INTERPERSONAL PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK

Nature and Scope

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost, that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

—Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the student to interpersonal practice and to relate the content of this book to the purposes, domains, and definitions of social work practice. This analysis is necessary because social work now encompasses a vast array of activities in countless settings. The size alone of the social work enterprise creates many controversies as to what social workers should know and what they should seek to accomplish.

We begin this chapter with two different case examples—one from literature and one from interpersonal practice. These two case examples will be used to introduce the major themes that are played out in the following 17 chapters of this book. Hopefully this way of beginning the book will demonstrate our commitment to provide many living examples of how interpersonal practice works.

"The Bent Backs of Chang 'Dong"

. . . She had been in Chang 'Dong only two weeks when she asked an unanswerable question.

She was working in her kitchen with two of her Sarkanese neighbors, trying to make a small guava which grew in the jungle into jam . . . "Why is it that all the old people of Chang 'Dong are bent over?" "Every older person I have seen is bent over and walks as if his back is hurting." The two older neighbor women shrugged. "It is just that old people become bent," one of them answered. "That's the natural thing that happens to older people."

Three weeks after the monsoon ended, the older people in the village began to sweep out their homes, the paths leading from their houses to the road, and finally the road itself. This sweeping was inevitably done by older people. They used a broom made of palm fronds. It had a short handle, maybe two feet long, and naturally they bent over as they swept.

One day, as Emma was watching the wrinkled and stooped woman from the next house sweep the road, things fell into place. She went out to talk to the woman.

"Grandmother, I know why your back is twisted forward," she said. "It's because you do so much sweeping bent over that short broom. Sweeping in that position several hours a day gradually moulds you into a bent position. When people become old their muscles and bones are not as flexible as when they were young."

"Wife of the engineer, I do not think it is so," the old lady answered softly. "The old people of Southern Sarkhan have always had bent backs."

"Yes, and I'll bet that they all got them from sweeping several hours a day with a short-handled broom," Emma said. "Why don't you put a long handle on the broom and see how it works?" . . .

"Brooms are not meant to have long handles," the old lady said matter-of-factly. "It has never been that way. I have never seen a broom with a long handle, and even if the wood were available, I do not think we would waste it on long handles for brooms. Wood is a very scarce thing in Chang 'Dong." . . .

It would have been simple, of course, to have imported wooden poles, but long ago Homer had taught her that only things that people did for themselves would really change their behavior. . . . She was driving the jeep down a steep mountain road about forty mile from Chang 'Dong. Suddenly she jammed on the brakes. Lining one side of the road for perhaps twenty feet was a reed very similar to the short reed that grew in Chang 'Dong—except that this reed had a strong stalk that rose five feet into the air before it thinned out.

"Homer," she ordered her husband, "climb out and dig me up a half-dozen of those reeds. But don't disturb the roots."

When she got back to Chang 'Dong, she planted the reeds beside her house and tended them carefully. Then, one day, when several of her neighbors were in her house she casually cut a tall reed, bound the usual coconut fronds to it, and began to sweep. The women were aware that something was unusual, but for several minutes they could not figure out what was wrong. Then one of the women spoke. "She sweeps with her back straight," the woman said in surprise. "I have never seen such a thing."

Emma did not say a word. She continued to sweep right past them, out on the front porch, and then down the walk. The dust and debris flew in clouds; and everyone watching was aware of the greater efficiency of being able to sweep while standing up.

Emma, having finished her sweeping, returned to her house and began to prepare tea for her guests. She did not speak to them about the broom, but when they left, it was on the front porch, and all of her guests eyed it carefully as they departed.

The next day when Emma swept off her porch, there were three old grandmothers who watched from a distance. When she was finished Emma leaned her long-handled broom against the clump of reeds which she had brought down from the hills. The lesson was clear.

The next day, perhaps ten older people, including a number of men, watched Emma as she swept. This time when she was finished, an old man, his back bent so that he scurried with a crab-like motion, came over to Emma.

