

# Social work training or social work education?

## An approach to curriculum design

*Population ageing, economic circumstances, and human behaviour are placing social welfare systems under great strain. In England extensive reform of the social work profession is taking place. Training curricula are being redesigned in the context of new standards of competence for social workers – the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF). Students must be equipped on qualifying to address an extensive range of human problems, presenting major challenges to educators. Critical theory suggests an approach to tackle one such challenge – selecting the essential content required for areas of particular practice. Teaching on social work with older people is used to illustrate this.*

*Habermas' theory of cognitive interests highlights the different professional roles served by the social work knowledge base - instrumental, interpretive, and emancipatory. Howe's application of sociological theory distinguished four social work roles corresponding to these. It is suggested that curriculum design decisions must enable practitioners to operate in each. When preparing students to work with older people, educators therefore need to include interpretive and emancipatory perspectives, and not construct social work purely as an instrumental response to problems older people present. This approach provides one useful rationale for curriculum design decisions, which is applicable to other areas of practice, and to contexts outside England.*

**Keywords:** Social Work Education; Social Work Training; Older People; Curriculum Design; Critical Theory

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# **SOCIAL WORK TRAINING OR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION?**

## **AN APPROACH TO CURRICULUM DESIGN**

### **Introduction**

The nature of professional social work varies greatly between countries and over time. In Europe, population ageing, maladaptive behaviour, migration, and economic insecurity are increasing the demand on welfare services, while widespread reductions in these are occurring due to pressure on public finances. The failure of current systems to protect vulnerable people from abuse has led to extensive concern, particularly in the UK. Major changes are taking place in social work education in England (to which this account will be confined). Triggered by a highly-publicised death of a young child in 2007, an extensive review was commissioned by the British government in 2008. Evidence submitted to the review highlighted inadequate professional training, insufficient support for on-going professional development, and poor professional leadership as features of contemporary social work in England. Initial training and arrangements for career development appeared to be failing to develop a workforce equipped to meet the demands of frontline practice (Social Work Task Force, 2009). Such concerns are not restricted to Western Europe: in India, Alphonse, George and Moffatt (2008) argued that globalisation and the destruction of cultural norms and values presented major challenges to social work which were inadequately reflected in standards of education and practice.

A prominent feature of the reforms in England has been a complete revision of professional standards, published in the form of a "Professional Capabilities Framework" (The College of Social Work, 2012). This framework is divided into nine domains – such as Professionalism, and Critical Analysis and Reflection - and statements of the level of capability required at each stage of qualification and professional development are articulated. As these determine the thresholds for qualification, attainment of these is a central purpose of professional training.

While abundant guidance has been published for higher education on the design and content of revised curricula at qualifying level (Social Work Reform Board, 2011), it will be argued below that wider professional and educational considerations still demand key decisions by individual Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on course aims and content. Alternative constructions of the social work role demand more emphasis on selected theory, content and practice, than would apply if preparing students to implement public policy was conceived as the sole purpose of social work education. This will be exemplified using a discrete area of the curriculum – social work with older people. This will be used to illustrate the value of critical theory as an organising framework to inform decisions about the aims and detailed content of different areas of the curriculum.

## **The emerging curriculum for generic social work**

The current reforms of professional training and practice in England demand extensive changes to qualifying curricula to prepare students for professional practice. HEIs in England have been reconstructing social work programmes, so that on qualifying the students have attained the threshold levels of “capability” detailed in the Professional Capabilities Framework. They must also attain the Standards of Proficiency required of social workers by the Health and Care Professions Council (2012a) which now holds the professional register for Social Work.

An extensive guidance document on designing the new qualifying curriculum (Social Work Reform Board, 2011) recognised that:

“The breadth and depth of knowledge and skills demanded of social work graduates is difficult to cover in a 3 year degree. Moreover, there are continuing demands from interest groups to augment the profile of a range of topics in the curriculum” (p.16),

This national “Curriculum Framework” is firmly based on the Professional Capabilities Framework. But while seeking greater consistency in content and delivery across programmes, it allows discretion within this for individual HEI’s to make their own decisions about design, delivery, and assessment. And while the Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers, and the Standards of Education and Training published by the Health and Care Professions Council (2012a,b) provide substantial guidance on the required outcomes and processes of social work training, they also leave much discretion to individual HEIs.

Specific curriculum guides have also been published by the (English) College of Social Work for qualifying programmes. The emerging range of guides (seventeen to date) now present educators with an extensive menu of topics and themes. The PCF, and other proposed high-level outcomes stipulated for social work programmes, provide some criteria for selection among these. But the proposed topics cannot all be included in the breadth and depth suggested by each guide, so some key curriculum design decisions are required. A rationale for choice is urgently needed, not least to identify the key content of teaching for different subject areas. Teaching students to work with older people will be used to illustrate how this may be addressed.

