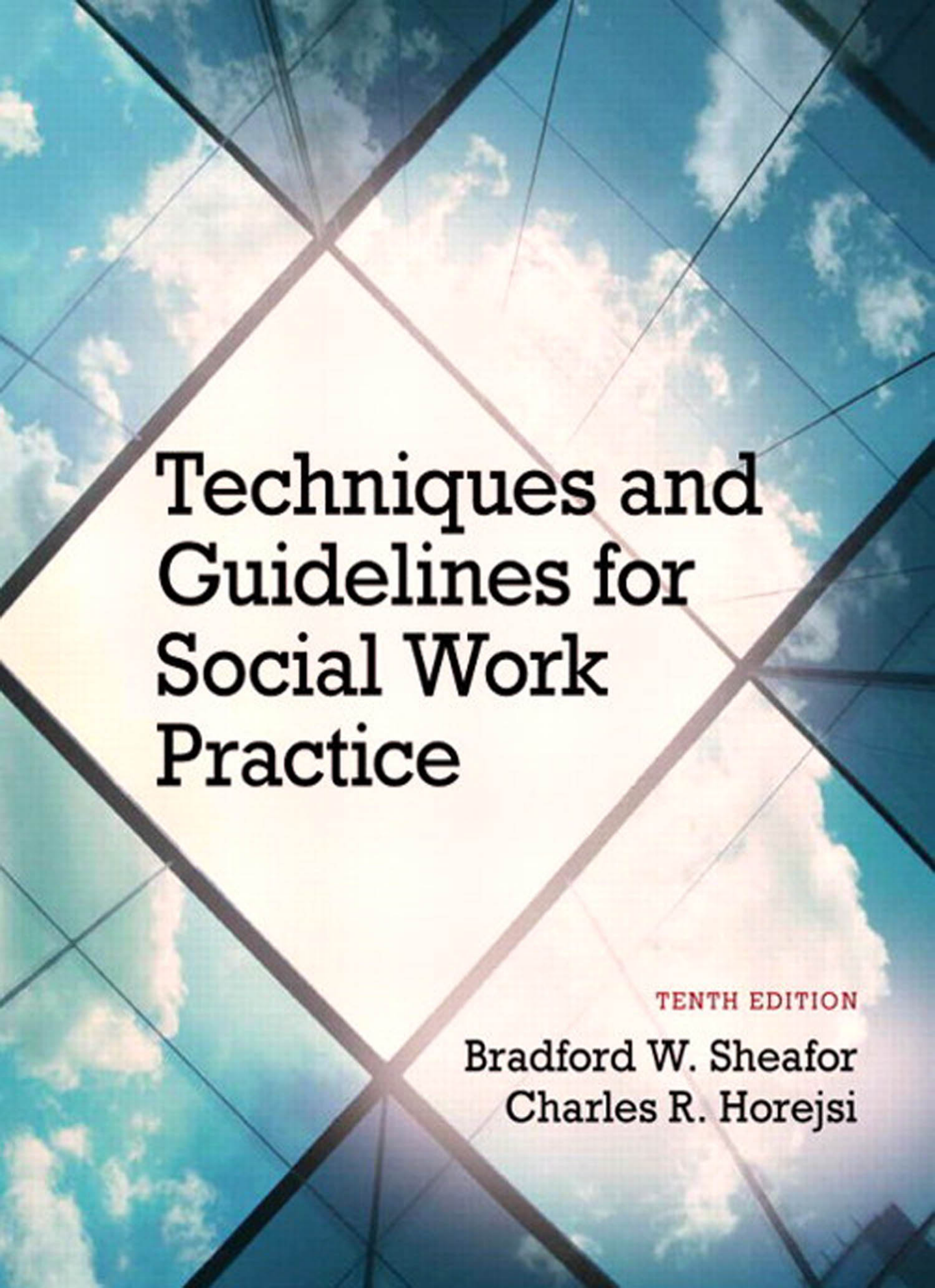
Techniques and Guidelines for Social Work Practice
TENTH EDITION
Bradford W. Sheafor
Charles R. Horejsi

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To the next generation of social workers,
who have chosen to devote their time and talents to the service of others
and the struggle for social justice,

and

To our families,
Nadine, Laura, Brandon, Perry, Christopher,
Gloria, Angela, Martin, and Katherine,
for their love and support

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Preface

Many people are influenced, directly and indirectly, by the decisions and actions of social workers. Working in courts, clinics, hospitals, schools, businesses, private practice, and a myriad of private and public social agencies, social workers deliver a wide variety of services directly to clients while also striving to promote positive community and social changes. Improving the quality of life for an individual, a family, or the people of a community ultimately impacts society as a whole and elevates the health, happiness, safety, and productivity of all its members.