"Wife of the engineer, I would like to know where I might get a broom handle like the one you have," the man said. "I am not sure that our short-handled brooms have bent our backs like this but I am sure that your way of sweeping is a more powerful way."

Emma told him to help himself to one of the reeds growing beside the house. The old man hesitated. "I will take one and thank you; but if I take one, others may also ask, and soon your reeds will be gone."

"It is nothing to worry about, old man," Emma said. "There are many such reeds in the hills. I found these by the stream in Nangsha. Your people could walk up there and bring back as many as the village could use in a year on the back of a water buffalo." The old man did not cut one of Emma's reeds. Instead he turned and hurried back to the group of older people. They talked rapidly, and several hours later Emma saw them heading for the hills with a water buffalo in front of them.

. . . It was not until four years later, when Emma was back in Pittsburgh, that she learned the final results of her broom handle project. One day she got a letter in a large, handsome yellow-bamboo paper envelope. Inside, written in an exquisite script, was a letter from the headman of Chang 'Dong.

Wife of the engineer:

I am writing you to thank you for the thing that you did for the old people of Chang 'Dong. For many centuries, longer than any man can remembers, we have always had old people with bent backs in this village. And in every village that we know of the old people have always had bent backs.

We had always thought this was a part of growing old, and it was one of the reasons that we dreaded old age. But, wife of the engineer, you have changed all of that. By the lucky accident of your long-handled broom you showed us a new way to sweep. It is a small thing, but it has changed the lives of our old people. For four years, ever since you have left, we have been using the long reeds for broom handles. You will be happy to know that today there are few bent backs in the village of Chang 'Dong. Today the backs of our old people are straight and firm. No longer are their bodies painful during the months of the monsoon.

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This is a small thing, I know, but for our people it is an important thing.

I know you are not of our religion, wife of the engineer, but perhaps you will be pleased to know that on the outskirts of the village we have constructed a small shrine in your memory. It is a simple affair; at the foot of the altar are these words: "In memory of the woman who unbent the backs of our people." And in front of the shrine there is a stack of the old short reeds which we used to use.

Again, wife of the engineer, we thank you and we think of you.

Source: Excerpt from William J. Lederer & Eugene Burdick. (1958). *The Ugly American*. Fawcett Publications, Greenwich, CT, pp. 196–201.

At this point in the chapter, we want the reader to think about the themes and patterns that appear in this case example. Here are some of the themes that we discern in this example, and you may have discovered others when you were reading this case example:

- Barriers may exist between people who come from very different life experiences, such as culture, religion, age, and economic class. This theme is played out in chapters on diversity, relationships, assessment of individuals, families, and groups.
- Even though people may not want to change, it may still be possible to help people make significant changes in their lives. This theme is presented in the chapters on clienthood; relationships; and the individual, family, and group change chapters.
- How do we engage vulnerable populations in ways that empower them to become active agents in the change process? The theme of empowerment of vulnerable clients is imbedded in the chapter on values, diversity, relationship, group change, and organizational and community change.
- How do we know that our efforts to help have been successful? The chapters on evaluation and monitoring, the group change chapter, and the termination chapter concern ways that interpersonal practitioners can understand the impact of their services.
- How much of helping depends on creativity, resourcefulness, and "working with what you have"? Though social work is in the age of evidence-based practice, there is a large measure of "art" in what interpersonal practitioners do to engage and help our clients to change. Examples of the "art" of practice can be found in the four change chapters (i.e., individual change, family change, group change, and organizational and community change).

- "Vicarious learning" (i.e., learning by watching others who are models) can be a powerful way that people can change. Vicarious learning is discussed in the chapter on group assessment.

The next case comes from author Barbara H. Seabury's (BHS) practice in a nonprofit agency in which she was employed as a social worker. Read the case example and look for themes and practice activities that you recognize in this case. This example is based on a real case situation, but it has been carefully disguised in order to protect the confidentiality of the clients.

