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An Introduction to Social Problems, Social Welfare Organizations, and the Profession of Social Work

No one we know starts out life wanting to be a substance abuser or to be poor. Most of us want to be lucky, cool, rich, and successful. Some of us are, fortunately, but many of us aren't. Part of the reason for individual success and failure has to do with what we were given biologically in terms of good health, intelligence, and the ability to stick with projects and finish them. The other part of it has to do with the families we grow up in, the social and economic conditions of our lives, and the parents, teachers, and friends who influence us. Some parents do wonderful things for their children and provide safe and happy homes. Other parents fight, use substances, and sometimes abuse and neglect their children. It doesn't take a genius to know that the child who grows up in a happy family has a better chance of being successful in life than the child growing up in a troubled family. Child abuse is everything it's cracked up to be and so are poverty, abandonment, unsafe neighborhoods, and poorly functioning schools. Some of us start life out on the right track, but a lot of us don't. Often those people whose families function poorly overcome early life problems by the inner strength some people call resilience. But many children who grow up in difficult, unloving, and abusive homes suffer harm to their bodies and to their spirit. It's difficult for them to be as successful as many of us who grew up in healthier homes. People sometimes pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but for those who don't professional help can make an enormous difference.

To help our most troubled families and the children who grow into adulthood having to cope with the burden of a great many early life problems, we've developed social programs and social service organizations to deliver those programs. We have organizations to help families when they lose the ability to work and to earn an income. We have other organizations that help families when the loss of work leads to the loss of their homes and health care. We have organizations to help people who experience mental illness or physical disabilities

brought about by accidents, war, and health problems. The organizations we have developed in America come from our concern that all Americans should have an equal chance to succeed in life. Sometimes our helping organizations work very well, but other times they don't. There's no question that helping organizations reflect the concerns of the society. When the concern is great, as it is when soldiers come back wounded from war or when people are hurt in terrorist attacks, the organizations often work extremely well. But when society is in a particularly blaming mood as it sometimes is about homelessness and poverty, then the organizations don't work as well because they've lost the support of citizens and funding is pulled back.

I'm not apologizing for organizations that don't work well. They need our help and support. Neither am I going to brag about our organizations that work very well. I'm just going to clarify what they do, what they cost, and how well they're doing the intended job of helping people resolve the social problems discussed in this book.

Social work is the profession originally developed to work with a number of these social problems. But it's not the only helping profession: Psychiatry, psychology, and counseling are also helping professions working with people in difficulty. The difference is that social work is concerned about the internal side of a person's behavior (his or her emotional problems and problem-solving skills) as well as the external side of a person's life (the quality of family life, the school the child attends, the safety of the neighborhoods, and the amount of money he or she has to live on). In a sense, social work sees people from a total perspective and works to resolve both internal and external problems. But we use common sense. If people are chronically hungry, social workers try to eliminate their hunger while at the same time resolving the reasons for their hunger. In this way, the immediate need for food is met, and the likelihood of repeated need for food may be diminished.
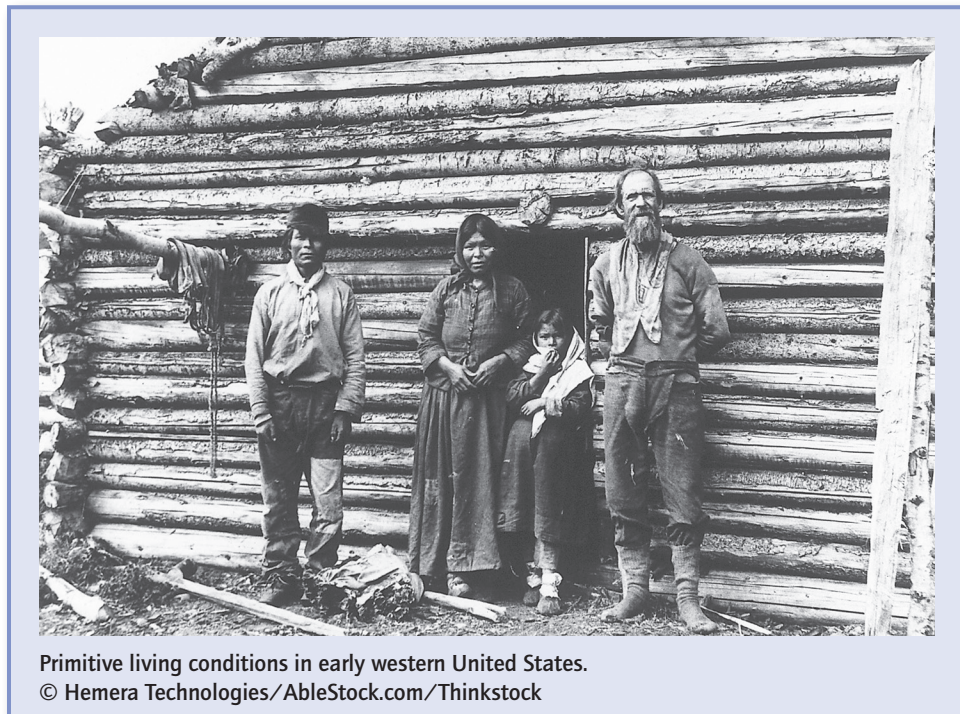
Primitive living conditions in early western United States.
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I think all people who work in the helping professions are heroic because we give of ourselves daily to help others. But I believe that social workers are particularly heroic because we're on the front line of all of the social problems that exist in our nation. We work with gangs, the terminally ill, children who are battered and abandoned by parents and caretakers, the homeless, the mentally ill, soldiers returning from war, the drug and alcohol addicted, and families who need to learn to communicate with each other more effectively. We inspire, we cheerlead, and we advocate for millions of people every day, and, in the process, many people who would otherwise suffer lives of quiet desperation and hopelessness have hope and the motivation to succeed. We counsel people who want to end their lives because of despair. We give hope to people facing a long struggle with terminal illness. We work with our political leaders to make our communities more livable and to offer opportunity where it didn't exist before. We are neither liberal nor conservative but believe that what we do from the heart is paid back in the wonderful feeling that our lives have been dedicated to helping others. My daughter, Amy Glicken (2005), wrote a piece on volunteering that describes what social workers do (see InfoTable 1.1).

