CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO SOCIAL WORK

How did I get here? Reflecting on a 30-plus-year career in social work service, advocacy, and teaching, I have often asked myself that question. Sometimes, when I am in conversations with other social workers, we lament our choice to pursue a profession that garners so little public respect and income.

After receiving my MSW degree, I began working at the first 24-hour transitional center for women experiencing homelessness in the District of Columbia. I was part of a groundbreaking team that challenged traditional service delivery messages, resulting in an environment that was healthy for residents and staff alike. In this environment, I questioned conventional social work methods and instead asked myself, "Why are we doing things this way?" "What is the ultimate benefit to the client?" and, most important, "What is the ultimate cost to the client of doing things this way?" As I began to ask these questions, another question was constantly nagging in the back of my mind: "If I had a tragic circumstance, could I live here? Would I want to live here? Could my mother live here?" These questions transformed the way I viewed social service delivery— not just as a mechanism for helping people in crisis, but as an active tool for delivering good or harm to vulnerable people.

POINTS TO PONDER: WHO IS OUR CLIENT?

Take a minute, close your eyes, and imagine the person who will be your next social work client. As you imagine this person, what images come to your mind immediately? Is this imaginary client someone like you or someone from a completely different background? Does this imaginary

client have more or less education than you? Is this client living in poverty? Does the imaginary client have credentialed expertise or "street" expertise?

Next, ask yourself: What was the source of the data that informed the image of this client? Was it from media (social media, newspapers, movies, television shows)? Was the source information from your personal experiences or from people you know? Were these sources reliable? Are these sources reliable when describing other groups of people? Now, ask yourself: How did these assumptions and sources of data inform how you positioned yourself vis-à-vis the client? How might they influence your social work practice?

Welcome to social work! Social work is a profession that is rich in its diversity of practice settings and practitioners, as well as its inclusivity, passion, and advocacy. This is a profession that cultivates debate and action, that relies on the power of practice and policy, and that embraces empowerment and equity. Social workers pride themselves on having a collective vision for a society in which every member has an opportunity to thrive and participate.

Tell someone you're a social worker and you're likely to get a response such as, "You are such a good person"; "You are such a strong person"; "I could never do that"; or "Bless your heart." Ask people what social workers do and you're likely to hear, "They help poor people"; "They take children away from their parents"; or "I don't know." Social work is a profession characterized by its altruism, good-heartedness, and sacrifice. Less often is it characterized by its competence or its capacity to change lives and communities.

The social work profession is also clouded by contradictory perceptions. It is simultaneously heralded for its passion while criticized for its idealism. Social work is described positively as hard and rewarding work, and negatively as underpaid and undervalued work. It is described as process-rich and outcome-light. It is a profession that is likely to touch every family at least once. However, many people are unaware of social work's scope of practice or its settings until they need a social worker.

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW; 2021a) *Code of Ethics*:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable,

oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's dual focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living. (p. 1)

People from many different backgrounds become social workers and practice social work. Across the country, more than 700,000 people (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.) choose social work practice to help people manage the task of living in a complex society. Like their colleagues who serve as doctors, nurses, psychologists, and other helping professionals, social workers enter the profession to positively impact the quality of people's lives.

In a study of the NASW membership, respondents ranked the top factors that influenced their choice of social work as a career (Whitaker, 2008). The top influential factors included an "interest in helping people; desire to advocate on behalf of disadvantaged populations; and interest in providing mental health services" (Whitaker, 2008, p. 4).

Some social workers come from homes and experiences where they never encountered a social worker, but they want to contribute to a more equitable society. Other social workers are drawn to the profession because of a personal experience with a social worker that affected their lives. Still others come to the profession because of their lived experiences with poverty or disadvantage and their desire to give back to others in a similar situation. Some people become social workers to transform social work so that others will not have to endure what they endured. The diversity of motivations and experiences that social workers bring with them to the profession is one of the profession's many strengths.