The Mother's Group

Family and Children's Aid (FCA) is a nonprofit agency that is funded by United Way and, in part, by several contracts to provide services to clients of the state's Department of Human Services (DHS). One of the contracts that FCA accepted with DHS was to develop and lead a parenting group. The parents' children had been removed from their care and put in foster care homes because the parents had been found either abusive or neglectful. As a social worker from FCA, I (BHS) was asked to meet with a group of eight mothers who had been identified by DHS as lacking parenting skills. The goal to teach members parenting skills had been set by my agency and DHS. All of the mothers in the group were ordered by the Family Court to attend the group as one of the requirements they had to meet in order to regain custody of their children. The mothers could choose not to attend the group, but if they made that choice, they would seriously jeopardize their chances of regaining custody of their children. In effect, they had no choice. They had to comply and attend the group. I was required to report their attendance and participation to DHS.

All eight women came to the first group session. I began the group by introducing myself. I introduced myself as a social worker from FCA and explained that most of my practice was working with children and their families. I informed them that I had a graduate degree in social work and was a married mother with three children. What I didn't specifically tell them was that I lived in a nice house in a nice neighborhood and my children were all living with me and my husband, who was a supportive father. (Note: I recognized that I was older than most of the women and younger than two of them. I was different from these women in many ways, and I imagine they figured that out on their own.) I stated that raising children was a difficult and stressful job even under good circumstances. I expressed my understanding of the purpose of the group, which was to improve their parenting skills.

I asked the women to explain the circumstances that brought them into the group. Seven of the eight women shared the following information: (One of the women, who was the youngest member of the group, was silent, which was a pattern that she maintained in most of the sessions of the group.) The women shared that they had been sent to the group by a foster care

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worker who had been assigned by DHS. The women had been through Family Court, where they had been told—not always in the nicest fashion—that they were neglectful or abusive parents. The judge had ordered them to get evaluated and treated by mental health professionals and to find better housing or clean up their existing living arrangement. They had been assigned court appointed attorneys. (Note: My experience with court appointed attorneys was that for the most part they took little interest in these clients.)

It was apparent to me that all of the women were poor. The highest level of education in the group was high school. All of the women had been getting financial aid from DHS before their children were removed. Now that the children were not in their care, their income was taken away, and they had very little money and were having to do whatever they could to maintain housing for themselves. Seven of the women were Caucasian and one was African American. All of the women were socially isolated single mothers. It also seemed to me that the women were angry, sad, and distrustful of authority and men. They described the men in their lives as unreliable, abusive, and transient. (I knew they probably didn't trust me either since I was part of that authority system.) They agreed to attend the group because they had to do that. The group was to meet weekly for 10 weeks. A meeting time for the group was arrived at for the next session.

As the group was leaving the room, one of the mothers stepped up to me and handed me a small rumpled piece of paper with several numbered items on it. I looked more carefully at the piece of paper. The writing reflected the mother's lack of education. But as I read what was written on the note I could tell that it was important to the author. I was impressed by her courage and strength. The small list represented a request for a different agenda for the group. The list included these requests: (1) for a lawyer to come to explain the legal process they all were required to go through in order to regain custody their children; (2) for a psychologist to come to talk about the psychological evaluations they had all been required to obtain; (3) for a legal expert to come and explain the mother's rights in the situation; and (4) for a foster care worker who was not one of theirs to talk about the responsibilities of a foster care worker in the court process. I told the woman that I would read over her list and talk about it next time with the entire group if that was OK with her.

All eight mothers came to the next session. I began the meeting by talking about the list that one member had presented to me at the end of the first session. The group was very interested in the list as I talked about it. They spoke more freely about not understanding what was happening to them in the court process. They didn't understand how the police could enter their house and remove their children without a search warrant or any warning. They didn't understand why they had been told by the authorities that they were neglectful or abusive. They missed their children and wanted them back. It was clear to me that as a group they were not ready for parenting techniques. They were trying to recover from the trauma and insult they felt as a result of the removal of their children. They really didn't understand what was happening to them or what they could do about any of it. My thought was that they needed to be

understood and empowered. They needed to be given some of the advantages that a more middle-class, educated mother might have in the same situation. I agreed to work out a group agenda that was in line with their questions instead of the one I had originally presented in the first session. After the second meeting, I called DHS and told them what I thought was needed before parenting classes. DHS agreed on the new agenda but still wanted parenting classes later. DHS gave me latitude and called the group a support group. I had to report attendance but was not required to divulge what members said in the group.

