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An Overview
of the Book

Preparing a textbook to guide students in their training to become highly skilled generalist social workers who primarily work with individuals, families, and small groups is no easy task. Many different definitions exist for *generalist social work practice.* And, in the absence of a common definition of what constitutes generalist social work practice, it becomes even more difficult to delineate the specific knowledge domains and skill sets of the generalist social worker. We believe that having a clear definition at the outset can be useful in understanding *why* we have given focus to certain content and topics at the expense of excluding others. We also believe that a clear definition can help you develop a framework to help work through the complex decisions that are required of social work practitioners. These may seem like lofty claims, but we don't think they are.

Before moving forward and outlining the content of this chapter and the ensuing chapters, we want to bring your attention to the use of the phrase, "We believe. . . ." This phrase is purposefully used to help explicate certain philosophical positions in which we don't have objectively defined right and wrong answers. In other words, our *beliefs* are not *facts,* but we have rationales for all the content contained in this book as well as the content that has necessarily been excluded for purposes of brevity. At the outset, we believe that generalist practice social workers should be highly skilled in separating beliefs from facts and that every social work decision has a clearly explicated and defensible rationale.

In this introductory chapter, we first provide you with our definition of *generalist social work practice.* Then, we want to raise awareness of a few other beliefs that we consider to be important in our overall educational approach. Finally, we provide separate sections for social work students and social work instructors on how to use this book.

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What Is Generalist Social Work Practice?

Generalist social work practice is what a generalist social work practitioner does. This hardly satisfies our insistence on a clear definition, but it provides a good starting point. More specifically, it is suggestive of various activities as well as knowledge and skills that ensure effectiveness and efficiency when engaged in practice-related activities. To help achieve clarity in our definition, we will contrast a generalist with a specialist.

In our view, the primary difference between generalist and specialist social work practice is a matter of breadth versus depth. This may seem like an oversimplification, but the general idea serves our need. That is, we can consider the differences in the types of problems that a social worker could address on any given day. Consider the example of a social worker employed as a case manager at a community mental health center or another health-focused agency. Social workers in these positions have a wide range of tasks and responsibilities. Common responsibilities for this social worker would involve providing individual supportive counseling and facilitating support groups. The social worker will likely have some administrative responsibilities, such as helping clients complete paperwork for benefits or other services, as well as supervising students. Some social workers in these positions might also be engaged in advocacy efforts within the community, reaching out to other community stakeholder groups to provide information on issues and services. Thus, the generalist actively draws upon many different bodies of research, theory, and personal and professional experiences while also considering the roles of social justice within the various systems (e.g., individual, family, community). This can be considered *breadth* of knowledge.

On the other hand, a social work specialist may have a clearly and narrowly defined set of practice-related activities, such as providing therapy to persons with substance use disorders or conducting forensic interviews with children who have been sexually abused. The social work specialist, much like the generalist, may draw upon different bodies of research, theory, and personal and professional experiences, and also consider the role of social justice. However, the scope of the problems encountered by the specialist is more narrowly defined. And, often times, the social work specialist tends to focus on the more difficult or significant problems within a focused area. Thus, their scope in activities and knowledge informing their work are more narrowly defined, and a deeper understanding is typically required.

Hopefully, our delineation does not suggest a preference for either generalist or specialist social work practice. The differences are really a matter of degree, and it is often the case that social workers have to have generalist knowledge and skills as well as a specialty area. We choose to focus on generalist social work practice because we believe that social work practice with individuals, families, and small groups requires a breadth of knowledge and skills. More importantly, the knowledge and skill set of a generalist social worker readily generalizes to the work environment and activities of the specialist social worker. In fact, we take the bold stance that strong generalist

knowledge and skills are necessary—but not sufficient!—for all types of social work practice, including specialty practice.