| **InfoTable 1.1** | "Volunteering as a Social Responsibility" by Amy J. Glicken |

As the volunteer coordinator for a rural nonprofit program in Arizona, I've seen the generous nature of people when they're asked to volunteer. I think that people become volunteers as they begin to realize that someone else's tragedy can easily be their own, and while many of us feel a responsibility to give back to our communities, so often we feel powerless to make the changes that seem beyond our personal scope.

I believe we have the power to make those changes by using the skills we already have. Attorneys donate their time with legal services for the poor. Doctors provide services to the neighborhoods and communities with marginal health care. Helping professionals offer their time and expertise to the many social welfare organizations without professionals to supervise services and as board members and grant writers.

With all of the options for helping, some of us are gifted at what is sometimes called "impact work." Impact work is the attorney who chooses to represent 600 new immigrants from Mexico rather than simply representing the one immigrant who walked into her office. Impact work is going beyond providing shelter and counseling services to victims of domestic violence by looking at the causes of violence and finding new ways of preventing it. Impact work is building more low and no income housing rather than just providing temporary shelters for those without homes.

Many of us are overwhelmed with our daily workloads and feel unable to make long-term, far-reaching changes in our communities. But whether it's by peacekeeping, sculpting, growing corn, counseling, healing, or teaching children, each of us has a gift that we can use to make our communities much better than they are. The task is simply to discern what our gifts are and to utilize them. Because, in the end, we are each our own Tooth Fairies, taking what has been lost and giving gold in return.

SOURCE: A. J. Glicken (2005, p. 310).

WHAT ARE SOCIAL PROBLEMS?

A social problem is an issue within the society that makes it difficult for people to achieve their full potential. Poverty, unemployment, unequal opportunity, racism, and malnutrition are examples of social problems. So are substandard housing, employment discrimination, and child abuse and neglect. Crime and substance abuse are also examples of social problems. Not only do social problems affect many people directly, but they also affect all of us indirectly. The drug-abusing driver becomes the potential traffic accident that doesn't choose its victims by race, color, or creed but does so randomly. The child of abusive parents all too often becomes the victim or perpetrator of family violence as an adult.

Social problems tend to develop when we become neglectful and fail to see that serious problems are developing. Between 1988 and 1993, for example, the United States saw a phenomenal increase in youth violence. In my book about children who commit violent acts (Glicken, 2004b), I documented that children younger than age 12 cause one third of all fires resulting in death and that the average age of children who sexually abuse other children is younger than age 10. According to Osofsky and Osofsky (2001), "The homicide rate among males 15–24 years old in the United States is 10 times higher than in Canada, 15 times higher than in Australia, and 28 times higher than in France or Germany" (p. 287). These are troubling examples of social problems that affect all of us.