The group continued to meet on a regular basis. I contacted professionals who agreed to come talk to the group. The first presenter was an attorney from the local law school who had worked in the child protection field in a different county. I felt she could give a neutral presentation on the law and the usual procedure that the parents would endure. The group had many questions for the attorney. Their expectations were often unrealistic. The rules in place in child abuse are different than in criminal cases. The group was able to discuss their experiences and help each other be more prepared with their attorneys and in court. The next presenter was a psychologist who was able to explain psychological testing in general terms. I felt one of the benefits for the women was that they could have the process demystified, made more concrete so that they were less afraid of what was happening to them. The presentations by outside professionals were combined with handouts that would help the women better deal with their situation. We talked about ways the mothers could be more assertive and practiced techniques.

The mothers got to know each other and began to be supportive of each other. I offered to facilitate a holiday party for them and their children if the group thought they would like that. They were excited about a party with their children. I contacted DHS to get approval for a party and an agreement to transport the children to and from the party. The parents had limited visitation with their children, so they were happy to have another special occasion. As a group, we planned a simple menu. I arranged to take a picture of each mother and her child(ren), so they had something they could take home with them.

The group continued and evolved. One of the more quiet mothers explained that she felt she could be honest in the group and say what she wanted. Others had expressed their concern that their foster care workers had lied to them about their rights and the threats that had been made about terminating parental rights. The mothers were more open and verbal. Some of the younger mothers began to bring concerns that they had about their children's behavior. The older mothers began to share stories how they had handled similar problems with their children. They were willing to continue the group for another 10 weeks. The new focus for the group would be parenting skills.

Again, we want the reader to think about the themes and issues that appear in this case example. Here are some of the themes that we discern in this example, and you may have discovered others when you were reading this case example:

● Like the first case example, there were many differences between the interpersonal practitioner and the members of the group. In spite of the social class differences and single parenthood, the interpersonal practitioner was able to bridge these differences by "starting where the client is," changing the initial group purpose in response to one member's suggestions, and encouraging group members to make decisions about what kind of group they would have. These kinds of issues are discussed in the diversity chapter, the relationship chapter, and in the group change chapter.

● The mothers were required by court mandate to attend the group as a condition of getting their children back. They were not happy with this coercive use of authority and the inherent power in the role of the interpersonal practitioner as an instrument of the court and DHS. The interpersonal practitioner was able to diffuse this resentment by demonstrating empathy for the mothers and empowering them to discover what their rights are when children are removed for neglect and abuse. These issues are discussed in the diversity, relationship, and clienthood chapters.

● The removal of children from parents is a traumatic experience for both parents and children. The interpersonal practitioner empathizes with the mothers and does not blame them for their predicament. By planning a party in which children and mothers can be reunited (even for a brief time) and photographing the mothers and their children, the interpersonal practitioner is responding to their needs and the pain of separation from their children. These issues can be found in the chapters on relationship, trauma, individual assessment, and individual change.

● The mothers are all struggling with the effects of social isolation. By providing them with a support group in which they can develop interpersonal relationships with other women facing the same problem, the interpersonal practitioner is intervening in a significant way to help them cope with their social isolation. These issues are discussed in the chapters on social work values, group assessment, and group change.

● The mothers are all struggling with powerful, fairly punitive, social institutions (i.e., police, protective services, and courts) that have descended on them for "deviant" behavior. By bringing in experts to teach them what their rights are and how these social institutions operate, the interpersonal practitioner is empowering them to understand the forces that are swirling uncontrollably around them. These issues are covered in the clienthood chapter and the individual assessment and change chapters.

