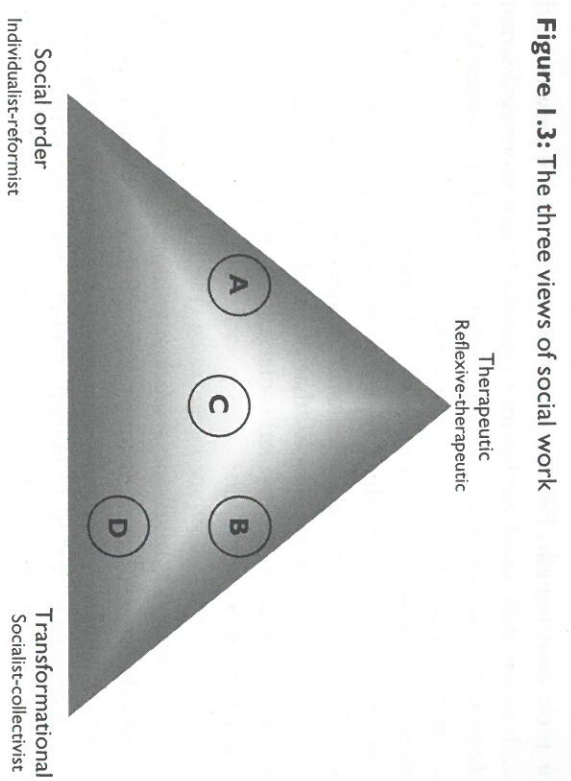# Contents

By 'discursive practices' he means activities such as social work practice that create and disclose discourses. These discourses are the sometimes obvious, sometimes hidden, power relationships between people as they interact. Relationships always represent particular ideologies about how society should be. 'Significations' are words or practices that represent important ideologies, for example appeals to the importance of the family or a kind of social work that sustains traditional family structures, or, on the other hand, they accept that families may include relationships between gay and lesbian couples or single-parent families.

All these types of discourse analysis connect together, because looking at language in written texts and in practice in an organised way through research into the use of language in texts and in practice can reveal power relations and the ideas that lie behind them. In this book, I look at written texts about social work as a technique for revealing the ideas about social work that lie behind everyday statements. I use professional documents, textbooks, articles, internet searches and government and official statements. I also look at social work practices, by examining examples of practice or organisation.

Social work's three-way discourse

The argument in this book is that social work is a three-way discourse; every bit of practice, all practice ideas, all social work agency organisation and all welfare policy is a rubbing up of three views of social work against each other. I argue that this discourse plays out the struggle about the claim: these three views are different ways of dealing with the claim. Figure 1.3 shows them at the corners of a triangle; the triangle represents the discourse between them, a field of debate that covers all social work. When I first described these three views, in the first edition of this book, I used complex names for them, but more recently, people have used simpler terms, so in this edition, I concentrate on the simpler terms, and give the complex names in this figure for reference. The important differences between these views of social work connect with different political views about how welfare should be provided.

Therapeutic views. These see social work as seeking the best possible well-being for individuals, groups and communities in society, by promoting and facilitating growth and self-fulfilment. A constant spiral of interaction between workers and clients modifies clients' ideas and allows workers to influence them; in the same way, clients gain experience of their world as they gain experience of it. This process

Figure 1.3: The three views of social work

Therapeutic
Reflexive-therapeutic

Social order
Individualist-reformist

Transformational
Socialist-collectivist

of mutual influence is called reflexiveness. Because it is reflexive in this way, social work responds to the social concerns that workers find and gain understanding of as they practise, and feeds back into society knowledge about these problems and how society might tackle them. Through this process of mutual interaction with social workers, clients gain power over their own feelings and way of life. Such personal power enables them to overcome or rise above suffering and disadvantage, so they experience the work to help them gain this power as therapeutic. I originally called this kind of social work 'reflexive-therapeutic'. This view expresses in social work the social democratic political philosophy that economic and social development should go hand-in-hand to achieve individual and social improvement.

This view is basic to many ideas of the nature of social work, but two other views modify and dispute it.