Major Themes in Each Chapter

It would be useful to have a clearly defined list of skills and knowledge to guide your training in generalist social work practice. Unfortunately, this is not possible, but this book is organized around a number of major themes that we believe define *contemporary* social work practice. We also want to emphasize that we consider these to be contemporary themes of generalist social work practice and thus recognize the overall dynamic nature of social work practice. Twenty years ago, one would not have found a strong emphasis on evidence-based decision making or globally focused issues. And it is difficult to say with any degree of certainty what will make the list of essential themes twenty years from now, but envisioning such a list is no mere academic exercise. We believe it is important for social work students to be able to envision possibilities. The core themes we address throughout the book include advocacy, social justice, global focus, ethics, theory, and critical thinking.

Advocacy

Advocacy involves the act of giving support for a specific cause, which we regard as a central function of generalist social work practice. Advocacy can occur at all levels of social work practice (e.g., individuals, families, communities). As you work through the ensuing chapters, we encourage you to think about the different ways you can provide case advocacy for a particular individual or family or advocacy for at-risk or disenfranchised groups.

Social Justice

Social justice is grounded in the related concepts of human rights and equality. The specific rights relate not only to social rights but also to political and economic rights. As social workers, we work to promote these rights for all members of society. When you encounter social work problems, as well as the various scenarios presented in this book, we encourage you to view these problems and scenarios using a social work lens. We devote the next chapter of this text to helping you develop this critical lens.

Global Focus

This text has a strong global focus and includes the diversity of persons, ideas, belief systems, and experiences that one is likely to encounter in contemporary social work practice. A global focus also implies diversity, which is fundamental to the work we do and the values that we espouse as social workers. We encourage you to consider

the global relevance of the various issues that are provided in this text. Think about the different mechanisms that give rise to diversity. And consider how your practice decisions might change with a simple change in context—for example, when working with an immigrant population, consider how your work might change based on your client's country of origin. Ultimately, you want to sharpen your thinking to identify the factors that matter most in the services you provide, and bringing a global focus to your work is essential.

Ethics

Social work ethics refers to a system of core values that help define the conduct of social workers. It is often the case that we will encounter difficult decisions and complex situations, and we look to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics to assist us in helping to determine and sometimes defend a professional judgment or a particular course of action.

Theory

A *theory* is an organized system of knowledge that helps us describe, explain, and predict social phenomena. Social work is built on many different theories. And as a student of social work, you may have discovered that not all social work professionals and educators agree which are the *best* theories. Of course, the theories presented in this book represent what we consider to be essential theories to inform social work practice. We encourage you to consider the practical utility of these theories, but keep in mind that these represent only a small set of the theories available to help guide your practice.

Critical Thinking

In this text, we attempt to assist you in building a variety of critical thinking skills. For example, we emphasize the importance of articulating rationales for various decisions that you make as a social worker as well as grounding your decisions in the evidence-based practice (EBP) framework. We also encourage integrative thinking— that is, how do we weave together and apply the various themes of the book when making a practice-related decision or taking a particular course of action? In what ways does each theme contribute to these decisions? An entire chapter of this book is devoted to the aspect of EBP and evidence-informed practice, but we hope you will appreciate and learn to apply critical thinking to all aspects of your training and practice.

Our core themes are linked to the 2008 Council on Social Work Education Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE–EPAS). The CSWE–EPAS identifies 10 core competencies critical to effective social work practice. Each competency highlights the knowledge, values, and skills that are core to the competency as well as the practice behaviors that social workers need to demonstrate to become proficient in applying these core competencies. Table 1.1 provides the list of core

Table 1.1	10 Core Competencies: 2008 CSWE–EPAS*

1. Professional Identity: Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly.

2. Values and Ethics: Apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice.

3. Critical Thinking: Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments.

4. Diversity: Engage diversity and difference in practice.

5. Social and Economic Justice: Advance human rights and social and economic justice.

6. Research: Engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research.

7. Human Behavior and Social Environment: Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment.

8. Social Policy: Engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services.

9. Organizational Context: Respond to contexts that shape practice.

10. Engagement, Assessment, Intervention, and Evaluation: Engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

*Please note that the 2015 Draft 1 (October 2013) of the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) has identified nine social work competencies. These competencies include (1) ethical and professional behavior, (2) diversity and difference, (3) social justice and human rights, (4) practice-informed research and research-informed practice, (5) policy practice, (6) engagement, (7) assessment, (8) intervention, and (9) evaluation (http://www.cswe.org/File.aspx?id=69943).