Could these problems have been prevented if our social institutions had been working well? I think so, but this is where political philosophies are important to understand. Some people believe that government should be very involved in providing services to people most at risk. I don't know if the labels *liberal* and *conservative* have much meaning anymore, but in times past, we might have called these folks liberals. Liberals believe that where our usual institutions fail, the government and the private sector should help out. Conservatives believe that intruding in people's lives often leads to a weakening of social institutions and the values that have served us well in the past. Conservatives might say that what we should be doing to reduce juvenile crime is to promote good family values and look to our traditional institutions (e.g., religious organizations and schools) to help prevent social problems from developing. They also believe that the more government has become involved in people's lives in the past, the more serious our social problems have become. And finally, although this is true of liberals as well, conservatives believe in the concept of social capital: that "the good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit" (Hanifan, 1916, p. 130) will reduce social problems if used wisely. The tension between political philosophies is often the underlying reason why we respond to or neglect social problems. This tension can be seen in the grass-roots organizations that often develop in the United States, such as the Tea Party movement and the radical groups of the 1960s, that seek to correct political problems through direct and sometimes aggressive social action.

In addition to liberalism and conservatism, there are four major political philosophies that affect the way we approach social problems in America. *Libertarianism* believes in maximum personal liberty and a small and well-defined role for government, and opposes most social legislation aimed at providing social justice and equity. The following position on a minimum wage might help you understand the position libertarians take on many social programs:

Skilled, experienced workers make high wages because employers compete to hire them. Poorly educated, inexperienced young people can't get work because minimum wage laws make them too expensive to hire as trainees. Repeal of the minimum wage would allow many young, minority and poor people to work. It must be asked, if the minimum wage is such a good idea, why not raise it to $200 an hour? Even the most die-hard minimum wage advocate can see there's something wrong with that proposal. The only "fair" or "correct" wage is what an employer and employee voluntarily agree upon. We should repeal minimum wage now. (Advocates for Self-Government, n.d., para. 1)

As we know from the financial meltdown of 2008, this position on noninterference by government can sound very distant from the reality of life when unemployment and little income force people who otherwise might take a "hands-off" position on the role of government to ask for substantial help.

Socialism is the exact opposite of libertarianism because it values the positive rights of citizens including the rights to health care, food, shelter, work, and so forth. Under socialism the economy is run for the good of society as a whole where resources are divided equally among the society and there is neither great wealth nor great poverty. *Communitarianism* values tradition; ethnic, regional, or national identity; and the common culture that comes from religion or shared moral values. It emphasizes the importance of belonging to a certain community and sharing in its traditions, values, and culture. Communitarians believe that libertarians and liberals overemphasize the importance of the individual. *Radicalism* believes that government and the private for-profit sectors often exclude many less affluent citizens from justice and equity and that the primary tool available to have social and economic rights maintained is to form strong alliances based on self-interest and to use social action including marches, strikes, and civil disobedience to maintain social equity. Radicalism is a much more assertive philosophy and believes that unless people aggressively protect their self-interest, they will lose social, political, and economic strength. Mahoney (2003) believes that the following four conditions must exist before an issue or a situation is considered a social problem:

- *The condition or situation must be publicly seen as a social problem because of a public outcry.* The conditions in New Orleans after the dikes broke and the city was flooded following Hurricane Katrina began a public outcry that focused on the slow response to the crisis by government, concerns about people in poverty who were left in the city to fend for themselves, concerns about the lack of law and order during the crisis, and, certainly, concerns about racism and a belief that the federal government had acted slowly because most of the people remaining in New Orleans after the flood were poor and Black.

- *The condition must be at odds with the values of the larger society.* Although people have varying degrees of concern about the poor, there was universal anger and grief at what happened to poor people in New Orleans and a growing recognition that government was potentially incapable of helping most Americans if they found themselves in a similar crisis.

- *Most people must be in agreement that a problem exists.* During a 10-year period from 1983 to 1993, America saw astronomical increases in juvenile crime. People were aware and concerned at the same time because their personal safety was at issue.

- *There must be a solution to a social problem.* In the case of New Orleans and future disasters, most people must believe that government is capable of handling large-scale disasters, whether man-made or terrorist. If people don't believe this, they fall into apathy; and while the problem may still exist, they don't believe anything can be done about it.

Mahoney also notes that the more influential people are who might be affected by a social problem, the more likely there is to be recognition of the problem and a proper response. The mass media also play a role in the recognition of social problems because they highlight problems in such a graphic way that many people are touched by it. How many people believed John Edwards (before his unfortunate behavior and fall from grace) when he spoke of two Americas during the 2004 presidential campaign? But people whose houses lost much, if not all, of their value in the current real estate collapse and who have had their houses foreclosed on because they can no longer make their mortgage payments are far more aware of the problems of poverty now than they were when their houses were dramatically increasing in value. The media have made a point of telling us how at risk we are and how much we potentially have in common with those in poverty. In the aftermath of Katrina, pictures of people struggling to survive during the New Orleans flood had a devastating impact on the perceptions people had about poverty. The media were responsible for informing us that, as much as we might like to think that poverty is nonexistent in America, it does exist, and its negative impact is substantial. But the media are not always unbiased or objective in the way they report the news. During the New Orleans floods, for example, some networks focused on crime and violence whereas others focused on the plight of poor people and the slow and befuddled response by the government. There are many people who believe that the media reflect a liberal bias, and there are also many who think that the media are controlled by their corporate owners who, some think, skew the news to reflect a more conservative orientation. InfoTable 1.2 gives two views of media bias.

