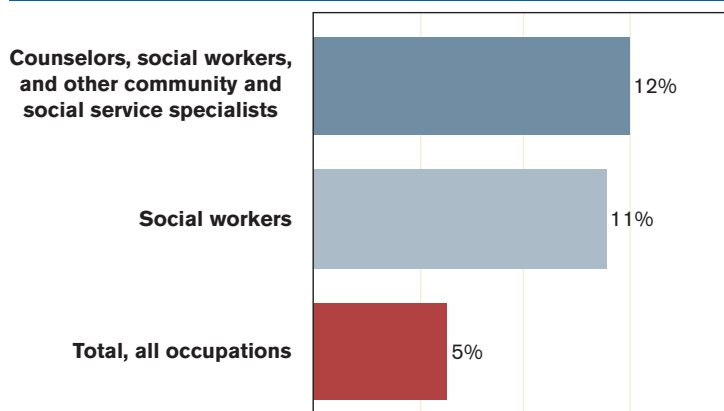
The overall employment of social workers is projected to grow 11% from 2018 to 2028, much faster than the average for all occupations (see Figure 1.2). Increased demand for health care and social services will drive demand for social workers, but growth will vary by specialization.

Employment of child, family, and school social workers is projected to grow 12% from 2019 to 2029 (see Table 1.4), faster than the average for all occupations. Child and family social workers will be needed to work with families to strengthen parenting skills, prevent child abuse, and identify alternative homes for children who are unable to live with their biological families. In schools, more social workers will be needed as student enrollments rise. However, employment growth of child, family, and school social workers may be limited by federal, state, and local budget constraints.

Employment of health care social workers is projected to grow 14% from 2019 to 2029, much faster than the average for all occupations. Health care social workers will continue to be needed to help aging populations and their families adjust to new treatments, medications, and lifestyles.

Employment of mental health and substance abuse social workers is projected to grow 17% from 2019 to 2029, much faster than the average for all occupations. Employment will grow as more people seek treatment for mental illness and substance abuse. In addition, drug offenders are increasingly being sent to treatment programs, which are staffed by these social workers, rather than being sent to jail.

FIGURE 1.2 ■ Percentage Change in Employment, Projected 2018–2028



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor (2020).

TABLE 1.4 ■ Employment Projection Data for Social Workers, 2019–2029

Occupational Title	Employment, 2019	Projected Employment, 2029	Percentage Change, 2019–2029
Social workers	713,200	803,800	13
Child, family, and school social workers	342,500	382,600	12
Health care social workers	185,000	211,700	14
Mental health and substance abuse social workers	123,200	143,800	17
Social workers, all other	62,500	65,600	5

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor (2020).

TABLE 1.5 ■ MSW Income by Role

In your principal position, what best describes your role?	Median Income
Direct work with individuals, families, or groups	\$42,500
Direct work with communities	\$37,500
Indirect social work	\$47,500
A position for which you believe a social work education provides relevant preparation	\$37,500

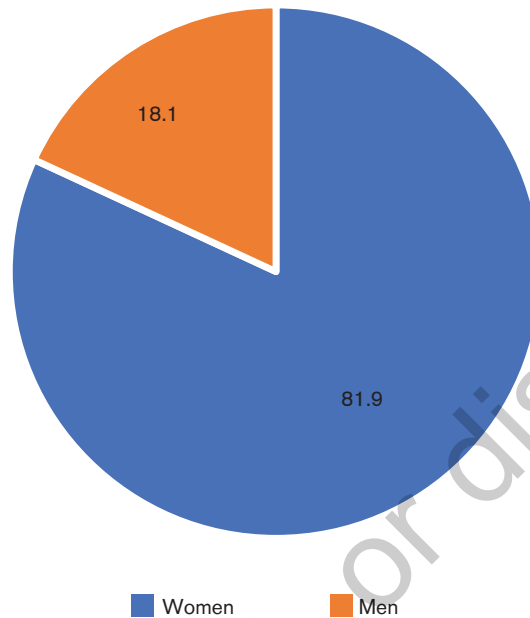
Source: The George Washington University and Health Workforce Institute (2019, Table 37).

Note: Figures are for those working in positions as social workers, including positions not requiring a social work degree or license. Median income is from unweighted data.

