To summarize, then, social work 'shares' with other professional groups in the human services:

➢ a humanitarian or compassionate approach;

➢ a professional knowledge base;

➢ a set of skills;

➢ practice based on values; and

➢ discretion and accountability.

What is social work?

The discussions so far in this chapter have paved the way for addressing the fundamental question of: 'What is social work?' Of course, there is no single, simple answer to this question. Social work is a political entity and so, of course, how it is defined, conceptualized and implemented is therefore a contested matter. Readers looking for a simple, non-controversial answer should therefore prepare to be disappointed!

One definition which has been put forward is that of the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers:

a profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (http://ifsw.org/policies/global-standards/)

I find this a helpful definition as it incorporates many of the elements of the preceding discussions, but even this leaves scope for debate and dissent. However, we have to be careful not to get bogged down in finding *the* definition of social work and losing sight of its variability, its complexity and its status as a contested entity.

How particular writers or organizations define social work will depend, to a large extent, on their view of what social work should be. For example, Payne (2005a, b) describes three different approaches to social work. These are:

➢ *Individualism–reformism* This refers to a view of social work as an activity geared towards meeting social welfare needs on an individualized basis.

➢ *Socialist–collectivist* For Payne, this approach 'sees social work as seeking to promote co-operation and mutual support in society so that the most oppressed and disadvantaged people can gain power over their own lives' (2005a, p. 9).

➢ *Reflexive–therapeutic* This approach is geared towards promoting and facilitating personal growth in order to enable people to deal with the suffering and disadvantage they experience.

Adherents of these approaches will define social work in terms of their view of what social work should be. Different approaches will produce different definitions. And, of course, the types described by Payne are 'pure' types – there also exist various combinations of elements from across the three. In addition, it is sadly the case that a further form of social work has emerged in recent years, one which is concerned mainly with rationing scarce resources and with a major focus on service delivery (input) rather than on meeting needs by focusing on the required outcomes. In Thompson (2015a, 2018a) I refer to this as a 'consumerist' model of social work (see also the discussion of outcome-focused practice below).

In view of these complexities I shall avoid the rather fruitless task of coming up with a single definition of social work. Instead, I shall explore some important issues that should help provide an understanding of what social work is, without necessarily producing a clear and explicit definition. What follows, then, is an account of some key issues relating to the nature and purpose of social work.

Social work is what social workers do

At one level, we could simply say that social work is what social workers do. That is, we could take a descriptive approach and list the sorts of activities that social work involves:

➢ assessing the needs and circumstances of those who request, or who are referred for, social work help;

➢ purchasing/commissioning and/or providing services to meet identified needs, or ameliorate a harmful or unsatisfactory situation;

➢ engaging in problem-solving, facilitative and supportive activities at the level of the individual, the family, group or community;

➢ assessing the degree and nature of risk to which vulnerable individuals are exposed;

- establishing, implementing and evaluating protection plans;

- providing reports for courts in order to assist in determining the most appropriate outcome;

- contributing to multidisciplinary schemes and projects to support, and benefit from, the efforts of other professionals;

- providing or arranging advocacy or mediation;

- working with community groups, individuals and families to address social problems on a preventative basis;

- undertaking statutory duties in accordance with a number of Acts of Parliament.

However, while this may be helpful in providing a picture of the range of activities that come under the umbrella of 'social work', it still does not really answer the question. It is also quite vague as a result of the level of generality. Furthermore, it involves a significant degree of overlap with descriptions of other human services.

An additional weakness of this approach, of course, is that it is incomplete. It will always be possible for someone else to come along and add another item to the list!

Social work vs. social welfare

Another way of addressing the question of 'What is social work?' is to locate social work in its broader context as part of the wider concept of social welfare. As Skidmore, Thackeray and Farley (1997, p. 3) have long argued:

> The terms *social work* and *social welfare* are often confused and sometimes used synonymously. Actually, social welfare has a broader meaning and encompasses social work, public welfare and other related programs and activities. Social welfare, according to Friedlander, 'is the organized system of social services and institutions, designed to aid individuals and groups to attain satisfying standards of life and health, and personal and social relationships that permit them to develop their full capacities and to promote their well being in harmony with the needs of their families and the community'.

Social work can therefore be seen as one form of social welfare amongst others, alongside youth and community work, housing welfare, advice work and so on.

A related approach is to present social work in terms of 'the personal social services'. This relates to the area of social policy that is concerned with the welfare of particular individuals or groups, rather than with the populace generally (as in the case of health and education, for example). This is significant in terms of the tension between the needs of the individual and those of the broader society (personal vs. social). This manifests itself in the following ways:

➢ Social work operates at the intersection of the personal and the social (a point to which we shall return below).

➢ The recipients of social work services are often stigmatized and disadvantaged.

➢ The role of the personal social services is to seek to redress the inequalities such people experience.