InfoTable 1.2   Media Bias: Two Views

A Liberal View of the Media

Each year it is more likely that the American citizen who turns to any medium . . . will receive [80% of his or her] information, ideas, or entertainment controlled by the same handful of 5 corporations, whether it is daily news, a cable entertainment program, or a textbook. . . . One of the dangers in all this is that the new corporate ethic is so single-minded about extreme fast profits and expanded control over the media business that it is willing to convert American news into a service for the affluent customers wanted by the media's advertisers instead of a source of information significant for the whole of society. The rewards of money profit through market control by themselves and their advertisers have blinded media owners to the damage they are doing to an institution central to the American democracy. (Bagdikian, 2005, para. 1)

A Conservative View of the Media

Conservatives believe the mass media, predominantly television news programs, slant reports in favor of the liberal position on issues. Members of the media argue [that] while personally liberal, they are professionally neutral. They argue their opinions do not matter because as professional journalists, they report what they observe without letting their opinions affect their judgment. But being a journalist is not like being a surveillance camera at an ATM, faithfully recording every scene for future playback. Journalists make subjective decisions every minute of their professional lives. They choose what to cover and what not to cover, which sources are credible and which are not, which quotes to use in a story and which to toss out.

Liberal bias in the news media is a reality. It is not the result of a vast left-wing conspiracy; journalists do not meet secretly to plot how to slant their news reports. But everyday pack journalism often creates an unconscious "groupthink" mentality that taints news coverage and allows only one side of a debate to receive a fair hearing. When that happens, the truth suffers. (Media Research Center, n.d.)

MY POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

What is my political philosophy? I like some liberal philosophies, yet I also like some conservative philosophies. Does this make me wishy-washy or, in political terms, a flip-flopper? Maybe it does, but most Americans are politically moderate, and our beliefs don't neatly fit most labels. I grew up in a blue-collar, working-class family. My father was involved in the labor movement. I agree with Andy Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union, that "the idea that the rich get richer and wealth is going to trickle down is a bankrupt economic and moral theory" ("Ten Questions," 2005, p. 6). Perhaps because of my early life experiences with the fight for fair wages and benefits for working people, I believe in many government programs that protect working people. Like what? Well, I believe in unemployment compensation for workers who have lost their jobs because of a poor economy. I believe in workmen's compensation to protect workers who are injured on the job. I believe in Social Security and Medicare because they provide a safety net for older Americans who would like to spend their later years enjoying the fruits of their hard labor. And I believe in public education, which means that all Americans, regardless of age, race, or gender, should have the opportunity to learn and benefit from a free, or reasonably inexpensive, but very high-quality educational system. Coming from a poor family, the quality of education I received helped me succeed in my life and was paid back many times in the work I've done, in the taxes I've paid, and in the mentoring I've done for a number of students who, like me, came from poor backgrounds and needed someone to cheerlead and offer a guiding hand.

On the other hand, I think that people who practice their religious beliefs or have a strong social consciousness that we sometimes call spirituality are often better off because of it (see InfoTable 1.3). I also think that capitalism is a great economic system but its more predatory

impulses need to be regulated and that people who are not competitive in our economic system because of physical or mental health reasons need to have alternative avenues of work. When they can't work, I think it's only humane that we help them by offering economic security.

InfoTable 1.3   Religion and Spirituality

According to George, Larson, Koenig, and McCullough (2000), a growing body of research points to the positive health benefits of religious involvement. Religious involvement was found to reduce the likelihood of disease and disability in 78% of the studies attempting to determine the existence of a relationship between religion and health. The positive health benefits of religion were particularly noted with certain medical conditions including coronary disease and heart attacks, emphysema, cirrhosis and other varieties of liver disease, hypertension, and disability. The authors also point to a relationship between religious observance and longevity, noting that "multiple dimensions of religion are associated with longevity, but attendance at religious services is the most strongly related to longevity" (p. 108).

I worry about what John Edwards called the "two Americas" during the 2004 presidential campaign: one America for the wealthy and privileged and the other America for the rest of us. This book will continually return to the concern about two Americas and the belief that government needs to be the advocate for the majority of us who want and deserve the same quality of health care, education, safety, and healthy environments as our more affluent fellow Americans.