This book is about what social workers actually do when helping their clients solve problems and/or enhance their functioning. Although many books describe social work's basic principles and theory, *Techniques and Guidelines for Social Work Practice* focuses on a more specific and concrete level. It describes 154 techniques and guidelines that social workers use in everyday practice.

Most social workers have been exposed to a variety of practice theories and conceptual frameworks described in the literature and taught in programs of social work education. Although that knowledge base is essential, practice is much more than a set of beliefs and ideas about how people can be helped. In reality, social work practice is a set of actions and behaviors by the social worker. Clients are not directly affected by the worker's theory; rather, they are influenced by what the worker actually does—by the social worker's specific actions and behaviors. We do not intend to suggest that attention to the techniques can or should replace attention to theoretical frameworks. Rather, techniques and specific guidelines complete the package of knowledge and skills needed by the social worker.

Plan and Structure

Understanding the design of a book helps the reader make use of its contents. This book has five major parts.

Part I, "Social Work and the Social Worker," reviews the background knowledge and characteristics we believe a social worker must possess, including:

- A clear conception of the domain of social work and the competencies the social worker is expected to bring to the change process (Chapter 1)
- An understanding of the challenges a social worker faces in merging his or her personal life with professional roles and responsibilities (Chapter 2)
- The native talents necessary for perceptively creating and entering into the interpersonal relations that are at the heart of practice (i.e., the art of social work), as well as a commitment to draw on and apply the science of social work—that is, the profession's knowledge base and its ethical principles (Chapter 3)

Part II, "The Building Blocks of Social Work Practice," stresses the need for the social worker to become familiar with the central features of effective helping. To serve clients ranging from individuals to communities, a social worker must have these qualities:

- An understanding of the varied roles performed by social workers in delivering human services and the specific functions associated with these roles (Chapter 4)
- A deep appreciation for the profession's fundamental practice principles and a commitment to be guided by those principles (Chapter 5)
- A basic knowledge of the various perspectives, theories, and models that have proven useful in practice (Chapter 6)
- The ability to use critical thinking to select the best possible knowledge, values, and skills to help clients make sound decisions about how they might improve their lives (Chapter 7)

In Chapters 8 to 16 we present numerous techniques and guidelines, each of which has a number and a title (e.g., 10.4: Making a Referral). In this example, *10.4* signifies the fourth item in Chapter 10. This system of numbering is used to refer the reader to related information in other parts of the book.

Several paragraphs describe each technique or guideline and its application. In addition, we present a Selected Bibliography, which usually lists two to four books or articles that we consider particularly useful for obtaining more in-depth information related to the topic discussed.

In Part III of the book, "Techniques Common to All Social Work Practice," we have included techniques that strengthen the social worker's performance regardless of agency setting and irrespective of whether the client is an individual, family, group, organization, or community. Underlying our selection was the belief that the social worker must have these basic skills:

- The interpersonal competence to communicate effectively and engage the client in a set of basic helping activities (Chapter 8)
- The ability to address ethical issues, handle organization-related details of service delivery, and effectively manage her or his time and workload (Chapter 9)

Part IV, "Techniques and Guidelines for Phases of the Planned Change Process," lists techniques and guidelines for both direct and indirect practice in chapters organized around the five phases of the planned change process. Although social work authors use differing names for these phases, we have elected to use the following:

- Intake and engagement (Chapter 10)
- Data collection and assessment (Chapter 11)
- Planning and contracting (Chapter 12)
- Intervention and monitoring (Chapter 13)
- Evaluation and termination (Chapter 14)

When introducing these five chapters, we describe what should be accomplished during that particular phase of the planned change process. These general concepts are then elaborated to more clearly describe the direct-practice applications (Section A) and the indirect-practice applications (Section B) in those chapters. A worker can readily examine

several suggested techniques or guidelines by identifying the phase of the change process, determining if the activity is a direct or indirect intervention, and then locating the most applicable technique or guideline.