Source: Council on Social Work Education Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) 2008.

competencies. In each chapter, we will highlight the core competencies emphasized in that particular chapter. Remember, these competencies are considered core to generalist social work practice and need to be a part of every professional social worker's portfolio of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Each core competency has identified practice behaviors that you will need to demonstrate in order to effectively engage in social work practice. You can find the practice behaviors that are linked to each competency at the CSWE website.

How This Book Is Organized

We authored this book with maximum flexibility in mind. Each chapter is designed to stand alone—that is, it does not necessarily call for information or skills from earlier chapters, although we believe that the order of the chapters capitalizes on learning.

Within each chapter, we have developed a variety of features that we would like to take a moment to highlight and explain:

- Chapter Learning Objectives: At the beginning of each chapter, we present a set of learning objectives. Keep these objectives in mind as you read the chapter. These objectives are intended to assist you in identifying the specific knowledge to be acquired. Other learning objectives can also be considered as part of the focus of the chapters, but the expressed objectives are the ones we consider most relevant.

- CSWE Core Competencies: We have worked in earnest to link the chapter content to the required core competencies related to social work knowledge and skills as defined by the CSWE. These core competencies can be of value to students in helping them to identify their specific areas of professional growth and development. For instructors and administrators, these can be used as a way to identify opportunities that can assist in monitoring educational outcomes.

- Case Situations: The case situations describes an issue confronting a social worker. Given our focus on diversity of persons, contexts, and issues, the case situations may not represent your specific interests or the population with whom you work. However, the case situations are intended to serve as a context for discussion and promote critical thinking across a range of issues. You will benefit from working actively to make connections between the case situations and the content covered in the respective chapter as well as in other chapters.

- Reflective Learning Activities: Throughout each chapter, you will find reflective learning activities to help you refine and challenge your thinking. For the reflective learning activities, you will discover that most do not have a single right or wrong answer. We consider the process of applying critical thinking during the activity to be the most important feature. In particular, take time to consider the various sources of information and the manner in which you integrate those sources to inform your ideas and decisions. The companion website for this book (http://study.sagepub.com/ruffolo) contains videos and links that will help you with these activities.

- Chapter Review Questions: Each chapter concludes with review questions. Similar to the other features of the book, these questions are designed to encourage further use and application of the information, which are necessary conditions for deeper understanding and learning. These questions are certainly not comprehensive of the chapter content, and we encourage you to formulate your own questions and actively test yourself on your knowledge building as you use this book.

As noted earlier, each chapter contains a case situation or situations featuring a social worker in action. These case situations are intended to provide a context for the information and skills presented. The case situations are referenced regularly throughout the chapter, so you are encouraged to begin each chapter by carefully reading the case situations.

One additional note about the organization of the book: the skill chapters highlight core skills that cross service settings and client/consumer populations. These core skills have emerged from a review of the evidence-based and evidence-informed practices that have demonstrated positive outcomes for individuals and families. Some of the core skills emphasize working with individuals, some with families, and some are used primarily when working in small groups. You will not find separate chapters focused on working with children, adults, families, or small groups, since the core skills cross all these domains.

Suggestions for the Social Work Student

As we wrote this text, we continually found ourselves wanting to make various suggestions that we believe will enhance your understanding of the material in this book as well as impact your broader social work training. For your convenience, we are providing them here with the hope that they will enhance your understanding of the content of this book as well as help you to highlight your ongoing educational and training needs.

Theory and Concept Tools

It is common to hear social work students express their frustrations with having to learn many different theories, particularly those that may be considered highly abstract without any immediate utility to inform their practice. We recognize the validity of these frustrations. At the same time, we often find that students have a hard time understanding the role that theory plays in sound social work practice. As you work through this book, we encourage you to view theory and the related concepts as tools you can use in your social work practice. More specifically, theory should serve a purpose in helping you describe, explain, and predict social phenomena in your practice. The theories you study and the concepts subsumed by those theories are designed to assist you in dissecting complex problems, which will help you identify and develop avenues for possible solutions.