This isn't to say that I'm not critical of our social institutions. I'm afraid that we have a long way to go before we can feel very happy about our ability to resolve many social problems. Money is often the issue. Even though we spend more money on health care than any other nation, the health of many Americans is not nearly as good as that of citizens in many other countries. Part of the reason is that more than half of all Americans live in or near communities with substandard air quality, which dramatically increases the rates of asthma, emphysema, and lung cancer, particularly in very young children. Another reason is that many Americans either completely lack health insurance or have limited coverage. This problem is thankfully addressed in part by the new health care reform bill passed in 2010. Much more will be said in Chapter 14 about how the bill will improve health care coverage for almost all Americans. While we spend vast amounts of money on public safety, I'd venture a guess that most of us would not feel safe in many parts of urban America during the evenings and even in many parts of some communities during daylight hours. While we discuss family violence and child abuse and develop public education approaches to inform our citizens about the impact of family violence, it remains a serious problem affecting all too many American homes. Much as I love America in a way that only the child of immigrant parents can, I think we have a long way to go before America works as well as it should.

WHAT IS SOCIAL WORK?

This is where social workers come in. Social work has a long and glorious history, much of which is outlined on Professor Dan Huff's website (see Chapter 2). Professor Huff describes the early history of social work and explains our roots in charitable organizations that flourished in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries. Out of this impulse to help people in need, the profession of social work developed with its unique emphasis on directly helping people as well as improving their environments. Social work deals not only with the internal aspects of the human condition (values, beliefs, emotions, and problem-solving capacities of people) but also with its external aspects (the neighborhoods, schools, working conditions, social welfare systems, and political systems that affect us). By working with the internal and external aspects, social work is able to provide a uniquely encompassing service to people in need. And by networking with other professionals, social workers are able to help our clients receive needed medical, financial, and educational services that improve their physical, financial, and emotional lives. Because social workers act as advocates by helping our clients access services they may be unable to access by themselves, we empower our clients. Our goal is to help people become self-sufficient by only doing for people what they may be unable to do for themselves.

We work in the organizations that help people with social and emotional problems. I think we're pretty terrific people because we work at demanding jobs with great conviction and dedication, and although we're paid well, nobody gets rich being a social worker. Like most Americans, social workers represent a range of political and religious beliefs. We come from different social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. We have differences of opinion about how best to help people, and we can be as stubborn as any group of professionals in our beliefs. However, our core values have developed over the years and are apparent in all the work we do to help our clients. The complete social work code of ethics is found in the appendix. These core values have been developed over the years by social workers through their experience and practice and are now part of the code of ethics of our professional organization, the National Association of Social Workers (2010b).

CORE SOCIAL WORK VALUES

The following broad ethical principles are based on social work's core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. These principles set forth ideals to which all social workers should aspire.

I. Service

Ethical Principle: A social worker's primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.

Social workers elevate service to others above self-interest. Social workers draw on their knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need and to address social problems. Social workers are encouraged to volunteer some portion of their professional skills with no expectation of significant financial return (pro bono service).

II. Social Justice

Ethical Principle: Social workers challenge social injustice.

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

III. The Dignity and Worth of the Person

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

Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers promote clients' socially responsible self-determination. Social workers seek to enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs. Social workers are cognizant of their dual responsibility to clients and to the broader society. They seek to resolve conflicts between clients' interests and the broader society's interests in a socially responsible manner consistent with the values, ethical principles, and ethical standards of the profession.

IV. The Importance of Human Relationships

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

Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.

V. Integrity

Ethical Principle: Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.

Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them. Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

VI. Competence

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

Social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

A DISSENTING VIEW

Now that you've read this brief description of the ethics of the social work profession, noted columnist George Will (2007) took schools of social work to task by writing that social work education forces students to accept a liberal ideology that "mandates an ideological orthodoxy to which students must subscribe concerning 'social justice' and 'oppression'" (p. 7). He also writes that promoting "social and economic justice" by social work education is thought to be especially imperative as a response to "the conservative trends of the past three decades" (p. 7).

Will gives as an example of the invasive use of liberal ideology a student in a school of social work who was enrolled in a class taught by a liberal professor who believed that social work is a liberal profession. The professor gave a mandatory assignment for his class to "advocate for homosexual foster homes and adoption, with all students required to sign an advocacy letter, on university stationery, to the state Legislature" (p. 4). When the student objected on religious grounds, she was given the most serious violation of professional standards by the school. After a two-and-a-half-hour hearing, she still refused to sign the letter and later sued the university where the charges against her were dropped and the university was forced to make financial restitution.

Will concluded by writing, "Because there might as well be signs on the doors of many schools of social work proclaiming 'conservatives need not apply,' two questions arise: Why are such schools of indoctrination permitted in institutions of higher education? And why are people of all political persuasions taxed to finance this propaganda?" (p. 4).