STRENGTHS OF THE PROFESSION

The social work profession has many strengths. Among them is a *Code of Ethics* that guides professional practice in a way that seeks to limit harm to those whom social workers encounter. In addition to standards about how social workers should interact with, respect, and support the dignity of clients, there are also standards about how social workers should interact with their colleagues and coworkers (NASW, 2021a).

The professional values that guide the professional practice of social work are also a source of strength. These values include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2021a). These values guide the decision making of social workers, often in a way that distinguishes them from other

disciplines. Social workers are trained to advocate to protect the dignity of their clients, to work collaboratively with them in goal setting, and to promote their clients' self-determination. Social workers also put a high premium on protecting their clients from harm and have strict guidance from the *Code of Ethics* regarding dual relationships and other potential avenues for exploitation (NASW, 2021a).

Another strength of the profession is its commitment to an improved society. The goal of social justice is exhorted not only by professional social work organizations, such as NASW, the National Association of Black Social Workers, and the International Federation of Social Workers, but also by the educational programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education. Social workers are called upon to not only address the problems that their individual clients present, but also to examine and eliminate the larger societal problems that result in disadvantages and disparities.

The dynamic interplay between addressing the challenges of individuals and families while working to eliminate structural obstacles to an equitable society make social work a vibrant and interesting career choice. Social workers can choose the realm in which they prefer to practice (micro, mezzo, or macro) with the understanding of the interrelatedness of their work across practice levels. This understanding allows social workers to be informed about the positive and negative impacts of social policies on people's lives.

The profession is also bolstered by its presence in an array of settings. Social workers are everywhere. Social workers can be found in settings such as hospitals, schools, child welfare agencies, substance abuse treatment facilities, mental and behavioral health facilities, private practice, the criminal justice system, legislatures, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities. Social workers work in settings where they are the predominant discipline, such as social service agencies, and in settings where they are not the predominant discipline, such as schools and hospitals. The breadth of social work presence is a strength in that social workers are not only on the front lines of practice, but also on the front lines of policymaking.

Social work is both collective and individual work. It represents the collective thinking of social work professionals and a particular application of knowledge, skills, and values to problem-solving processes. The problem-solving processes can occur at the individual, family, group, community, or organizational level. However, these processes are also highly individualized and can result in interactions that are not standardized; instead, they rely on the rapport built between the social worker and the client system.

What qualities do social workers need to form positive and healthy relationships with their clients? Most people take the goodwill of social workers

for granted. People who work so hard on behalf of those experiencing societal disadvantage, and who are often undercompensated for their labor, must be good people. While that starting assumption may have hints of truth, it can also embody an altruism that can lead to blind spots in social work practice.

Social work competence is built on knowledge, skills, values, and cognitive and affective processes (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). However, the educational platform is only a part of social work practice. Much of social work practice is also driven by the assumptions that individuals and institutions make about the strengths and deficits, motivations, and characteristics of the people they serve. For social workers in particular, the people they serve are often facing a multitude of challenges and disadvantages.

Social workers' clients may be especially vulnerable if they lack the financial resources or the option (e.g., court mandated) to choose the helping professional they prefer. Except for private practice, social work clients don't often have the option to interview their social worker, nor do they have the option to fire them if they are dissatisfied with their services. For these reasons—the reliance on the goodwill of the social worker and the lack of options for the client—it is imperative that positive outcomes are not unintentionally undermined by the social worker's personal beliefs, biases, or assumptions that influence the type and amount of "help" people receive. It is not sufficient that social workers simply do not intend to harm people, *it is critical that they do not cause harm.* As the saying goes, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." Avoiding the path to destruction is not accidental, but requires diligence, intentionality, and critical thinking.

CONTRADICTIONS

In addition to its strengths, the social work profession also has its share of contradictions. From its inception, social work has been an instrument of preserving the status quo of privilege for some and oppression for others. While proclaiming to be a profession that advocates social justice, social work has also contradicted this stance in its active enforcement of social control policies, often against the very people who need social justice. The contradictions and limitations of the profession have been described (NASW, 2021b; Specht & Courtney, 1994; Whitaker, 2023) with some calling for the eradication of social work (Maylea, 2021) based on its inability to achieve its long-standing goals. However, the critique that the social work profession may indeed be a wolf in sheep's clothing is balanced by the good that is accomplished by the members of the profession daily. Social

workers can and do, with the guiding principle of social justice, make life not only better, but tolerable for many members of society.