➢ Social work, although geared towards addressing social inequalities and related problems, generally functions at the level of individual and group needs and problems, rather than through social activism.

The conceptualization of social work as the central plank of the personal social services (and one part of the broader field of social welfare) still does not provide a definitive statement of what social work is. However, it does take us further forward in developing our understanding, and it also raises important issues that will feature in further discussions below.

Practice focus 1.3

Jamie had been a volunteer in a Citizens' Advice Bureau for nearly two years when he started his social work degree. When he went out on his first placement in an older people team as part of the course, he found it all very confusing. He had expected that he would be given the opportunity to just generally be helpful to older people, to promote their welfare in a wide range of ways. He was very surprised when he realized that his work was much narrower in its scope and so closely linked to legislation around community care. By the end of the placement he had a much clearer picture of what was involved in social work with older people and how it fitted into the broader picture of social welfare. He enjoyed the placement but felt that he wanted to take his career in more of a community development direction in future. He felt this would be more satisfying than individual casework.

History and purpose

A further possibility for arriving at a definition of social work is to consider:

1. What is the history of social work? How did it arise?

2. What is the purpose of social work? Why does it exist?

While a detailed and thorough analysis of the historical roots of social work could help broaden and deepen our appreciation, it would still not give us a definitive

statement. This is because social work is a fluid entity – it grows, develops and changes. Consequently, we cannot necessarily define present (or future) social work by reference to past work. By contrast, considering the *purpose* of social work could prove far more fruitful.

I made the point earlier that social work is a contested concept, with different perspectives on what it is and how it should be practised. Similarly, the question of what social work is *for* is one that is highly contested. Indeed, there are many schools of thought about the nature and purpose of social work (and social welfare more broadly). It is certainly beyond the scope of this book to explore the complexities of the various approaches and typologies. I shall therefore limit myself to one theme to emerge from a consideration of these issues, namely the distinction between conceptions of social work as an agency of social stability and an agency of social change. In some ways, this is an oversimplification of a highly complex situation, but it can none the less be helpful as an introduction to the intricacies of the debate about what social work is for.

Social work and social stability

It can be argued that the role of social work is to contribute to social stability, to ensure that the level of social discontent does not reach a point where the social order may be threatened. A generous reading of this role is that it is geared towards enabling disadvantaged members of society to function effectively in society – it is a *caring* response. By contrast, a more sceptical perspective on this role is that it is geared towards protecting the status quo of power and privilege from the threat of a disenfranchised 'underclass' – it is a *controlling* response.

Many traditional approaches to social work are premised on this notion of social stability. The primary task, it would seem, is to help people adjust to their social circumstances and learn how to function better within them. The possibility of changing those social circumstances is afforded only secondary consideration, if at all.

One key assumption underpinning this approach is what can be called a 'consensus' model of society. That is, it is assumed that society as a whole has the same basic interests and goals – that there is a consensus of moral and political values (as opposed to a conflict model which recognizes that there are different, competing interest groups in society). According to this view of society, the task of social work is to help deal with personal and social problems at a personal or interpersonal level so that people can overcome, or adjust to, any personal difficulties that may be preventing them from sharing in the common good.

An example of a consensus model would be the 'trickle down' theory of economics – that is, the view that, as the upper echelons of society become richer, the wealth 'trickles down' to the rest of society, so that everyone benefits (Dorling, 2014).

Consensus-based approaches are closely associated with a 'medical' model of social work. Here, the social worker is seen as a form of 'doctor' who diagnoses what

is wrong with an individual or family, and prescribes a programme of treatment. This was, at one time, a dominant model of social work practice (Thompson, 2019a). It is only relatively recently that the term 'diagnosis' has been dropped from the social work vocabulary, and the term 'treatment' is still widely used, especially in a child protection context. According to this model:

➢ The social worker is the expert and therefore occupies a very powerful position.

➢ Although social circumstances are relevant, the primary problem (or 'pathology') is seen to lie in the individual or in the family.

➢ A successful outcome is either a 'cure' for the problem or an alleviation of the 'symptoms' so that a return to 'healthy' society can be facilitated.

Social work and social change

The consensus approach can be seen to be seriously flawed, in so far as it neglects the inherent tensions and divisions in society (Thompson, 2016a). An alternative perspective is to see social work as part of a process of social change and amelioration. This approach is premised on a view of society characterized not by moral and political consensus with common interests, but rather by significant social divisions and conflicts of interest. These social divisions include class, race and gender, along with many others.

According to this view, the recipients of social work help are predominantly members of oppressed minorities whose problems owe more to the structure of society than to their own personal failings or inadequacies. The task of social work, then, is to support oppressed individuals, groups and communities in challenging the discrimination and inequality to which they are routinely and systematically exposed. This is an approach that is closely associated with what became known as 'radical social work', a perspective that emphasized the importance of working towards social change, rather than simply helping people adjust to their disadvantaged position.