Part V, "Specialized Techniques and Guidelines for Social Work Practice," includes some items that cut across the five phases of the planned change process and thus did not fit into the classification system used in Part IV. To address these issues, we created two chapters containing items related to serving vulnerable client populations (Chapter 15) and the items related to maintaining a social work position and enhancing one's professional performance (Chapter 16).

Definition of Terms

Writing about social work practice inherently presents some language problems. One has to read only a few social work texts or articles to become at least a little confused when various authors use terms somewhat differently. Unfortunately, some commonly used terms lack a precise or an agreed-upon definition. Perhaps that is to be expected in a profession that focuses on complex and dynamic human and social interactions. This book cannot overcome these long-standing problems of terminology, yet the ideas presented here will be more readily understood if we make the meanings of several terms, particularly those in the title of the book, more explicit.

A **technique** is viewed as a circumscribed, goal-oriented behavior performed in a practice situation by the social worker. It is a planned action deliberately taken by the practitioner. The application of a simple technique (e.g., making the first telephone contact) may take only a few minutes, whereas more complex techniques (e.g., assessing a client's social functioning) may require several hours or more.

Guidelines, by comparison, are a set of directions intended to influence the social worker's behavior and decisions. Guidelines are essentially lists of do's and don'ts. They might be used when working with a specific type of client (e.g., a child or a client with mental illness) or when carrying out workload management tasks (e.g., recording or writing reports).

Social work is a term applied to a specific profession that is committed to improving the quality of life for vulnerable people by helping them deal more effectively with the challenges they face and/or helping to change the social and economic conditions that create or exacerbate individual and social problems. In our introduction to Part I, we more fully spell out our perception of social work.

Practice is a term used when speaking about what social workers actually do, as in the phrase *social work practice.* The word *practice* infers action and performance by the social worker. The word *practice* also implies that social workers always are learning from what they do, always open to new insights, and never content to do what they have always done. Thus, social workers take the viewpoint that they are continually practicing, evaluating, and improving their craft.

In addition to terms in the book's title, the reader should be alert to the varied meanings of the term *client.* Common usage implies an individual who is the consumer of services. However, as used in this book, the term has a broader connotation. The **client** of the social worker may be an individual, a family or another form of household, or even a small group, committee, organization, neighborhood, community, or larger social system. Throughout the book, the term *client* is occasionally expanded to mention clientele, clients, client groups, or client systems, reminding the reader that the traditional narrow definition of *client* is not intended.

Finally, the term **intervention** is sometimes confusing to someone new to social work. The practice of social work is all about change—for example, change in the client's thoughts, perceptions, and actions, as well as change in the environment that affects or impinges on the client. The word *intervention* suggests that the social worker enters into and guides the client's search and struggle to deal more effectively with some particular challenge or problem.

New to This Edition

Techniques and Guidelines for Social Work Practice has been carefully updated to provide students with easy access to current information on fundamental techniques required for social work practice from the generalist perspective. Virtually every chapter and every item has been revised to add new understanding, to delete outdated material, and so far as we are able, to offer clear descriptions and explanations. In addition, new features of this tenth edition of *Techniques and Guidelines* include:

- The brief descriptions of intervention approaches commonly used by social workers (see Chapter 6) have been expanded to include dialectical behavioral therapy and various trauma-related approaches.
- Several new items related to direct-practice interventions are included in this edition: clarifying roles and responsibilities, the meaning of work in social functioning, assessing a client's needed level of care, mandated reporting of abuse and neglect, understanding the family life cycle, accessing evidence-based information, and providing support for caregivers.
- We have also added two new indirect-practice items: conducting community assets assessments and participatory action planning.
- An item on measuring client change with frequency counts was added to Chapter 14 to complement the items on measuring with individualized and standardized assessment scales.
- In Chapter 15 new items related to the client with a personality disorder and the client or family experiencing an adoption have been added.
- With each new edition of this text it has been necessary to delete some items in order to make room for new content we believed was important to include. Many of these deleted items are quite relevant today and we are making them available by indicating through marginal notes how to access them. The notes appear near related content in this current edition.

Supplements for Instructors

For instructors using this book in their classes, we have created an Instructor's Manual and Test Bank to assist them in using this text. This manual can be obtained from your campus Pearson representative or by writing to Pearson Education (One Lake Street, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 07458).