## **The value of critical theory**

Essentially the approach proposed here is to base decisions on the content of particular areas of the curriculum on distinctive constructions of the social work role. These emerge firstly from scrutiny of this in the light of critical social theory and secondly from the work of David Howe. Critical social theory illuminates and calls into question a range of everyday human activities by examining their intellectual, social, and structural foundations. Among critical theorists, Habermas’ emphasis on knowledge (as opposed to Foucault’s on power,

or Althusser's on structure) renders him particularly germane to social work education. Habermas (1971) argued that knowledge is constructed by the interests of its users, distinguishing the "cognitive interests" of control, understanding, and emancipation. This illuminates the multiple ends to which professional knowledge provides the means. Higher education's distinctive role in developing, critiquing, interpreting, and transmitting the knowledge base for professions such as social work thus demands a critical awareness of the distinctive functions this serves.

While social policy regards professional activity as essentially instrumental, and social workers as public servants, practitioners have generally constructed their roles in more complex terms. These include an interpretive emphasis on understanding the subjective and social nature of persons, and an emancipatory recognition of the role of power in both constructing and exacerbating social problems.

This is endorsed by Howe (2008) who (see below) argued that different roles demanded different organising theories and consequently (I will argue) different knowledge and skills. The curriculum needs to represent the social work functions of understanding, and emancipation, and not just the instrumental function of problem-solving. This provides an integrating framework to inform selection of essential teaching content. This will be exemplified using social work with older people, although it is applicable to many different groups of people requiring social work help.

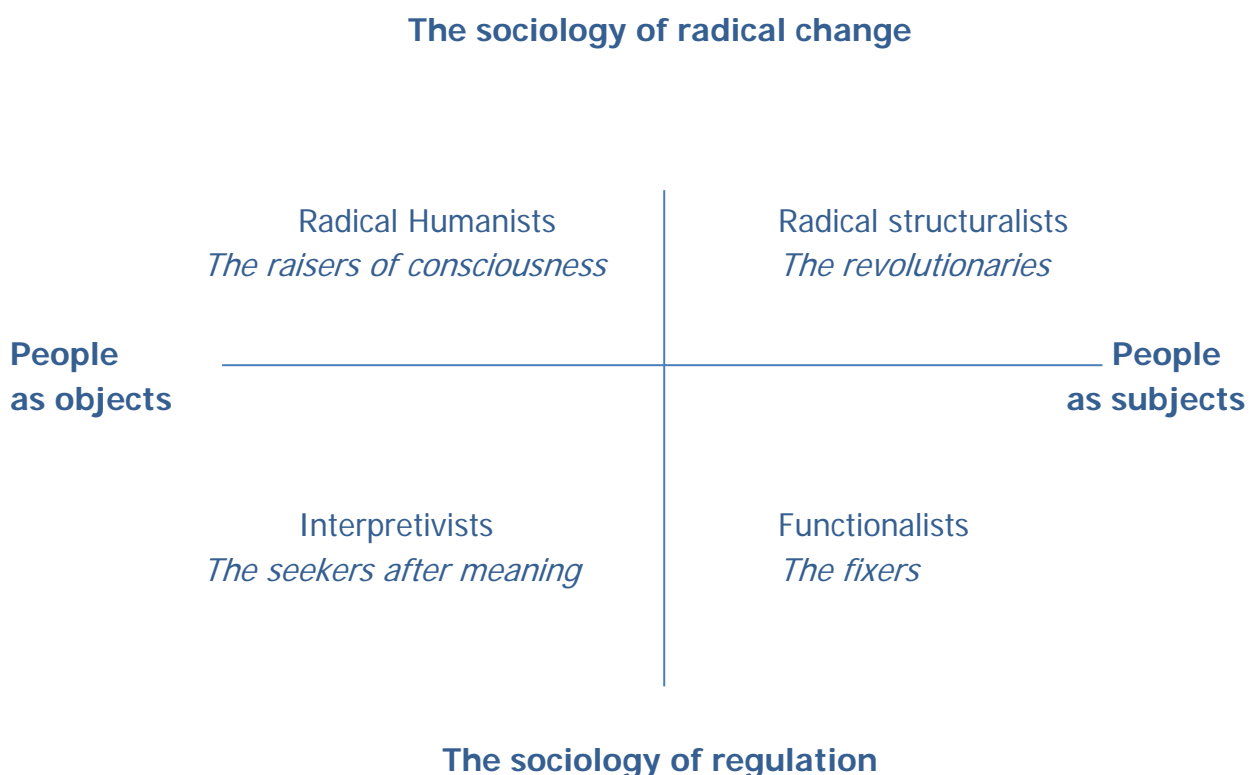
This stance does not contradict the core purposes of social work reflected in the PCF, but explicitly distinguishes the functions of control, understanding, and emancipation which are represented there implicitly. For instance, the PCF domains of "Intervention and Skills" and "Knowledge" relate clearly to the function of control; subjectivity and understanding are (to some extent) apparent in "Diversity" and "Values and Ethics"; and the domain of "Rights, Justice, and Economic Wellbeing" promotes emancipation. The value of critical theory is to reveal that these Capabilities support the exercise of different professional roles. The PCF incorporates but does not highlight these roles: the case made here is that they represent different interpretations of the purposes of practice, each with its distinctive knowledge, theory, skill and value base. Adopting a stance on the relative importance of these professional roles provides an integrating framework for decisions on qualifying curriculum content in distinct areas of practice, such as work with older people. It is worth noting that the Framework reflects a construction of social work tending towards a functionalist model of society and an individualised view of humanity, and is arguably attuned better to European and north American cultures than to those of emerging nations. The existing and proposed definitions of social work published by the International Federation of Social Work (2013) give greater prominence to the profession's role in social change, empowerment, and liberation than is apparent in the English Professional Capabilities Framework.