Thyer (2005, para. 19), a conservative social work educator and former dean of a school of social work, adds to Will's concerns when he writes,

Conservative social workers labor as strangers in a strange land. The words of one social worker writing in the April 2003 issue of the *NASW NEWS,* the flagship newsletter of the largest professional social work association, are seemingly representative of the views of the majority of social workers: "If you accept that social workers have an obligation to advance social justice and that political engagement is a means to accomplish that end, then you have to accept that we will reject conservative thought and conservative politicians" (Newdom, 2003, p. 3). This is unfortunate as conservative thought, practitioners and politicians have contributed much to genuinely progressive social welfare policies and programs in the United States, and will continue to do so.

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In response to Will's editorial, Abramovitz and Lazzari (2008, para. 2) wrote,

Recently the social work profession has come under attack for its dedication to advocacy and social justice. George Will (2007, October 14) repeated the charge in a *Washington Post* column in which he stated that social work education programs at 10 major public universities "mandate an ideological orthodoxy to which students must subscribe concerning 'social justice and oppression.'" Indeed, social work students are expected to study forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and to work toward positive social change to best meet the needs of all people. Fortunately the profession stood its ground. In an email to the CSWE membership executive director Julia Watkins (2007, October 16) publicly declared that "the profession . . . has a long and time-honored practice tradition of advocacy for social justice as well as a commitment to participation and inclusion in the structures of democratic society." Elizabeth Clark (2007, July), the executive director of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), wrote that "NASW proudly embraces and supports the guiding value of social justice in social work education and practice." In a letter sent to *The New York Times*, NASW President Elvira Craig de Silva stated that "social work requires its members to advocate for individual clients and for systemic reform that improves communities" (de Silva as cited in Clark, 2007). In response to these attacks, leaders of major social work organizations modeled courage, commitment and advocacy on behalf of the profession.

Questions

1. Do you think students should be forced to accept ideologies that are contrary to their personal beliefs? In my classes, many students are opposed to gay marriage but aren't forced to change their minds. Should they be? Can they work with all clients if they retain strong prejudices or negative attitudes toward specific groups of people?

2. The investment firms that went bankrupt in 2008 suffered from a lack of ethical practices. Do you think teaching ethics in business schools might have stopped some of the more egregious violations of ethics on Wall Street? Shouldn't all professions have a code of conduct for their members and enforce it?

3. In my classes, students who cheat, plagiarize, seem to dislike people, or don't take social work seriously are in big trouble. Should I be less hard-hearted and more lenient on the assumption that ethical behavior doesn't matter and what happens in class will never happen once a student works in a social work agency?

WHAT SOCIAL WORKERS DO

The U.S. Department of Labor (2004b) defines the functions of social workers as follows:

> Social work is a profession for those with a strong desire to help improve people's lives. Social workers help people function the best way they can in their environment, deal with their relationships, and solve personal and family problems. Social workers often see clients who face a life-threatening disease or a social problem. These problems may include inadequate housing, unemployment, serious illness, disability, or substance abuse. Social workers also assist families that have serious domestic conflicts, including those involving child or spousal abuse.

Although some social workers conduct research or are involved in planning or policy development, most social workers prefer an area of practice in which they interact directly with clients. Child, family, and school social workers provide social work intervention to help improve the social and psychological functioning of children and their families, and to maximize family well-being and the academic functioning of children. Some social workers assist single parents, arrange adoptions, and help find foster homes for neglected, abandoned, or abused children. In schools, social workers address such problems as teenage pregnancy, misbehavior, and truancy. They also advise teachers on how to cope with problem students. Some social workers may specialize in services for older adults. They run support groups for family caregivers or for the adult children of aging parents. Some advise elderly people or family members about choices in areas such as housing, transportation, and long-term care; they also coordinate and monitor services. Through employee-assistance programs, they may help workers cope with job-related pressures or with personal problems that affect the quality of their work. Child, family, and school social workers typically work in family service agencies, schools, or state or local governments. These social workers may be known as child welfare social workers, family services social workers, child protective services social workers, occupational social workers, or geriatric social workers.

Medical and public health social workers provide individuals, families, or vulnerable populations with the social and emotional support needed to cope with chronic, acute, or terminal illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease, cancer, or AIDS. They also advise family caregivers, counsel patients, and help plan for patients' needs after discharge by arranging services in the home—from meals-on-wheels, to public health nurses, to homemakers, to oxygen equipment. Some work on interdisciplinary teams that evaluate certain kinds of patients (e.g., geriatric or organ transplant patients). Medical and public health social workers may work for hospitals, nursing and personal care facilities, individual and family services agencies, or local governments.