Acknowledgments

Social work practice involves many different activities with a wide variety of clients having many different problems and concerns. Moreover, social work practice takes place within a wide spectrum of organizational settings and social environments. Consequently, social work practice entails a vast array of knowledge and skills. This book

is ambitious in the sense that it describes techniques and guidelines used by social workers practicing in different settings and with many differing types of clients and situations. That goal and broad scope calls for more expertise than that possessed by its two authors. Consequently, in preparing this book we asked more than 65 colleagues and former students in social work practice and social work education to critique our drafts of the items included in the book. We thank them for enhancing the quality of this publication, but take full responsibility for the final product.

We would also like to acknowledge the following individuals, who reviewed this tenth edition and offered suggestions for improving this publication: Kathleen Belanger, Stephen F. Austin State University; Rosalyn Deckerhoff, Florida State University; Kimberly Delles, Aurora University; Lettie Lockhart, University of Georgia; and Patricia Magee, Pittsburg State University.

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PART 1

SOCIAL WORK AND THE SOCIAL WORKER

Social work is an indispensable profession in our complex and ever-changing society. But it is an often misunderstood profession, in part because it is a profession characterized by considerable diversity. Indeed, social workers engage in a broad range of activities within many types of settings and with many different people. Some social workers deal intensely with individuals and families, whereas others work with groups, organizations, or whole communities. Some deal primarily with children, others work with older persons. Some are counselors and psychotherapists, others are supervisors, administrators, program planners, or fund-raisers. Some focus on family violence and others specialize in how to provide housing or medical care to the poor. This variety is what makes social work so challenging and stimulating. But it is because of this diversity of both clients and activities that it is so difficult to answer the simple question: What is social work?

The task of concisely defining social work in a manner that encompasses all of what social workers do has challenged the profession throughout its history. At a very fundamental level, **social work** is a profession devoted to helping people function as well as they can within their social environments and, when necessary, to changing their environments to make positive social functioning possible. This theme of improving person-in-environment functioning is clarified and illustrated throughout this text.

The authors' perspective of social work is captured in the following three-part definition of a social worker. A social worker

1. has the recognized professional preparation (i.e., knowledge, ethics, and competencies) and the requisite skills needed to provide human services sanctioned by society, and
2. especially to engage vulnerable populations (e.g., children, older people, the poor, women, persons with disabilities, ethnic groups) in efforts to bring about needed change in the clients themselves, the people around them, or related social institutions,
3. so that these individuals and groups are able to meet their social needs, prevent or eliminate difficulties, make maximum use of their abilities and strengths, lead full and satisfying lives, and contribute fully to strengthening society.

In order to be a responsible professional, the social worker must understand and function within the profession's accepted areas of expertise. Throughout its history, social work has been portrayed as both an art (one's personal characteristics) and a science (a base of knowledge and skill required to be an effective professional). Part I of this book addresses the most fundamental elements of social work practice—the blending of the person and the profession. These elements must be clearly understood before a social worker can most effectively use the techniques and guidelines described in the subsequent parts of the book to assist vulnerable and disenfranchised people as they seek to prevent or resolve the complex social problems that arise in their daily lives.

1

The Domain of the Social Work Profession

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of this chapter, the reader should be prepared to:

- Describe the unique place of social work among the several helping professions.
- Identify that the improvement of people's social functioning and changing detrimental social conditions are the dual responsibilities of social workers.
- Recognize that social work's person-in-environment focus requires the social worker to address issues and problems ranging from those of the individual to those impacting the community or society as a whole.
- Identify the merging of client, social worker, agency, and social policies and programs during the process of planned change.

When a person sets out to help others, he or she assumes a serious responsibility. The responsible helper from every profession must practice within his or her **professional domain** (i.e., the profession's area of expertise) if clients or patients are to receive the most effective services that the professional is prepared to provide. Indeed, professional helpers can harm those they intend to help if the helpers' activities extend beyond their professional boundaries because these boundaries identify and encompass the services its members are best prepared to deliver. These boundaries also determine the content of professional social work education and training.

This text is concerned with the profession of social work and how social workers assist people in addressing a variety of different problems and issues that confront them. Thus, understanding the professional domain of social work is prerequisite to helping clients address their issues.

Social work is, indeed, a curious name for a profession. In times that emphasize image over substance, it is clearly a title that lacks pizzazz. In fact, the use of the word *work* makes it seem burdensome and boring. Social work is a title that many social workers have wished they could change, possibly without understanding where it came from in the first place.