Transformational views. These views (for example, Pease and Fook, 1999) argue that we must transform societies for the benefit of the poorest and most oppressed. Social work aims to develop cooperation and mutual support in society so that the most oppressed and disadvantaged people can gain power over their own lives. It facilitates this by empowering people to take part in a process of learning and cooperation, which creates institutions that all can own and participate in. Elites accumulate and perpetuate power and resources in society

for their own benefit. By doing so, they create the oppression and disadvantage that social work tries to supplant with more egalitarian relationships in society. Transformational views imply that disadvantaged and oppressed people will never gain personal or social empowerment unless society makes these transformations. Value statements about social work, such as codes of ethics, represent this objective by proposing social justice as an important value of all social work. This view expresses the socialist political philosophy that planned economies and social provision promotes equality and social justice, and I originally called it 'socialist-collectivist'.

Social order views. These see social work as an aspect of welfare services to individuals in societies. It meets individuals' needs and improves services of which it is a part, so that social work and the services can operate more effectively. Dominelli (2002) calls these maintenance approaches, reflecting the term used by Davies (1994); I originally called them 'individualist-reformist'. They see social work as maintaining the social order and social fabric of society, and maintaining people during any period of difficulties that they may be experiencing, so that they can recover stability again. This view expresses the liberal or rational economic political philosophy, that personal freedom in economic markets, supported by the rule of law, is the best way of organising societies.

Each view says something about the activities and purposes of social work in welfare provision in any society, and so they are each different implementations of social work's claim. Therapeutic social work says: 'Help everyone to self-fulfilment and society will be a better place'. Social order social work says: 'Solve people's problems in society, by providing help or services, and they will fit in with general social expectations better; promoting social change to stop the problems arising will produce all-round improvements'. Transformational social work says: 'Identify and work out how social relations cause people's problems, and make social changes so that the problems do not arise'.

Each view criticises or seeks to modify the others. For example, seeking personal and social fulfilment, as in therapeutic views, is impossible to transformers because the interests of elites obstruct many possibilities for oppressed peoples, unless we achieve significant social change. They argue that merely accepting the social order, as therapeutic and social order views do, supports and enhances the interests of elites. To the transformer, therefore, the alternative views involve practice that will obstruct the opportunities of oppressed people who should

be the main beneficiaries of social work. To take another example, social order views say that trying to change societies to make them more equal or create personal and social fulfilment through individual and community growth are unrealistic in everyday practice, and inconsistent with the natural organisation of societies in competitive markets. This is because most practical objectives of social work activity refer to small-scale individual change, which cannot lead to major social and personal changes. Also, stakeholders in the social services that finance and give social approval to social work activities mainly want a better fit between society and individuals. They do not seek major changes. That is why social order views prefer their approach.

However, these different views also have affinities. For example, both therapeutic and transformational views are centrally about change and development. Also, therapeutic and social order views are about individual rather than social change. Generally, therefore, most conceptions of social work include elements of each of these views. Alternatively, they sometimes acknowledge the validity of elements of the others. For example, transformational views criticise unthinking acceptance of the present social order, which is often taken for granted in social order and therapeutic views. Nevertheless, most people who take this view of social work accept helping individuals to fulfil their potential within present social systems. They often see this as a stepping-stone to a changed society by promoting a series of small changes aiming towards bigger ones.

So these different views fit together or compete with each other in social work practice. Looking at Figure 1.3, if you or your agency were positioned at A (very common especially for beginning social workers), your main focus might be providing services in a therapeutic, helping relationship, as a care manager (in managed care) or in child protection. You might do very little in the way of seeking to change the world, and by being part of an official or service system, you are accepting the pattern of welfare services as it is. However, in your individual work, what you do may well be guided by eventual change objectives. For example, if you believe that relationships between men and women should be more equal, your work in families will probably reflect your views. Position B might represent someone working in a refuge for women suffering domestic violence. Much of their work is helping therapeutically, but the very basis of their agency is changing attitudes towards women in society, and you might do some campaigning work as part of your helping role. Position C is equally balanced; some change, some service provision; some therapeutic helping. My present job is like that: to promote community helping.

development so that communities become more resilient about and respond better to people who are dying or bereaved, but I am responsible for liaison with other services so that our service system becomes more effective. Position D is mainly transformational but partly maintenance. This reflects the reality that seeking social change is not, in the social services, completely revolutionary, but will also seek to make the service system more effective. Many community workers, for example, are seeking quite major change in the lives of the people they serve by achieving better cooperation and sharing, but they may act by helping local groups make their area safe from crime, by providing welfare rights advocacy or by organising self-help playgroups in the school holidays.