Social work is affected by political processes, and the practice of social work has political consequences. The political system affects social work in several ways: First, social work has a commitment to serve populations that themselves are centers of controversy, such as persons who are in poverty; who experience racism,

sexism, and homophobia; and who have been labeled deviant by society, such as the mentally ill, prison inmates, and perpetrators of physical and sexual violence. Second, the social welfare enterprise consumes a significant proportion of the resources of any country in the developed world. In the United States in fiscal year 1990, total welfare expenditures were estimated at 19% of the GDP, and in Canada and Western Europe, the expenditures for many welfare categories were larger than those in the United States (Bixby, 1995). More recent estimates in fiscal year 2005, which take into account both public and private expenditures, reflect an increase in total welfare expenditures driven by the rising costs in health care and health insurance (Hoefer, 2008).

DEFINITION OF SOCIAL WORK ●

How does social work define itself as a profession, and how does this definition relate to the functions of the profession? How do such definitions and functions manifest themselves in the various fields of social work practice, when these various agencies respond to different kinds of social problems? Because most social work practice takes place in social agencies, how does social agency sponsorship affect social work practice? These issues are the foci of the chapters on clienthood and organizational and community assessment and change.

A pervading theme of social work practice focuses on the interactions between individuals and their environments. The ultimate measure of the success of social work activity is the well-being of individuals within their environments. These environments range from the most immediate, such as friends and family; to larger entities, such as the workplace, neighborhoods, and the surrounding community; and finally to the largest systems, such as the state or the country.

In working to create optimal interactions between individuals and their environments, at times social workers will be helping individuals to change, at other times helping to make environmental change, and most often working to change the transactions between individuals and their environments. The decision to focus on individual change or environmental change or change involving both is based on the unique character of the case situation and is negotiated between the social worker and the individual concerned. Social work is "boundary" work (Hearn, 1993). Such a perspective requires social workers, however, to consider individuals and their environments as always in interaction and to apply measures consistent with this view.

INTERPERSONAL PRACTICE ●

Because this book is about interpersonal practice, it is important to locate this level of practice within all of social work practice. The primary focus of interpersonal

practitioners involves work with individuals and their immediate environments, such as their families, social relationships, and peer groups. On occasion, interpersonal practitioners will help people to seek changes in larger entities, such as schools, welfare departments, hospitals, workplaces, and neighborhood groups that affect them. Specific chapters in this book deal with individual assessment and change, family assessment and change, group assessment and change, and organizational and community assessment and change.

Besides interpersonal practice, there are other social work roles that can be found in social work practice. When the unit of attention is communities, the profession refers to these workers as *community organizers* or *community practitioners*. When the focal activity is the effective and successful management of social welfare agencies, the profession refers to these workers as *administrators*. When the focal activity is the creation and establishment of programs and services, the profession refers to these workers as *social planners*. This last segment of practice includes departments of government as well as special interest groups. *Research-oriented workers* and *policy analysts* are also trained to provide new knowledge about services and how to evaluate them.

Despite what we have said about the differences between interpersonal practice and other levels of practice, such as community organization and administration, these distinctions are not as clear as one might think. This is especially true with reference to the topic of social justice. We believe that social justice is most likely to be attained and maintained in a society in which individuals see themselves as drawing from as well as contributing to their communities.

This concept of social justice and community conditions should be carefully considered by interpersonal practitioners. It suggests that individuals, as they develop a sense of themselves in their societies, will become increasingly committed to creating communities that promote the common good (Hartman, 2006). Social justice represents the community's concern for the welfare of everyone in the community. When individuals develop this attitude and understanding, they will be strengthened in their sense of importance and power. They will be on a path of individual growth and development.

Because of our convictions about the relationships between individual and community well-being, we focus to a great extent in this book on the interpersonal practitioners' understanding of and work with the community. Our discussions of work with families and groups stress the role of the worker in helping families and groups work on their relationships with their communities.