The title is attributed to Jeffrey Brackett (1860–1949), who served for nearly 30 years on the Massachusetts Board of Charities and later became the first director of what is now the Simmons College School of Social Work. In the early 1900s, Brackett argued that the word *social* should be part of this developing profession's title because it depicts the focus on people's interactions with important forces that shape their lives, such as family members, friends, or a myriad of other factors, including their relevant cultural or ethnic group, school, job, neighborhood, community, and so on. He added the word *work* to differentiate professional practice from what he considered the often misguided and self-serving philanthropic activity of wealthy volunteers. Brackett believed including *work* in the profession's title emphasized that its activities were to be orderly, responsible, and disciplined—not something to be engaged in by volunteers or those simply curious about other people's problems.

Social work, then, is an accurate title for a profession that applies helping techniques in a disciplined manner to address social problems. During the years since Brackett convinced early helping services providers to accept this title, the domain of social work has expanded and its methods have been reshaped by knowledge drawn from the social and behavioral sciences. Yet the title continues to describe this profession's central focus today.

THE SOCIAL WORK DOMAIN

It is important for the social worker to carefully examine the domain of social work (i.e., to understand its purpose, focus, scope, and sanction). This is critical for students because educational programs divide the study of social work into units, or courses, and this can lead to familiarity with the parts without necessarily understanding the whole. Yet the practice of social work requires attention to the whole of the profession's mission.

Another reason for understanding the social work domain is to help guard against **professional drift**, which is the neglect of a profession's traditional purpose and functions in favor of activities associated with another discipline. This happens most often in clinical settings when social workers align themselves too closely with models and theories used in medicine, psychology, and other disciplines that tend to minimize attention to social policy and social justice issues. These individuals may come to define themselves as their job title first (e.g., therapist, probation officer) and social worker second—or perhaps not as a social worker at all. Professional drift is also seen among administrators and managers, too, who were trained as social workers but identify primarily with the existing procedures of specific organizations rather than also introducing the perspectives of the social work profession. When professional drift occurs, it is a disservice to one's clients, social agency, and community, for it diminishes the unique commitment, perspective, and competencies that social work brings to the helping process.

A precise and generally agreed-upon understanding of the boundaries that mark the several helping professions does not exist. Different disciplines (e.g., social work, clinical psychology, school counseling, and marriage and family therapy) have claimed their domains without collaboration or mutual agreement about where one profession

ends and another begins or where they appropriately overlap. This problem is further complicated by the fact that each state that licenses the practice of these professions is free to establish its own definitions of professional boundaries. It is important, therefore, to approach learning about social work's domain with recognition that the boundaries between professions are sometimes blurred.

Social Work's Purpose

An understanding of the social work profession begins with a deep appreciation of humans as social beings. People are, indeed, social creatures. They need other people. Each individual's growth and development requires the guidance, nurturing, and protection provided by others. And that person's concept of self—and even his or her very survival, both physically and psychologically—is tied to the decisions and actions of other people. It is this interconnectedness and interdependence of people and the power of social relationships that underpins social workers' commitment to improve the quality and effectiveness of those interactions and relationships—in other words, to enhance clients' social functioning and, at the same time, to improve the social conditions that affect social functioning.

Improved Social Functioning

The concept of social functioning is a key to understanding the unique focus of social work and distinguishing it from the other helping professions. *Social functioning* relates to a person's ability to accomplish those tasks and activities necessary to meet his or her basic needs and perform his or her major social roles in the society. As Maslow (1970) suggests in his *hierarchy of human needs*, the most basic human needs concern having adequate food, shelter, and medical care, as well as being safe and protected from harm. At an important, but not quite so critical, level, people need to feel that they belong within their social networks, experience some level of acceptance and respect from others, and have the opportunity to fulfill their own potential (i.e., self-actualization). Indeed, one aspect of the diversity in the profession of social work is that social workers are prepared to help clients improve social functioning related to all levels of these basic human needs.