CHALLENGES WITH PHILOSOPHY AND LANGUAGE

Like any discipline, the social work profession is not without its challenges. Social work is a problem-solving profession. By default, social work is a *problem-focused* profession. Social workers typically describe their work by describing the problems facing the people they serve and the solutions they offer. A problem can be personal or systemic. Problems can occur in almost any realm of human and social interaction. For example, people experience financial problems, health problems, family problems, and mental health problems. Similarly, a community may be plagued by problems related to unemployment, poverty, substandard or unsafe housing, or crime.

Sometimes, however, the problem-focused language of social work, rather than alleviating the stigma that clients face, can compound issues. Unflattering descriptions of the clients they serve can create the illusion that the problems are in the people and not the environments that have failed to support them. Similarly, service descriptions can make social workers sound like saviors or magicians, rather than professionals who practice *with* clients rather than *on* them. Table 1.1 shows some typical phrases that social service agencies use to describe their clients and phrases used to describe social services.

Compare and contrast the language used in Table 1.1 and consider whether the phrases are problem-focused or empowering to the client and the provider.

Another challenge facing the profession heralds back to the earliest days of social work—the image of the "deserving and undeserving poor." This philosophy is deeply engrained in government policies and, often, in those who must implement them. This philosophy has as its primary boogeyman the "undeserving poor," who seek only to exploit the hard work and tax dollars of others to secure a free ride. This attitude is reflected in policies that require people to work, pray, or volunteer their labor to eat a meal. It expands to include people with substance use disorders, people with mental health disorders who are non-medication compliant, and those who have children that they cannot individually support. Social workers are not immune from the influence of these messages, and they, too, may adopt a hard-heartedness about what people do and do not deserve. When denigrated and dismissed as bleeding hearts, social workers may develop a harsher response to refute these designations.

Social workers often talk about empowerment of clients. Yet, social workers do not often talk about the power they wield in creating social

TABLE 1.1 Contrasting Descriptions of Social Work Clients and Service Providers

Whom Social Workers Serve	How Social Workers Help
Clients with severe needs	By providing compassionate and holistic care
Clients who come from the most underprivileged areas	By providing a place where clients can develop a healthy self-esteem
Clients with the highest needs	By building healthy, loving, and functional families
Disenfranchised and homeless populations	By empowering families to become nurturing and self-sufficient
Families with personal challenges	By providing services aimed at ending the cycle of poverty
Clients with negative behavior patterns	By helping families heal from dysfunctional patterns
Clients who need to become self-sufficient	By transforming their lives through faith and compassion

service systems and the extent to which their use of power supports or diminishes clients in those systems. Members of the profession may point to factors that inhibit their power, such as large caseloads or inadequate pay. Yet, they may not talk about how those factors impact the client experience. Who is harmed when clients experience long wait times to receive services? Who suffers when documentation requirements delay the receipt of services? How do social workers reconcile treating people in crisis as if they are impatient or frustrated?

EMPATHY IS NOT ENOUGH

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Most social workers are trained to be empathetic—to understand a client's situation and how they might be feeling or reacting to the circumstances around them. Yet, if these feelings are clouded by perceptions of the client's otherness, this type of empathy can fall short in helping to manifest change in a person's circumstances. When we are empathetic to someone whom we perceive as fundamentally different from ourselves, our understanding and support can be stunted. For instance, as a social worker, I may understand a single mother's frustration at not being able to support her children. However, if that understanding is clouded by thoughts of "Why did she have so

many children if she knew she couldn't take care of them?" or "Why should she rely on the system to fix her bad decisions?" then the intervention is also clouded. Rather than provide the single mom with what she *needs*, I may unconsciously gear her services to what I believe she *deserves*. These services may include housing in an unsafe neighborhood or shelter, expectations about how she interacts with her children, and a prescription for parenting or training classes. This level of empathy considers a person's situation, but not the person's feelings about the situation. Their feelings may be disregarded because of the judgment attached to their circumstances.