Table 1.5 illustrates the median income a graduate-prepared social worker might earn, depending on their role and position. Keep in mind, however, that lower salaries may be offset by more opportunities to learn quickly about community resources, as is often the case when working for a nonprofit agency.

MSW-degreed social workers will find interesting opportunities in coming years in the following specialties: aging, public welfare, child welfare, justice corrections, school social work, health care, employment/occupational social work, developmental challenges, community organization, mental health/clinical social work, management/administration, international social work, research, politics, policy and planning, adoption and foster care agencies, private practice, employee assistance programs, advocacy and coalition groups, domestic violence agencies, drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, nursing homes/skilled nursing homes, homelessness and hunger advocacy networks, women's shelters, long-term care facilities, military counseling offices, assisted-living facilities, senior centers, and social and human services centers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2020).

FIGURE 1.3 ■ Percentage of Social Workers by Gender, 2019



Source: Data from Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2019).

The pie chart shown in Figure 1.3 illustrates how many social workers identify as women versus how many identify as men. This striking difference reveals the disproportionate representation of women in the social work profession.

The social work profession will also offer ample opportunity for creativity and innovative solutions in the future. Developments in scientific knowledge, technologies, and the economy will continually shape our world, as will globalization, the changing natural environment, and a population that is growing older. Social workers' broad education and versatile skills will help ensure the flexibility needed in the world's changing landscape.

One appealing aspect of professional social work is that it reflects social and technological trends. These are some of the areas that promise to provide interesting challenges and opportunities for social workers in the next few years:

- *Teaching and learning:* Outstanding communication skills are more essential than ever. Advocating for the need for client access to, and instruction in the use of, digital technologies is essential. Streaming videos can inform clients about anger management, substance misuse interventions, or assistive devices to use at home. Online webinars can provide social work professionals with cutting-edge knowledge about mental health or health care reform.
- *Research:* Genetic counseling and neuroscience are burgeoning sciences that some social workers are embracing. **Cultural neuroscience** elucidates how early childhood experiences affect physical and mental health across the life span. Research that studies

the meaning and nature of work is also vitally needed to inform social work practice. For example, one social work study comparing younger (ages 19 to 34) and older workers found that each group attached diverse meanings to the concept of “work” (Singh, 2013). In direct practice, social workers should ask which activities qualify as work and which sociocultural and situational factors influence the general public’s interpretations of work.

- *Services:* Social work has a tradition of charity and service. In the future, social workers will need to become expert navigators and literate interpreters of services that are becoming digitized and being offered as part of a virtual marketplace, so that they can work with clients to address their needs. Just as previous generations of social workers adopted cultural competency, social workers now and in the future will need to embrace technical literacy (Belluomini, 2013). In addition, social work practitioners are increasingly offering e-therapy interventions.
- *Social work education:* Social media and technology are radically changing social work pedagogy. Some graduate programs are now offered completely online. Social work education has also become part of the global marketplace (Askeland & Payne, 2006; Garrett, 2009; Gasker, 2019). Those who have the resources to produce and distribute social work literature digitally and through social media are able to disseminate their theoretical views and skills throughout the world. Online social work programs may be especially valuable for addressing the educational needs of rural and other remote geographical areas in need of social workers.

CURRENT TRENDS

LIFESTYLE AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

Technology is very much a part of our daily lives. Take a moment to consider the dramatic technological advancements of the past three decades: Computers have replaced typewriters; e-mail, instant messaging, and texting have replaced letters and greeting cards; smartphones have replaced rotary phones; and Wikipedia has replaced encyclopedias (Lindsell-Roberts, 2011, p. ix). Social work practice has changed along with technology but not necessarily at the same pace. It’s important to recognize the differences in how social work services are offered and how social workers engage with clients.

1. How will ever-changing technology likely influence your lifestyle and educational experience? What possible positive and negative consequences do you think technology has had on social work practice and policy? And how can reliance on technology for services and program implementation negatively affect economically challenged people and areas, especially persons of color?
2. What social work–related apps or e-therapy resources do you or your professors know of or use on a regular basis? How helpful do you think these resources are to social workers or to people engaged in social work services?
3. If you had the opportunity to design a social work–related app or online service, what would it be, and who would it advantage and/or disadvantage?