Mental health and substance abuse social workers assess and treat individuals with mental illness or substance abuse problems, including abuse of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. Such services include individual and group therapy, outreach, crisis intervention, social rehabilitation, and training in skills of everyday living. They may also help plan for supportive services to ease a patient's return to the community. Mental health and substance abuse social

Los Angeles Police Department gang unit officers arrest two known Crazy Rider gang members (center) and question a young woman associating with them on August 5, 2006 in the Rampart District of Los Angeles, California.
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workers are likely to work in hospitals, substance abuse treatment centers, individual and family services agencies, or local governments. These social workers may be known as clinical social workers.

Other types of social workers include social work planners and policymakers who develop programs to address such issues as child abuse, homelessness, substance abuse, poverty, and violence. These workers research and analyze policies, programs, and regulations. They identify social problems and suggest legislative and other solutions. They may help raise funds or write grants to support these programs. Many social workers are community organizers who help communities tackle problems of crime, poverty, unemployment, schools, and transportation. President Barack Obama was a community organizer, and the things he did in his community are exactly the same things social workers who work with their communities do. Watching his style of managing the country, it's clear that he has taken to heart many of the principles social workers stand for in their work with individuals, groups, families, organizations, and communities.

Three terms are important to understand because they represent the systems with which we work in social work: micro-, mezzo-, and macropractice. *Micropractice* typically focuses on help to individuals. *Mezzopractice* refers to work with families and small groups, and *macropractice* refers to work with an organization, a neighborhood, a community, an institution, a movement, or even an entire society. Some authors use the term *micropractice* to describe practice with individuals, families, and small groups. Just know that social work provides a

holistic service, and the size and focus of the service depends on the nature of the problem, who is experiencing the problem, and the best way to resolve it.

An adolescent experiencing depression might be seen individually by a social worker yet benefit greatly from work with the family and perhaps even becoming part of a group focusing on adolescent depression. It's possible that an unusually large number of adolescents in a community suffer from depression. Might the problem be caused by a lack of suitable recreation facilities, high crime rates, or communitywide problems with drugs and alcohol? It might then be a good idea for the social worker to also work with community leaders to create communitywide change. Are there institutions such as the school system that aren't working well that have limited ability to resolve serious problems such as bullying, sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and other problems that lead to depression and might suggest social work intervention to help our depressed client and many others suffering from depression? In social work we work with systems, and as those systems pertain to our clients, improving their social functioning, we may interact with a number of systems. *Social functioning* is the ability of a client to successfully work, do well in school, function as a parent or spouse, and be a contributing and productive part of the community.

I want to emphasize the need to understand the word *social* in social work. Perhaps unlike other helping professions, not only does social work see its function as helping people become healthy, happy, and successful members of the community, but social workers also want the communities and the larger society we live in to be healthy, humane, and productive. In this sense we have a dual focus: to help our clients while making the society better. We think this combination makes us an invigorating and successful profession with large, idealistic, and compelling goals. If the idea of directly helping people and the structures, politics, and institutions of our communities work better sounds good to you, then you've definitely found a place in social work practice.

This unique idea of working with *social systems* might help you better understand the goals and objectives of social work. A *social system* refers to people, institutions, and the larger society as each interacts with the other. That interaction suggests patterns of behaviors, norms, and values that help create our collective sense of how each should relate to the other. In social work we often work with systems that are functioning badly. It's our job to help align systems so they work well. In doing so everyone should gain. The trick is to define the system that needs intervention and to use interventions with proven ability to help. In our discussion above of the depressed adolescent it's entirely possible that the depression has its origins in badly functioning family life. Before we know that for certain, however, we need to consider other social systems and evaluate their impact. It's possible that many systems collude in creating the depression. We may be unable to work with all of them, and we then must determine which are most instrumental in creating the problem and which interventions will have the most probable impact. Think of this as you would a doctor trying to treat an illness. It's not enough just to treat the illness if there is an environmental cause such as pollution. The drugs we use to treat the illness won't cure the illness because the underlying cause is pollution. Without the doctor trying to reduce pollution in the community, not only will the problem be unresolved, but many more people will suffer. Similarly social work believes that when we help to change

badly functioning social systems, not only do we help our current clients, but we may even prevent similar problems from happening to others in the future.

THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS

In the following chapters, I will discuss a number of social problems facing the United States. Many social problems, such as youth violence, child abuse, domestic violence, poverty, and racism, are of such a serious nature that they affect the way all Americans live. Social work organizations and social workers are on the front line in dealing with serious social problems. To show you what we do, most chapters will contain an actual case study demonstrating what social workers do in practice. To help you develop a sense of what you would do if you were a social worker, many chapters have a section that offers a short case vignette and then asks what you would do if you were the social worker. The websites you will find listed at the end of each chapter contain information that will add to your knowledge base. Some websites provide government reports, some provide articles written by authors for journals, and some provide historical overviews of the development of social programs.