## **The place of theory in social work**

Howe (2008), has acted as a powerful advocate for the importance of theory in social work, emphasising the importance of middle-range theories. As he points out “What is to be done depends on what you think is going on” (Howe, 2008, p.9). He identifies theory’s purposes as description, explanation, prediction, and control. He focuses on the role of theory in informing action, describing its role as “increasing the practitioner’s ability to exercise conscious and deliberate mastery over his environment” (Howe, 2008, p.115). But theory informs understanding as well as control: at its best, it has the power to focus attention, to organise disparate observations, and to demonstrate relationships. Theory therefore needs to occupy a substantial role in professional education.

Howe argued that the choice of (social work) theory is partly determined by the views espoused either individually or collectively, about the nature of society, and the stance held in relation to people. He suggested, following Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) typology, that theories may be grouped along two dimensions, involving opposed (polar) views: **1** people as objects vs. people as subjects: **2** Society as well-ordered and stable (following a functionalist model) vs. fragmented and conflict-ridden (tending more towards a Marxist position). Howe suggested this creates four paradigms for social work practice, and that each corresponds to a practical orientation taken by social workers, which he labels accordingly (see Figure 1, below)

FIGURE ONE: THEORISTS AND PRACTITIONERS MAPPED TO IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONS  
After (Howe (2008)



He argued (Howe, 2008, p.46) that “in any piece of work, the problems perceived, the explanations offered, the aims devised, and the methods used” will vary fundamentally for each paradigm and its associated theories. Although he says less about this, it is clear that he considers that each demands a differing knowledge base, skill set, and value base.

## **Working with older people**

Critical theory highlights the alternative functions of knowledge. Howe’s typology of social work roles requires educators to accommodate each of Habermas’ “cognitive interests” – those of control, understanding and emancipation – served by the social work knowledge base. Higher education therefore needs to equip social workers with the knowledge (and skills and values) to operate in all four of Howe’s (2008) paradigmatic quadrants.

The diverse nature of social work practice with older people in England illustrates this well, as this reflects profound recent changes in national demography, and in the policy and practice context. The primary social work role adopted differs according to circumstances, and each requires a distinct repertoire of theory, knowledge and skills. A functionalist paradigm suggests itself as the starting point, where the social worker is a public servant, a “fixer” in Howe’s terms, acting to address (publicly-defined) social problems such as elder abuse, or “bed-blocking”.

Preparing students for this requires the appreciation and application of theories and concepts derived from biological, psychological and social sciences, and the skills to address them. From this perspective, social work appears as applied social science. This is reflected in the PCF domains of “Knowledge, Critical Reflection, and Analysis”, and “Intervention and Skills”, and is well supported by many of the curriculum guides e.g., that on Physical Health, Dementia, and End-of-Life Care (Fish, 2012).

By contrast, a central concern for subjective experience – whether of ageing or any other human situation – demands a different repertoire of theory, knowledge, and skills. Social work has generally taken an ethical stance which places the individuals’ concerns and priorities (Habermas’ second “cognitive interest” of understanding) at the centre of practice. While this is affirmed by clear recognition of the importance of involving service users in social work education (Social Work Reform Board, 2011), it is only partially recognised in the Professional Capabilities Framework, where the domains of “Values and Ethics” and “Diversity” both suggest a concern for individual experience. However, this underplays the importance of an appreciation of the older person’s inner world in shaping the ends and means of social work practice in many situations.