TIME TO THINK 1.4

If your friends or parents said to you, “Social work doesn’t pay well. Why don’t you major in nursing, psychology, or criminal justice?” how would you respond? How will social work prepare you to work with people and social problems differently than other professions would?

SUMMARY

Social workers are professionals who help individuals, families, groups, agencies and organizations, and communities through planned change. They work with people across the life span and across socioeconomic levels. They often work with people who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and who seek assistance with basic needs like food, housing, and health and mental services. Social workers may also work within the local, state, or national political system, as when social workers serve as policy planners and program evaluators. Whatever the employment situation, social workers are advocates for social justice and champions of economic and social justice.

Social workers can obtain employment in multiple settings, including traditional social service agencies as well as courts and correctional settings; schools; the military; offices and factories; hospitals; mental health agencies; child and family welfare agencies; long-term care settings; substance abuse treatment centers; homeless shelters; nonprofit advocacy programs; local, state, and federal government agencies; and legislative bodies. Social workers are found wherever services and policies intersect with the needs and wants of people.

No matter where social workers are employed, common skills and responsibilities exist across the profession:

- Providing services to support change, not only in the individual but also in their environment
- Having a knowledge and understanding of human relationships and the environment
- Improving the problem-solving, coping, and development capacities of all people
- Serving as a broker by connecting individuals with resources
- Engaging and communicating with diverse populations and groups of all sizes
- Creating and maintaining professional helping relationships
- Advocating for individual clients, larger causes impacting clients, and/or community change to solve identified problems

Employment prospects and opportunities to offer volunteer services for graduates with BSW or MSW degrees, who learn these skills through classroom learning and field education, offer a bright and meaningful future.

TOP 10 KEY TERMS

Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)	Master of Social Work (MSW)
Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)	NASW <i>Code of Ethics</i>
Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS)	National Association of Social Workers (NASW)
field education	social work
level of practice	social workers

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the values and beliefs of social workers? How do social workers put their values and beliefs into action?
2. Why is self-awareness and understanding so important for becoming a social worker?
3. Imagine that you meet a man who felt neglected as a child because his parents divorced and his father was an abusive alcoholic. As this man ages, he has choices. At one end of the spectrum, he may continue the cycle of addiction, drink heavily, and also become abusive. At the other end, he may choose never, ever to drink alcohol and become the most responsible person in all his relationships, always trying to please others. If you grew up in a family where alcohol was never around or was drunk only in moderation, how would you relate to and help this man?
4. What characteristics do you possess that make you behave ethically? Think of a time when perhaps you or someone you know did not act in an ethical manner. What was the rationale for the unethical behavior? Looking back, was that a good rationale? Why or why not?
5. What are the differences in where a BSW social worker and an MSW social worker might work and in how they might practice?

EXERCISES

1. What is important to you in a career? Interview a social worker, and then interview a sociologist, a psychologist, or another human service professional. Compare and contrast their roles and responsibilities. Ask about their level of education and how quickly they got a job working with people after graduation.
2. How would you respond to people (clients) who are economically disadvantaged, struggling with health and/or mental health, abusing substances, and/or experiencing a specific form of discrimination? Find out more about these population groups: Read articles or stories; watch a movie; listen to or watch news programs; or interview social workers who work with addicted, mentally ill, impoverished, and oppressed people. Then record your thoughts and

feelings about working with people who are vulnerable and in need of services. For example, here are some of the questions you might explore in a few relevant movies:

- a. *Losing Isaiah*: What was your reaction to this transracial adoption?
 - b. *Maria Full of Grace*: What do you think about how drug and sex trafficking was portrayed?
 - c. *Uncle Frank*: How much do you think attitudes toward gay men have changed in small, rural towns in southern areas of the United States?
3. What workplace features or career goals are most important to you? With which clients might you most like or dislike to work?
 4. On the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics website (www.bls.gov/home.htm), find the range of salaries for social workers in your local area or state. Compare salaries across practice settings, such as aging, child welfare, corrections, health, mental health, and school social work. Then compare the salaries for entry-level BSWs and advanced-practice MSWs (BSW salaries: <http://www1.salary.com/Social-Worker-BSW-Salary.html>).
 5. Read one of Dr. Brené Brown's books (e.g., *Dare to Lead*, *Rising Strong*, or *Braving the Wilderness*) and consider the importance of learning to be both courageous and vulnerable.