● USE OF ECOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

We discuss in more detail in later chapters the theories and knowledge that social workers utilize. It is important to note here that many social workers have come to believe

that the historic mission of social work to enhance the transactions between individuals and their environments can best be fulfilled by using concepts from ecology. Ecology was originally a biological conception of the relationships between organisms and their environments and now has been broadened into one of humans and their social relations as well. Germain and Gitterman (1980), who have contributed to this development in social work, stated,

> The ecological perspective provides an adaptive, evolutionary view of human beings in constant interchange with all elements of their environment. Human beings change their physical and social environments and are changed by them through processes of continuous, reciprocal adaptation. When it goes well, reciprocal adaptation supports the growth and development of people and elaborates the life-supporting qualities of the environment. When reciprocal adaptation falters, however, physical and social environments may be polluted. (p. 5)

THE SCOPE OF PRACTICE ●

The major purpose of social work is to *prevent* or *resolve* problems in social functioning. Obviously, such problems result from how well people respond to their environment and how well the environment provides the resources and opportunities people require. When we define practice in this way, we require concepts and theories related to this definition. Role concepts, for example, are applied extensively in this book because they relate to how people act, as well as the expectations others hold for the role, the resources they provide for its enactment, the rewards, and punishments they offer the role performer (Biddle & Thomas, 1966).

Fields of Service

The emergence of fields of service is largely a result of how agency services developed in response to social needs or problems. Table 1.1 summarizes the major fields in which interpersonal practice in social work occurs.

In all these fields, the social work purpose is to improve social functioning—that is, to help people to interact in more functional ways with their situations and to change aspects of themselves and their situations that will enhance such interactions. For example, in a family agency, an interpersonal practitioner may help family members communicate their expectations of each other in order to improve their family role performance. In a criminal justice setting, an interpersonal practitioner may help a client develop behaviors that are more adaptive and also help the client transition from inmate to community roles after release from

incarceration. In a VA hospital, an interpersonal practitioner may help a returning veteran transition from a military role to civilian roles. This transition back to civilian roles, such as spouse, parent, and breadwinner, may be complicated by physical and emotional disabilities in which the veteran will be required to learn new skills.

Table 1.1	Social Work Fields of Service

1. *Family Welfare.* The focus is on family roles, such as parent, stepparent, sibling, grandparent, etc. Relevant agencies are usually referred to as family agencies, although some focus only on roles such as youth and the aged. Other agencies also classified under this heading deal only with certain types of role problems, such as those that seek to prevent family violence. Some agencies deal only with people with similar issues, such as the elderly.

2. *Child Welfare.* The focus is on either strengthening family roles or helping the child reestablish roles in substitute families created under adoptive, foster care, or institutional arrangement. An important category of child welfare services is protective services, and these are brought into play when the dangers to the child are immediate and severe. Another specialized category of services, usually linked to the field of child welfare, is school social work. In that field, the emphasis is on how the student role may be affected by other roles, such as those within the family. Relevant agencies are usually referred to as child welfare, although these are increasingly combined with family agencies into family and children's agencies.

3. *Criminal Justice.* The focus is on helping people who have been in deviant roles to relinquish these in favor of socially acceptable ones. This often involves enhancing the client's performance as spouse, employee, and citizen. Relevant agencies include prisons, training schools, and courts.

4. *Physical Health Care.* The focus is on how people can best fulfill the requirements of their other roles, as well as the patient role, while entering or leaving the patient role. Relevant agencies include hospitals and rehabilitation programs.

5. *Mental Health Care.* The focus is on how people who require forms of mental health care, or who have entered the role of mental patient, can enhance their social functioning as spouse, parent, employee, or citizen. Relevant agencies include hospitals, community mental health programs, and clinics. We also classify agencies that help people with developmental disabilities here.

6. *Leisure Time and Youth Services.* The focus is on helping people fulfill all roles better through enhancing their creative potential and ability to work cooperatively with others. Youth services are often emphasized in community centers and "Y's," and these services focus on the developmental needs of people in that role. Relevant agencies include settlement houses and community centers.

7. *Income Maintenance, Job Training, and Employee Assistance in Industry.* Because relevant agencies focus on resource and provider and employment roles, we have grouped them together. The last-named category, industry, is one of the newest fields of practice for social workers. Agencies include welfare departments, personnel training and placement programs, and employee assistance departments in businesses and industries.