Another illustration of the diversity of human situations social workers address relates to the fact that their clients typically are expected to simultaneously perform several social roles, including, for example, those of being a family member, parent, spouse, student, patient, employee, neighbor, and citizen. Depending on the person's gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, abilities, occupation, and so on, these roles may be vague or quite prescribed. Furthermore, they may change over time, leading to confusion, tension, and conflict in families, at school, or at work. Thus, the concept of improving social functioning includes the wide range of actions that social workers might take to help clients strengthen the match or fit between an individual's capacities to perform these multiple social roles, and resolving the sometimes conflicting demands, expectations, resources, and opportunities within his or her social and economic environment.

Although the social work profession is concerned with the social functioning of all people, it has traditionally prioritized the needs of the most vulnerable members of society and those who experience social injustice, discrimination, and oppression. The most vulnerable people in a society are often young children, the frail elderly, persons living in poverty, persons with severe physical or mental disabilities, persons who are gay or lesbian, and persons of minority ethnic/racial backgrounds.

To carry out their commitment to improving people's social functioning, social workers are involved primarily in the activities classified as social care, social treatment, and social enhancement. **Social care** refers to those actions and efforts designed to provide people in need with access to the basics of life (e.g., food, shelter, and protection from harm) and opportunities to meet their psychosocial needs (e.g., belonging, acceptance, and self-actualization). In social care, the focus is on providing needed resources and/or helping the client be as comfortable as possible in a difficult situation that either cannot be changed or modified in the immediate future. Examples of social care would be efforts to help older people adjust to the somewhat restricted lifestyle of living in nursing homes, adults who experience a serious and persistent mental illness, and persons who face a terminal or life-threatening situation.

Social treatment involves actions designed to modify or correct an individual's or a family's dysfunctional, problematic, or distressing patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior. In social treatment, the focus is primarily on facilitating individual or family change through education, counseling, or various forms of therapy. In some cases (e.g., children in foster care, hospice work), the social worker may provide both social care and social treatment to the same family.

A third form of intervention seeks to enhance, expand, or further develop the abilities and performance of persons who are already functioning well. **Social enhancement** services emphasize growth and development of clients in a particular area of functioning without a "problem" having necessarily been identified. Some examples of enhancement-oriented services are youth recreation programs, well-baby clinics, marriage-enrichment sessions, and job-training programs.

Improved Social Conditions

Social work's second broad area of emphasis is on shaping and creating environments that will be supportive and empowering. Underpinning this goal is one of the most fundamental social work values: a strong belief in the importance of social justice. **Social justice** refers to fairness and moral rightness in how institutions such as governments, corporations, and powerful groups recognize and support the basic human rights, dignity, and worth of all people. A closely related principle is *economic justice* (sometimes called *distributive justice*), which refers to basic fairness in the apportioning and distribution of economic resources, opportunities, and burdens (e.g., taxes, bank loans, business contracts). Social workers often favor the use of various laws, public policies, and other social and economic mechanisms to ensure that all people are valued and treated with fairness and that all have reasonable opportunities for social and economic security and advancement.

Very often, political controversy has its origin in differing conceptions of what is truly fair and just and in differing beliefs about whether and how society should assume responsibility for addressing human needs and problems. Most social workers would argue that social and economic policies must recognize that all people have the right to have their basic needs met—not because of individual achievement, but simply by virtue of one's inherent worth as a human being. Among those *basic human rights* are the following:

- The right to have the food, shelter, basic medical care, and essential social services necessary for one's survival
- The right to be protected from abuse, exploitation, and oppression
- The right to work and earn a sufficient wage to secure basic resources and live with dignity

- The right to marry who one chooses, to have a family, and to be with one's family
- The right to a basic education
- The right to own property
- The right to be protected from avoidable harm and injury in the workplace
- The right to worship as one chooses—or not at all, if one chooses
- The right to privacy
- The right to associate with those one chooses
- The right to accurate information about one's community and government
- The right to participate in and influence the decisions of one's government

Social workers would also argue that rights and responsibilities necessarily coexist. With every right comes a responsibility. For example:

- If a human has the right to the basic requirements for survival, then others have the responsibility to make sure that each person has food, shelter, and essential medical care.
- If people have the right to be protected from abuse, exploitation, and oppression, then others have the responsibility to create social programs and take actions that will provide this protection when required.
- If a person has the right to work and earn a living, then others have the responsibility to make sure that employment opportunities exist and that those who work are paid a living wage.

Situations of injustice develop when people are concerned only about their own rights and have lost a sense of responsibility for others and for society as a whole. Not infrequently, social workers become advocates for those who whose rights have been ignored or abused. And in many situations, social workers provide a voice for the vulnerable and oppressed.