You can assess your position in social work by trying out the exercise in Figure 1.4.

First, you complete the three scales at the top. You circle one figure on each line; the 0 means your job is equally balanced between these two points of view, whereas a 3 would mean that your job is very strongly oriented towards one view or the other. When you have completed the scales, you can plot your position on each of the three sides of the discourse triangle; 0 will be in the middle of the triangle side, and 1 or 2 a proportional step towards the relevant corner; a 3 will be at the corner. Now connect up the three points you have identified. Often this will form a triangle, perhaps a fairly flat triangle. Your job is positioned in social work discourse at the fattest part of the triangle. If you have a straight line, your position is one third along the line away from the strongest point. Figure 1.5a–c gives some examples drawn from exercises I have done with different social workers.

By copying Figure 1.4, you can get people who know you or your supervisor to make their own assessment of your territory, and you can plan; for example, you can go on to identify the position you would like to be in. By carrying out these exercises, you are again involving yourself in the discourse around the nature of the social work that you have constructed for yourself. It is also possible to do this for agencies and their policies, or the welfare regimes of different countries and the priorities that social work has in that country.

This process of engaging in the discourse about your own role can help to clarify the range of objectives in your work and contributions that you make. Figure 1.5 offers some examples, which are composites of people from different areas of social work that I have discussed this with. A palliative care social worker (Figure 1.5a), for example, might start out by seeing themselves as primarily doing therapeutic work

Figure 1.4: Views of social work scale

Consider the balance between each pair of views of social work, as explained in the text, within your present practice. If it is equally balanced between the pair, circle 0; if your practice is strongly biased towards the left-hand view, circle 3; indicate less strong biases by circling 1 or 2. You can only circle one number for each pair.

Therapeutic	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Social order
Therapeutic	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Transformational
Social order	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Transformational

When you have finished, transfer the scores to the triangle. Start with the first scale on the left side of this triangle (social order to therapeutic). If you circled 0, mark the midpoint of the side; each corner represents a 3: 'therapeutic' at the top or 'social order' on the far left. If you circled 2, put a mark about a third of the way from the corner to the midpoint; if you circled 1 put a mark about two thirds of the way to the midpoint. Repeat for the other two scales: scale 2 on the right, scale 3 along the bottom. Connect the marks to create a triangle that represents the territory of your view of your practice.

Social order
Individualist-reformist

Therapeutic
Reflexive-therapeutic

Transformational
Socialist-collectivist
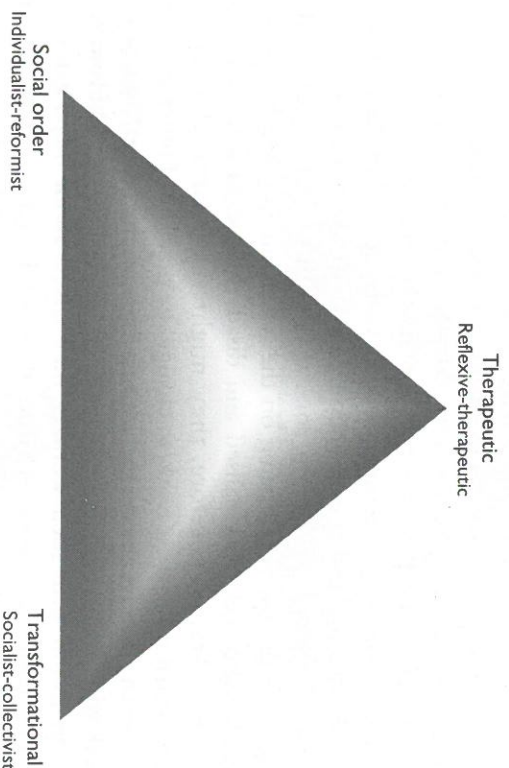
You can repeat the exercise by getting your supervisor or a colleague who knows your work to work out their view of your practice. You can also work out what your ideal combination might be. Comparing these with your present analysis can help you to see how you might want to change your practice.

with their patients, in fact, almost as a straight line from the therapeutic corner to the mid-point of the opposite side, between social order and transformation. However, they often arrange services for their patients and their families, and might persuade patients not to commit suicide because of their illness. Providing or organising services is clearly a social order activity: it is about maintaining the fabric of society through the provision of social services. The question then arises: how far is therapeutic work on patients' family relationships also a service? One might see it more as helping people achieve happiness by fulfilling the potential of their relationships and preventing difficulties in bereavement, but others might see it as an element in a package of caring services that also includes, for example, practical help at home and with physical needs. Persuading people not to commit suicide might be a therapeutic process, enabling people to come to terms with their impending death and to use their time to achieve other social objectives. However, it might also help to maintain a social convention against suicide. A palliative care social worker's actions also connect with ethical objectives to value the experience of dying and to avoid preventable early death. Thus, they are also part of the hospice movement's mission to change attitudes to death in society.