8. *Substance Abuse.* A number of agencies focus entirely on helping abusers of alcohol and drugs. Most of the fields of service already discussed also help many substance abusers, but these clients will also be referred to specialized agencies. Relevant agencies are alcohol and drug treatment programs.

9. *Private Practice.* Social workers in increasing numbers have entered private practice, often in addition to their agency practice. In most recent surveys of members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), about 23% of members are engaged in some form of private practice. Studies of private practitioners in social work over the past 2 decades show that this sector continues to grow (Mosley, Stoesz, Cnaan, Koney, & Lopez, 2008). Private practitioners operate independently or in partnership with other social workers. The people who seek help from such workers usually must be affluent enough to pay fees, although many are now covered by health insurance for this service. Most private practitioners offer psychotherapy, group therapy, and family and marital therapy.

10. *Faith-Based Programs.* Historically, social work has been connected to many religious institutions—e.g., Catholic Charities, The Salvation Army, Lutheran Social Services, and Jewish Child & Family Services. Presently a number of small, inner-city churches have developed community based programs to reach poor families in their neighborhoods. These services might include emergency food, clothing, housing, employment counseling, and recreational programs for youth.

A Problem Focus

Our model has in common with most social work models the idea that the purpose of social work practice is to enhance social functioning through the prevention or amelioration of *problems*. In interpersonal practice, we mean by problem some aspect of the transactions between a person and his or her environment that is unsatisfying or highly stressful for the person. Recently in interpersonal practice a solution-focused model has developed, which we view as relatively consistent with our problem focus (DeJong & Berg, 2002; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Walter & Peller, 1992). Because we believe that establishing goals is a central part of problem solving practice, we will discuss later in greater detail in this book how solution-focused practice is compatible with our model of interpersonal practice.

Service Priorities

An issue that has confronted social workers as long as there has been an awareness of the range of problems with which they can help is whether, with limited resources, some problems have a higher priority for service than others. We believe that the problems of certain groups in society are the priority ones for social work practice. These are the problems of people who are poor, oppressed, or have physical or emotional disabilities. We also included members of ethnic groups, such as African Americans, Latinos and Latinas, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, and sexual

minority groups, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people because these groups have been the targets of racist, homophobic, and sexist practices.

We believe that social work has a historical commitment to these kinds of groups, as affluent persons or persons in powerful positions have access to many resources to resolve interpersonal difficulties and enhance personal development. This does not mean that we should withhold social work services from such groups but that they deserve a lower priority when scarce social work resources are an issue. This is consistent, for example, with the social work professional organization's (NASW) stance that recognizes the legitimacy of private practice but asserts the primacy of social services in welfare organizational settings.

How Agencies Affect Practice

The agency is not simply a physical setting for interpersonal practice, but it may strongly influence and determine what such practice will be. In the chapters on organizational assessment and change, we discuss how the worker, to serve clients better, can assess and change agency conditions. We believe that an understanding of the agency is essential for any comprehension of interpersonal practice today. The agency may determine who may "enter" the agency system through its recruitment policies and intake procedures. The agency can also determine which aspects of the client or the environment or both will become targets for change. For example, the policies of a department of social work in a school system were that clients must be students in the school, that they must be referred by their teachers, and that classroom behaviors are the targets to be changed. These policies then did not allow interpersonal practitioners in this school to see students on a walk-in basis, nor to work with student concerns about "bullying" in the lunchroom, nor to work with problems in the families of students. More about these issues are presented in the clienthood chapter.