According to this model:

➢ Society is characterized more by conflict and division than by consensus.

➢ The task is not to return people to a 'healthy' society, but rather to work towards promoting social change by supporting oppressed minorities in their struggle against discrimination and inequality.

➢ Social work is not a morally or politically neutral exercise in technical problem solving, but rather a set of activities geared towards promoting equality and social justice.

Social stability and social change

As far as the consensus and conflict models are concerned, it will be clear from the chapters that follow that I have little sympathy with the former and mixed feelings about the latter. As I have argued elsewhere (Thompson, 2018c, 2019a), a medical model approach to social work is highly problematic. It reduces complex social and interpersonal problems to matters of individual failing or 'dysfunction'. The radical school of thought succeeds in locating social work in its sociopolitical context and highlights the importance of power and inequality in the development of social problems and as a barrier to addressing them. However, at least some forms of radical social work appear to make a number of fundamental errors in their analysis of the relationship between social work, the state and the wider society:

> ➢ Social work practice is rooted in law and policy. While it can challenge or work against these factors to a certain degree, it cannot transcend them altogether.

> ➢ By and large, social workers are paid employees, often of statutory agencies. Their actions are therefore constrained by the policies, values and aims of their employing organizations (if they wish to continue as employees).

> ➢ Although structural factors are clearly important aspects of the development of social problems, these interrelate with cultural and personal factors (Thompson, 2016a, 2018c). An unbalanced emphasis on structural factors can leave social workers feeling powerless and helpless.

What I wish to propose here, then, is an approach that builds on the strengths of the consensus and conflict approaches, but seeks to avoid their weaknesses. A consensus approach associates social work with social stability, while a conflict approach would concentrate on social change. However, I believe a more realistic view of social work is one that focuses on *both* social stability *and* social change.

In some ways, the approach I develop below could be seen as a form of radical social work. However, I would be using the term 'radical' in its literal sense to mean 'at the root'. The problems social workers seek to address are *social* problems, and therefore have their roots in society – in patterns of social relationships, distributions of power and resources, and attitudes and values. A radical approach is therefore one that seeks to address problems at a social level (Thompson, 2017b). However, to be realistic, it must be recognized that there are limits to how far this can go or how it can be done. It is important to avoid the naïve idealism associated with earlier forms of radical social work. As Davies (1991, p. 4) comments:

> Whatever the arguments of those who saw in social work an unacceptable vehicle for the oppression of the poor, the radical idea of using social workers as agents of political reform seemed to reveal – then as now – an astonishing naivety about the sociology of organisations, the relative powerlessness of individuals within them, and the importance of

self-interest as a motivating force in any occupational group. There was bound to be a bitter harvest of disillusionment.

This is not to say that social work cannot contribute to social change and amelioration. Indeed, I shall be arguing below that it most certainly can. However, optimism about achieving change must be combined with realism about the obstacles to be faced and the limits on likely success. We should also consider the question of timescales. While social changes may not be likely in the short term, this should not deter us from working towards changes in the longer term, a point to which I shall return below.

Working towards social change, however, does not mean that social stability is not important. Trying to make a contribution to developing a more humane, compassionate society in which discrimination and oppression are not tolerated does not preclude working to maintain and safeguard many aspects of the social order. Social work can, then, legitimately claim to contribute to social stability without reinforcing inequalities or social injustices. That is, social work can work towards social change *and* social stability – it is an oversimplification to see the two as mutually exclusive.

This leaves us, though, with a crucial question: what aspects of society need to be changed, and what aspects are worthy of safeguarding? How we respond to this will
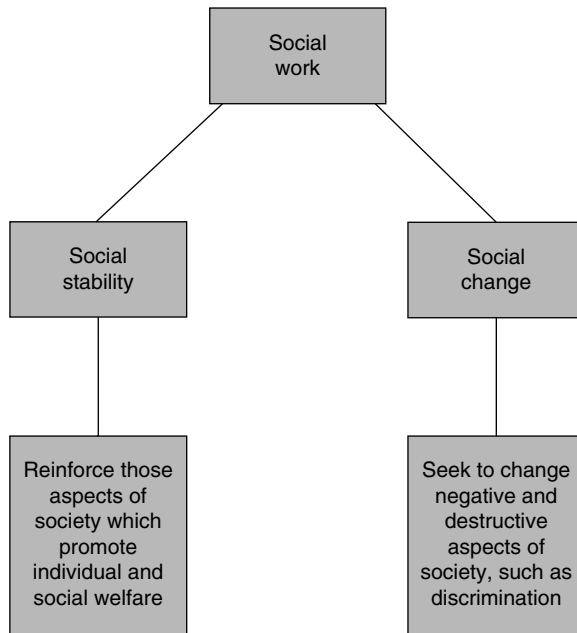
Figure 1.1 Stability and change