More often than other helping professionals, social workers seek to bring about changes in the environments in which people must live and function. When working with individuals and families, these changes are often termed *environmental modifications*. An example would be efforts by a school social worker to prepare students for the return of a former classmate who was badly scarred in an automobile accident. Another example would be special training and guidance given to a foster mother so she can provide a calming and protective atmosphere for a young vulnerable foster child who is fearful of new people.

Even when working with an organization or a community, a social worker may seek to modify its wider environment. That may entail efforts to influence local decision-makers, businesses, political leaders, and governmental agencies so they will be more supportive and more responsive to a community's needs and problems. Such interventions may involve the worker in social research, social planning, and political action intended to develop and improve laws, social policies, institutions, and social systems so they will promote social and economic justice, expand opportunities for people, and improve the everyday circumstances in which people live. Specific examples would be expanding the availability of safe and affordable housing, creating incentives for businesses to hire people with disabilities, amending laws so they better prevent discrimination, and helping neighborhood and community organizations become politically active in addressing the issues they face.

In some situations it is possible to prevent a problem from developing or from getting worse. **Prevention** consists of those actions taken to eliminate social, economic,

psychological, and other conditions known to cause or contribute to the formation of human problems. To be effective in prevention, social workers must be able to identify the specific factors and situations that contribute to the development of social problems and then select actions and activities that will reduce or eliminate their impact (see Item 12.13). Borrowing from the public health model, three levels of prevention can be identified:

Level 1: Primary prevention. Actions intended to deter the problem from ever developing
Level 2: Secondary prevention. Actions intended to detect a problem at its early stages and address it while it is still relatively easy to change
Level 3: Tertiary prevention. Actions intended to address an already serious problem in ways that keep it from growing even worse, causing additional damage, or spreading to others

Social Work's Focus

Social work is certainly not the only profession concerned with how individuals and families function, nor is it the only profession interested in social conditions and social problems. However, it is social work's *simultaneous focus* on both the person and the person's environment that makes social work unique among the various helping professions. This pivotal construct is termed **person-in-environment**.

Social workers strive to view each individual as a **whole person**, having many dimensions: biological, intellectual, emotional, social, familial, spiritual, economic, communal, and so on. It is this concern for the whole or the complete person that contributes to the breadth of issues addressed by the social work profession—for example, the individual's capacity to meet basic physical needs (food, housing, health care, etc.), the person's levels of knowledge and skills needed to cope with life's demands, the person's values about what is important in his or her own life and how others are viewed, the individual's goals and aspirations, and the like. It is important to note the person-in-environment construct uses the word *person*, not *personality*. Personality is but one component of the whole person. A focus only on personality without attending to other influences on that person would be incongruous with the domain of social work and slant it toward the domain of psychology.

A person always lives within a particular environment. As used here, the term **environment** refers to one's surroundings—that multitude of physical and social structures, forces, and processes that affect humans and all other life forms. Of particular interest to social workers are those systems, structures, and conditions that most frequently and most directly affect a person's day-to-day social functioning (i.e., the person's *immediate environment*). One's immediate environment includes the individual's family, close friends, neighborhood, workplace, and the services and programs he or she uses.

Social workers devote major attention to helping clients improve aspects of their immediate environment. In addition, they are also concerned about what can be termed the client's *distant environment*. These more remote influences have to do with what people need for healthy growth and development, such as clean air, drinkable water, shelter, and good soil to produce food. And because biological well-being is a prerequisite to positive social functioning, social workers must also be concerned with problems such as prevention of disease and pollution.

Because social relationships are of central concern to their profession, social workers must understand the power of a social environment—both its potentially helpful and

harmful influences. Humans are social creatures with a strong need to be accepted by others. Achieving what others in our environment do is a powerful force for change—either positive or negative. Social workers also understand that if a person's environment changes to become more supportive and nurturing, that individual will be more likely to make positive changes in attitude and behavior.