Agency rules and procedures may indicate which persons in the agency are authorized to interact with the client, what social work approaches are approved by the agency, and what resources will be made available for the utilization of these approaches. In the example of a school social work department just cited, the policies of the department required all students who are referred to a social worker to also be interviewed by the school psychologist for possible psychological testing. The agency's descriptions of social work practice described the social worker's approaches as "individual problem solving," "referral," and "support." The interpersonal practitioner was not permitted to develop and run groups nor to communicate directly with parents. Any communication directed to the parents about their child had to go through the assistant principal's office, who was the school disciplinarian. Some agencies have policies that determine when a client may be terminated regardless of whether the client has achieved the goals of service. As

a way of allocating scarce resources, some agencies limit services to a specified time period (e.g., 3 months) or number of social work sessions (e.g., 10 sessions), whether or not the goals of service have been reached.

Agency Functions

The functions of social welfare agencies that employ social workers are not identical to the functions of the social work profession. The ways in which professions evolve in society are seldom in full correspondence with the ways in which the institutions that employ their members evolve. There are a number of conflicts that emerge between the profession of social work and the agencies that employ social workers. These conflicts are discussed in some detail in the clienthood chapter and in the organizational and community assessment chapter.

THE BASES OF INTERPERSONAL PRACTICE ●

Social work professional practice consists of (1) a body of *knowledge*, (2) a set of *values*, and (3) a series of *actions* that are related to the knowledge and values. These actions are referred to as the interventive repertoire of the profession. Later in this book, we discuss values, knowledge, and actions that workers utilize in specific circumstances. Our purpose here is to provide a general introduction to interpersonal practice.

Social Work Action Repertoire

Social work practice consists of actions that are utilized in a manner consistent with social work values, a topic dealt with in detail in Chapter 2. The use of actions is also determined by reference to a body of knowledge. The rest of this book elaborates on this action repertoire; however, we introduce this topic here with a general discussion of actions employed by social workers. Because the word *intervention* is also commonly used to mean the actions of workers, we use these terms interchangeably.

One issue is whether social workers' professional actions are different from those employed by members of other human service professions. We cannot assert that social workers exclusively possess any techniques. The distinguishing features of social work are its focus on individual environmental transaction and the purposes that we have also described in regard to these, not how social workers carry out their purposes. This is not to deny that social workers have pioneered in the development of a number of procedures, such as those of family treatment,

group work, individual problem solving, advocacy, and brokerage. (All of these will be discussed in detail later.)

A more generic approach in social work practice has led to several alternative ways of defining specialization in social work. One that has had considerable influence in social work education is the separation of training for practice with individuals, families, and groups (usually referred to as direct practice, clinical practice, interpersonal practice, or micro practice) from that with communities and organizations (usually referred to as indirect practice, macro practice, or social policy and administration).

The skills that are called for to implement change plans can also be categorized by whether they apply to individuals, to environmental systems affecting individuals, or to the interactions between the two. These skills can be clustered, and these clusters can constitute different worker roles. Thus, in facilitating changes in individuals, workers fulfill roles as *enablers* of change, as *teachers*, as *behavior modifiers*, or as *promoters* of insight and awareness of feelings. Workers who locate resources to meet the needs of clients function as *brokers*; workers who develop opportunities to meet the aspirations of clients function as *resource developers*; workers who argue the client's cause in relationship to organizational policies and procedures function as *advocates*; and workers who help clients negotiate with other individuals and systems so that the needs of both may be met function as *mediators*. These roles are elaborated in the individual change chapter.

● SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have sought to describe the current status of interpersonal practice in social work. To accomplish this, we have presented and discussed a definition of social work. This definition emphasizes the functions of the profession as preventing or resolving dysfunctional individual environmental transactions and as strengthening the potential of people to lead creative lives in their environments. We clarified the role of the interpersonal practitioner in social work as accomplishing this function through interactions with individuals, families, and groups.

We subsequently described the scope of interpersonal practice in terms of fields of practice and the types of agencies that employ such practitioners. We introduced our model of practice as one that employs the concept of social functioning, is problem focused, and gives priority to people who are oppressed in modern society.

Our model also recognizes that because most interpersonal practice occurs in agency settings the implications of this must be fully understood, and this topic was also elaborated upon. As we have stated, the purpose of this chapter was to introduce the reader to the range of roles and actions of social workers in interpersonal practice. These also constitute the subject matter of the rest of this book.