I've tried, where possible, to give you many sides of each issue; but when it comes right down to it, I believe in helping people, and the side I've chosen is the side that seems humane, positive, and morally right. I believe that helping people always has a large payoff for society. It's what defines us as a caring nation. I also believe that whenever possible political correctness (see InfoTable 1.4) should never affect the way we approach serious social problems.

If, after reading this book, you absolutely want to be a social worker, I'll be very happy for you and feel that I've written this book for the best possible reasons. If you think that helping people is a wonderful thing but that you'd do better as a volunteer, I'll also be very happy. And even if I simply move your attitudes and opinions a bit, that's equally wonderful because having an open mind about social problems and the people who experience them the most is all anyone who writes can hope for. So give the book a chance, think about the issues, talk to your friends and classmates about the problems discussed, and have a very good year! Social work is a terrific field, and I hope you think about making it your life career.

InfoTable 1.4	Political Correctness

There is a sad need to conform to ideas in America today and political correctness sometimes determines what can and what cannot be studied. Issues of race, ethnicity, gender and social class that should be very important to social scientists are often felt to be too risky, too likely to offend someone. I hope that you don't fall into the trap of political correctness and that the star you choose to shoot for is a star that may not blink as brightly for others. Dissent is the mother's milk of a democracy, and dissent born of rational analysis and objectivity is the most sublime form of dissent.

SOURCE: Glicken (2003, p. 261).

SUMMARY

This chapter explains the content of the book and provides an introductory discussion of the importance of one's own political philosophy in viewing social problems and their solution. The chapter also discusses the three types of social work practice—micro, mezzo, and macro—and the importance of working with social systems. The social work code of conduct was also discussed, as were criticisms of the code by conservative commentators. Future chapters will discuss social problems in more detail, and the role of social service and helping organizations will be discussed, as will the function of social work within those organizations.

QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE YOUR FRAME OF REFERENCE

Many people believe that America is a divided nation and that this sharp division can be defined by political ideologies. Perhaps half the people are conservative and believe that government should have a limited role in people's lives. Many conservatives also believe that government should permit more religious observance in public settings, including schools, and that prayer in school should be permissible just as gay marriages should not. The other half have a more liberal ideology and believe that there is a significant role for government in people's lives: the role of protecting and offering succor and relief when help is needed. These people point to the failure of government to function well and its consequences in the economic meltdown of 2008 and after Hurricane Katrina as examples of what happens when government becomes weakened. You are about to embark on a voyage into the world of social problems and the helping profession of social work. Given your current beliefs, please answer the following questions about your ideological preferences.

1. Do you believe not only that prayer in school should be permissible but also that it has a positive impact on children? A corollary might be whether you find it objectionable to mention "God" in the Pledge of Allegiance or whether you believe it begins a child's day with a strong sense of moral grounding.

2. Do you believe that most poor people are responsible for their situation and that if they worked harder or had more motivation, they'd be fine? Or is it more likely that most poor people are poor because they lack good education, healthy homes, and a safe environment?

3. Do you believe that those who have the most income should pay the most taxes, or does it reduce incentive to work hard and have much of your income go to pay taxes?

4. Do you believe that most helping functions should be done by family, religious organizations, and other private charitable organizations, or do you believe that when people need help, it's good to have government there to provide it?

5. Good citizens, whether they are liberal or conservative, take their vote seriously and vote in elections. Will you vote in the next election if eligible? If not, why not?

6. Social workers believe that all people should be treated with dignity. We have imprisoned many terrorists, some of whom have done awful things. Do you believe that they should be treated with dignity?

7. Conservatives believe that in a country with high crime, high drug rates, and dangerous sexual practices that sometimes lead to rape and unwanted pregnancy and then an astonishing number of abortions, that what we need is a moral rebirth through more religious involvement. What do you think?

8. Liberals believe that poverty is increasing and that people often live lives of quiet desperation because we've become such an uncaring society. What's your position?

9. As you face your future, what excites you most: the amount of money you will make and accumulate or the value of the work you do for yourself and others?

10. What would you do, if you had the power, to help us become less divided and contentious as a nation?

PODCASTS

Liberalism and the Democratic Party: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4946028

The Tea Party: A Modern Movement: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126390876

What Is Communitarianism? http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1118012

KEY WORDS FOR CHAPTER 2

American Charity Organization

Barack Obama

Bill Clinton

Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)

Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW)

Dorothea Dix

English Poor Laws

Franklin Roosevelt

George W. Bush

Great Society

Hull House

Jane Addams

National Association of Social Workers (NASW)

National Organization for Women (NOW)

Neighborhood Guild

New Deal

Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO)

Veterans Administration (VA)

War on Poverty

Workhouses

Works Progress Administration (WPA)