Empathy, good intentions, and application of skills have been insufficient to consistently and adequately meet the needs of the people whom social workers serve. Although social workers invariably provide important, necessary, and vital services, as a profession social work has not succeeded in doing so without sometimes compromising the dignity of those they seek to serve. Consider the environments where social services are provided. Are they typically clean and quiet, or are they characterized by noise and chaos? Are services provided efficiently and privately? Are the residential units that social workers manage places where they would want to live? The profession has a goal of transforming others, but there is also a need for the profession to be in constant transformation itself.

WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIONAL EMPATHY?

Transformational empathy is the ability to see and understand others as *ourselves*. In the situation described previously, transformational empathy would allow us to see the single mom as ourselves—with both flaws and strengths. If we were not able to meet our children's needs, what would *our* children deserve? Would our children deserve safe housing and regular, nutritious meals even if our own parenting was deficient? In this situation, what might we need as a parent? Would we need a parenting class or financial support? Transformational empathy is sometimes hard to achieve because our minds will tell us the many ways that our clients are not like us. They (the clients) do not necessarily have the same tools (training, education, background), qualities (capacity to understand, love, forgive), or character (honest, hardworking, ethical) as we have. Yet, most of the time, we don't know what a client has in their toolbox, their qualities, or the totality of their character. What we may have is knowledge of a client's current circumstances and what we perceive as the missteps that contributed to these circumstances. Transformational empathy allows us to put the client in our shoes and provide services based on what people like us would need in those

circumstances. Through the lens of transformational empathy, we can more clearly see what is missing from the environment or the intervention, rather than what is lacking in the client. Utilizing an approach that is based in transformational empathy also allows us to adjust our services to be more strengths-based and less deficit-based. Transformational empathy allows us to see our role as social worker as facilitator, but not savior. Transformational empathy keeps us grounded in the commonality of our humanity.

Transformational empathy should not be confused with enabling or supporting harmful behaviors. It is also not an extension of cultural competence. Transformational empathy is not about understanding the motivations of others; it is about being in touch with our own motivations. Instead of asking why a client would behave in a certain way, we examine our own behavior in a similar circumstance. There's a subtle difference between imagining how we think we would respond in a circumstance and how we actually respond. When we have a problem, are we always patient? Kind? Even-tempered? Or do our moods fluctuate with the circumstances? Do our clients have this breadth of freedom of expression, or are they always expected to be calm, rational, and endlessly patient?

HOW TRANSFORMATIONAL EMPATHY CAN IMPROVE OUR SERVICE DELIVERY

Using transformational empathy is not complicated, but it can be uncomfortable. Transformational empathy facilitates a critique of the kind of services we are providing and forces a reckoning of the assumptions that are driving those services. When our eyes become open to the kind of services we would need and those we would like to receive, we can become very critical of the existing structures and systems. However, transformational empathy also allows us to make small adjustments as well as systemic overhauls. Sometimes, the adjustment is as simple as asking a person how they would like to be addressed, rather than starting on a first-name basis. Other times, it provides opportunities for choices, rather than assuming that all clients want or need the same things. And other times still, it is realizing that but for a turn of luck or a divergent fork in our paths, that there is simply no difference between ourselves and our clients.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Look at the phrases used by social service agencies in Table 1.1 again. When you read those phrases, did they remind you of your

imaginary client? What kinds of people have severe needs or live in the most underprivileged areas? What kinds of people have difficulty addressing their personal challenges? What kinds of people need to learn how to be self-sufficient? What kinds of people lack the resources to address their own difficulties?

2. Is there anything about the concept of transformational empathy that makes you uncomfortable? Why or why not?

3. Do you think that there are circumstances in which social workers can be too empathetic? What are some of them?

4. How does the idea of transformational empathy differ from the idea of cultural competence?