In the case of ageing, this is exemplified by the increasing emphasis on a person-centred approach in dementia and end-of-life care. Here valid explanation and legitimate control must be based on a deep appreciation of personal concerns and lived experience. A number of the curriculum guides do support this aim, with an emphasis on effective communication, and giving service users a voice in dementia and end-of life care (Boylan and Ray, 2012).

But this presents significant educational challenges. Kitwood's (1992) preliminary development of a theory of personhood in dementia, and later elaborations of this, can be used to demonstrate the value of insights into the nature and significance of the inner worlds not just of older people, but also those responsible in different ways for their care (Ray, Bernard, and Phillips, 2009). Involving older people in social work education to help students appreciate their perspective also offers much potential, but is less straightforward than with other service users. Students can also be introduced to some essential experiences of ageing through media such as prose, poetry, and film. The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE, 2013), and the University of Brighton (University of Brighton/Age UK, 2013), have produced useful resources to support this.

The central social work value of equality and respect for rights, corresponding to Habermas' third (emancipatory) interest, is well-represented in the PCF domains of "Rights, Justice, And Economic Wellbeing", "Values and Ethics", and "Diversity", as well as the curriculum guide on Oppression and Diversity (Singh, 2012). Howe considered that social workers may adopt two different roles in pursuit of these emancipatory ends, one with a focus on individual empowerment and addressing discrimination exerted at a personal level (acting as "raisers of consciousness"), and the other of "revolutionary", focusing on social change and addressing structural and cultural discrimination.

Operating at an individual level as "raisers of consciousness", involves promoting advocacy, self-determination, and the exercise of choice in health and social care. This requires social workers to possess a theoretical understanding of the nature of power in general, of ageism in particular, and of agency - individuals "potential to influence the events around them" (Jeffery, 2012, p.6). They need to acquire knowledge of relevant social structures and processes, and of practical measures to maximise self-determination, such as (in England) the 2005 Mental Capacity Act. Local knowledge, and the skills of advocacy are needed to apply this understanding and address discrimination.

Working within Howe's fourth ("revolutionary") role requires recognition of the socially constructed nature of ageing, and of the insights of critical gerontology. Chris Phillipson has highlighted how late old age has become "medicalised", to the detriment of person-centred and emancipatory perspectives (Phillipson, 2012). Ageing is problematized, enlisted



as a market opportunity, and used as the basis for inequitable treatment in a range of spheres. An appreciation of the dominance of this model, and a sound appreciation of the alternatives suggested by critical gerontology, is essential for social workers to practise ethically and competently. Such critical and emancipatory perspectives are represented in curriculum guidance, such as that on Human Growth and Development (Boylan and Ray, 2012), and Diversity and Oppression (Singh, 2012). Inculcating such perspectives is essentially an educational rather than a training role.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The argument is that curriculum design in qualifying social work programmes should be informed by an explicit stance on the purposes of professional education, and that these are not uncontested. Critical theory highlights three core purposes served by professional knowledge (which higher education is responsible for transmitting), and Howe's (2008) account distinguishes four roles adopted by practising social workers. The foregoing has demonstrated (in working with older people) how appropriate selection of teaching content can provide intending practitioners with the different theoretical and practical repertoires required for each role.

The approach outlined is applicable to many other areas of the qualifying curriculum in social work in England, and appears transferable to other developed nations where an established social work profession needs to adapt to major socio-economic changes. Elsewhere, Alphonse, George, and Moffatt (2008) have argued on a similar basis for significant changes in the (relatively new) standards of social work education and practice in India, in the light of globalisation and major shifts in cultural values. Their call for a change of focus, away from the "person-environment fit", towards social justice and empowerment, illustrates how an explicit paradigm shift might be adopted. Other paradigms might take precedence in England, but the value of taking an explicit position remains.

Developing a shared philosophy about the central purposes of professional education, based on the range of possible roles outlined, thus provides some valuable criteria for determining qualifying programme aims and content in particular areas of practice. It thus serves to inform curriculum design, assisting selection of appropriate content from the vast repertoire of available possibilities. Delivering such a curriculum is an educational enterprise: it goes beyond training students to exercise a range of capabilities. It also involves preparing them to do so according to an understanding of the core and enduring purposes of the social work profession, an allegiance to its central values, and an appreciation of the local and global context of practice, which only education can provide.

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## Figure Captions

FIGURE ONE: THEORISTS AND PRACTITIONERS MAPPED TO IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONS  
After (Howe (2008))