Social Work's Scope

A profession's **scope** can be thought of as the range of activities and involvements appropriate to its mission. One way of describing social work's scope involves classifying the intervention by the size of the client system. Practice at the **micro level** focuses on the individual and his or her most intimate interactions, such as exchanges between husband and wife, parent and child, close friends, and family members. The terms *interpersonal helping, direct practice,* and *clinical practice* are often used interchangeably with *micro-level practice.*

At the other extreme, **macro-level** practice may involve work with and efforts to change an organization, community, state, or even society as a whole. Macro-level practice also deals with interpersonal relations, but these are the interactions between and among the people who represent organizations or are members of a work group such as an agency committee or interagency task force. When engaged in macro-level practice, the social worker is frequently involved in activities such as administration, fund-raising, proposed legislation testimony, policy analysis, class advocacy, and social resource development.

Between the micro and macro levels is **mezzo-level** (midlevel) practice. Practice at this level is concerned with relationships and interactions that are somewhat less intimate than those associated with family life but more personally meaningful than those occurring among organizational and institutional representatives. Examples of midlevel practice would be the change efforts with and within a self-help or therapy group, among peers at school or work, and among neighbors.

Some practice approaches address more than one intervention level. For example, the generalist perspective requires the social worker to be capable of practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (see Chapter 6).

Social Work's Sanction

The concept of **sanction** refers to the authorization, approval, or permission needed to perform certain tasks or activities—ones that can have a significant impact on someone's life and possibly cause harm. Three sources provide sanction for social work practice. One of these is legislation at the state and federal levels that explicitly or implicitly recognizes and approves social work activities. This is most apparent in the state licensing and regulation of individual social work practitioners. Sanction is implicit in various forms of legislation that creates social programs and allocation of funds for social work activity.

A second source of sanction is the many private human services organizations (both nonprofit and profit-making agencies) that endorse social work by recruiting and hiring social workers to provide services or by purchasing services from social workers who are in private practice or employed by other agencies. Indirectly, then, the community sanctions and pays social workers to provide specific services.

Finally, the true test of public sanction for practice is the willingness of clients to seek out and use services offered by social workers. In order to win the trust of clients, social

workers must demonstrate on a daily basis that they are capable of providing effective services and conduct themselves in a responsible and ethical manner.

In return for this sanction, both individual social work practitioners and the profession, through its professional organizations and through state licensing boards and accrediting bodies, are obliged to make sure that social work practitioners are competent and adhere to the *NASW Code of Ethics* (see Item 9.5).

AN OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Indeed, many factors shape the work of the social worker. Figure 1.1 presents a model of the key factors that influence social work practice and shows how the content in the 16 chapters of this book fits together to reflect the whole of social work. The overlapping circles in the center of the figure depict the client (or client system) and the social worker as joined in an effort to bring about a desired change in the client's functioning or situation. This **planned change process** involves several phases during which the client and social worker move from their decision to initiate action to improve some aspect of the client's social functioning, through assessment and action phases and on to an evaluation of its success and a decision to terminate the helping activity. Although the social worker is expected to guide this process, the client must ultimately decide that change is needed and commit to utilizing the helping resources identified by or provided by the worker.

"The Client" side of Figure 1.1 indicates that the client's problem or concern is, most likely, the product of a combination of personal and environmental factors. Each client has a unique set of *personal characteristics* (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, life experiences, beliefs, strengths, limitations, needs) that may have contributed in some way to the situation being addressed. Some of these personal characteristics will be important resources during the helping process.

Clients do not exist in isolation. Their *immediate environment* might include friends, family, school personnel, employers, natural helpers, neighborhood or community groups, or even other professional helpers, to mention just a few. In some cases these environmental influences have contributed to the client's problem and may need to become targets for change and others may be potential social supports and resources.

"The Social Worker" side of Figure 1.1 suggests that the worker brings unique personal characteristics and a professional background to the change process. These are experienced by the client through what the social worker actually does (i.e., the worker's activities and application of skills and techniques). What the worker does is a function of the specific professional role he or she has assumed and the conceptual framework(s) he or she has selected to guide practice. The social worker's *personal characteristics* encompass many factors. For example, the social worker's unique perspectives on the causes of human suffering, as well as her or his particular values, are inevitably introduced into the change process. Those perspectives will have been shaped by the social workers' unique life experiences of family, community, socioeconomic background, gender, age, sexual orientation, and the like. All of these characteristics to some degree affect the social worker–client relationship.

At the same time, the practitioner brings the special contribution of a *professional background* to social work, which differentiates the social worker from the client's friends, family, and the professionals representing other disciplines who may also be working with the client or have attempted to help in the past. What is this professional background?