Our own social work territory does not remain the same. Every case and every social work action contain elements of all three views, which interact and sometimes conflict with each other. We can look at each situation, and at each action we take to adjust the emphasis of our work. Social workers in an Asian youth project (Figure 1.5b) might see themselves as being on the side of mainly Muslim young people who feel marginalised and disadvantaged in a large public housing estate. Therefore, they might see a large element of transformation in their work: to change the practice of other agencies and social attitudes among the white people on the estate. Most of the work with the young people themselves might be therapeutic. However, in discussion with such workers, they talked about helping several young women to decide whether they would agree to take part in arranged marriages proposed by their parents, and also about a young man who decided that he would ask his parents to do so. In this way, they contributed to social order, by helping young people and their families adjust their wishes to social structures, helping the social structures to change to fit new circumstances. While this did not fit with their own political views, as social workers dealing with troubled individuals, they had to remain open to the alternatives that they were considering. So, some of the work was more therapeutic or social order influenced than much of the community work activity.

Figure 1.5: Examples of views analyses

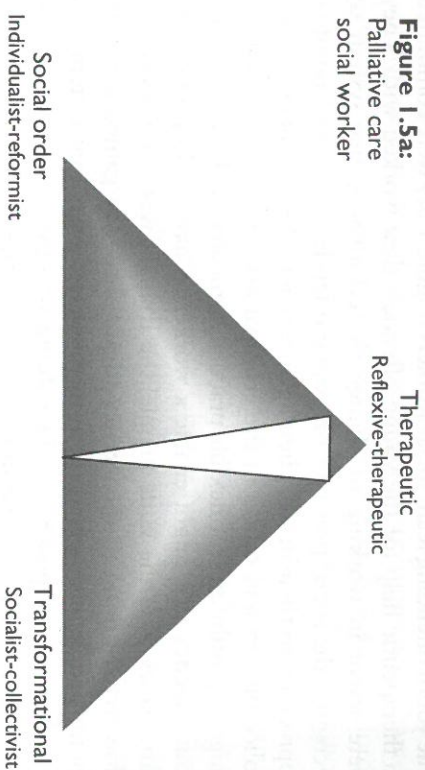**Figure 1.5a:**
Palliative care social worker

Individualist-reformist
Social order

Reflexive-therapeutic
Therapeutic

Socialist-collectivist
Transformational

Figure 1.5b:
Asian youth project social worker

Individualist-reformist
Social order

Reflexive-therapeutic
Therapeutic

Socialist-collectivist
Transformational
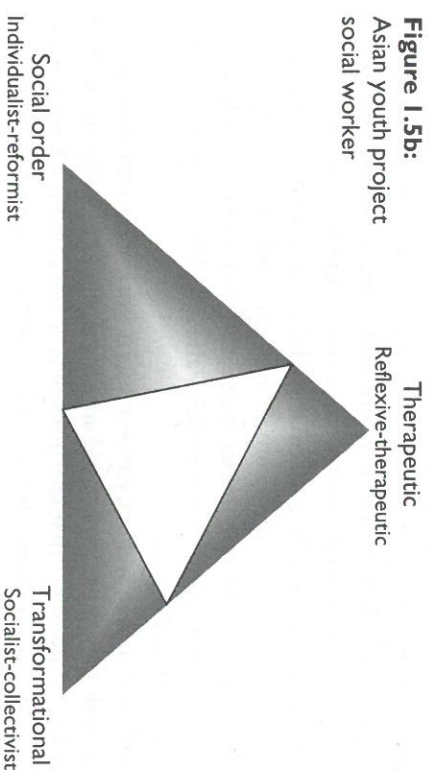
Figure 1.5c:
Youth offending team social worker

Individualist-reformist
Social order

Reflexive-therapeutic
Therapeutic

Socialist-collectivist
Transformational
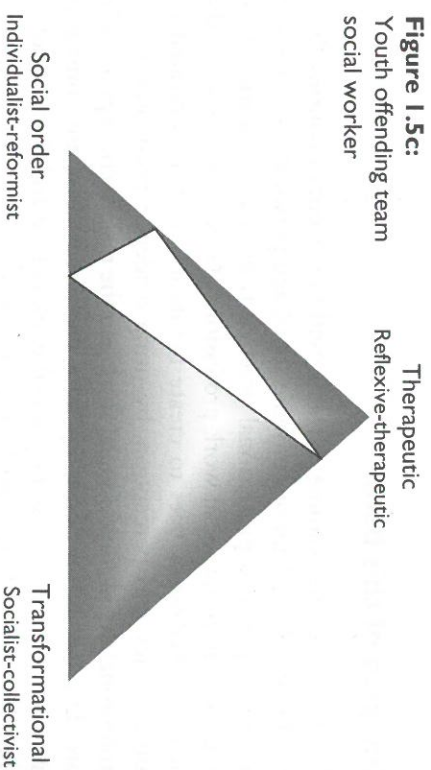
Views analysis also enables us to look at agencies and welfare systems. The youth offending team social workers (Figure 1.5c) were committed to therapeutic help for the young offenders they worked with. They were active in working to change the criminal justice system to recognise the social pressures on young offenders and avoid punitive approaches to their needs. Their agency, where they cooperated with police officers and others in the criminal justice system, limited the range of possibilities for flexible practice, compared with a community youth agency that might enable a worker to have an impact on the same issues with the same people; the triangle was quite restricted. However, working in the agency meant that they gained access to young people and helped them in the youth offending system in a way that was not possible in the voluntary sector.

All these workers faced directly some of the challenges of social work's claim to bring together social change and individual help. They came to their own construction of practice, sometimes unwittingly incorporating these three elements. However, views analysis shows us the process of social construction for individuals, in agencies, in particular cases, and in particular social work actions in response to the struggle to meet the claim. It can also apply to welfare systems. Some welfare systems focus more on therapeutic work, less on transformation. Sometimes, policies affect welfare systems to create a period of transformation.

Political aims in welfare, views of social work and social work practice thus link in complex ways, and are constantly interacting to create the particular discourse that social work is at any one time. Views analysis is a way of examining that discourse, either as we practice, or as we analyse how the agencies and welfare systems that surround us deal with the problem of the claim.

The plan of this book

This book aims to examine elements within current discourses about social work. The claim to combine social and personal improvement in an interpersonal professional practice is difficult to work out in practice within the social work profession. Chapter Two explores the identity social work tries to create for itself, and that is created by public policy and perception, by using evidence from official and professional definitions of social work and the related concept of social care. The discussion points up how the three views are constantly present in both contemporary social work debate and throughout its history. Chapters Three and Four focus on how social work practice, values and ethics incorporate elements of the discourse, and attempt to deal with the difficulties of social work's claim, through the discourse on the three views within interpersonal activity in practice. Chapters Five to Eight discuss how social work interacts with the forces surrounding it by considering successively social work management and agency, the use of power and authority in society, the role and character of social work as a profession including its education and research, and the interaction of social work with current issues about globalisation and postmodernism. Chapter Nine brings together these different strands of the construction of social work as a profession, and discusses how in everyday practice social workers can work towards achieving social work's claim in the context of today's society and its social movements and policies.

Conclusion: the claim and the perspectives

Social work's claim, unique among similar professions, is to combine in a professional role both social transformation and also individual improvement through interpersonal relationships. Because the social world is constantly in flux and individual humanity is infinitely variable, the only valid approach to understanding social work is to examine its social construction. However, a completely relative social construction, premised on constant variation in response to social and human contexts, does not reflect the world that most people experience. There are many continuities in social work, which is constructed in a shared language of concepts about its nature, contained in a discourse among three views of it: therapeutic, social order and transformational views. Social workers construct their own social work practice by following pathways towards, through, and sometimes away from, a nexus of ideas and debate that is the centre of social work. Thus, any particular social work act, any case, any social work role, any agency, any welfare system reflects a constantly changing balance among these three views about how to meet the claim. However, the three views are consistently present.