Unfortunately, applying theories and concepts is a skill that takes a while to develop, and one that we will try to facilitate throughout this book. Toward this end, consider each theoretical system as a lens for viewing problems and issues in your own specific or emerging areas of interest. Actively think about how the theories and concepts apply to problems you encounter, and seek out guidance from your instructor when you don't make strong connections between the context of the text and the work you are involved in during your field placement. We are confident you will acquire a deep appreciation of the importance of theory and that your learning will be enhanced when practice-based connections are made.

Generalizable Knowledge and Skills

Related to the preceding suggestion, we encourage you to consider the *generalizability* of the theories and concepts you acquire, along with their associated technical

skills. This means considering how you can apply theory, concepts, and skills broadly to other populations, contexts, and problems. When you seek out new training opportunities, you can further apply this concept by considering the type of knowledge and skills you need to develop that may have a broader application. Establishing a broad-based foundation of knowledge and skills will not only enhance the effectiveness of your practice, it can also open up employment prospects. The diversity of social work practice is rapidly expanding, so the contemporary generalist social worker will need to have knowledge and a skill set that is responsive to the dynamics of the ever-changing environment.

As you work through the activities in this book, continually consider how the theories, concepts, and skills presented can apply to other practice domains. Build upon or change the conditions of each chapter's case situations and consider how the theories, concepts, and skills may or may not apply. And when you look for future training opportunities, identify those opportunities that will apply broadly to different populations, contexts, and problems.

Rationales for Decisions

The primary work that social workers are involved in requires making decisions. A *decision* is broadly defined to include any act that follows careful deliberation. And it is often the case that any given decision represents only one of many decisions involved in an ongoing process. We believe it is essential that social workers develop the capability of providing defensible rationales for all decisions they make while practicing. In other words, providing a rationale means giving a sound and thoughtful justification for your actions (and sometimes inaction). Doing so is important for helping to ensure that a high standard of care for your clients is maintained as well as for providing you with some degree of protection in the event of a resultant legal problem (e.g., malpractice suit). This is not to suggest that rationales will absolve social workers who may be involved in a legal dispute, but a strong rational decision-making process can help ensure a high standard of care and thus reduce the likelihood of legal dispute occurring in the first place.

As you work through the activities throughout this book, try to construct a rationale using and applying the major themes found in this book. For example, what is the existing theory and evidence to support your decision? How does your decision align with the values and principles of social work practice (ethics and social justice)? How did the characteristics of the client influence your decision (diversity)? We believe that a social work student can become more effective and efficient in establishing rationales for decisions by engaging in reflective thinking. Thus, take advantage of the reflective activities throughout this book, in addition to your broader training, to develop and refine this important skill.

Technology as a Friend (and Possibly a Foe)

As you already know, the world in which we live and the context of our social work practice is influenced, at least to some degree, by technology. In fact, we would go so

far as to argue that contemporary social work practice is embedded in the world of technology, requiring social workers to have strong technology competencies. Most of our clients are connected to the Internet and use it on a daily basis to manage many different parts of their lives. Thus, it should not be a surprise that many of the problems and issues that arise in social work practice are associated, to some degree, with technology. Virtually all new evidence is communicated in electronic format. Similarly, almost all government programs and services are described and managed in an online environment. And our communications with other professionals are commonly facilitated by some type of technology.

This book is not designed to promote the development of a comprehensive technology skill set. In fact, given the rapid changes in the world of technology, any book on the role of technology in social work practice is likely to be outdated shortly after publication. However, at various points throughout the text, we actively consider the role of technology and how it may impact generalist social work practice. We believe that technology, broadly defined, can be a tool for helping solve problems and improve processes. At the same time, technology can introduce a myriad of unintended consequences. Similar to clearly articulating rationales for your decisions that affect the well-being of your clients, it is also important to have a clear rationale for your use of technology in social work practice.

As you work through this text, we encourage you to continually think about the relevance of technology. For example, learning to use advanced search features of various websites and databases can help you more effectively and efficiently obtain the best available evidence to inform your practice. You should have an awareness of the rapidly changing environment of social media, including developing a sound rationale about how you will use social media in your personal life in ways that will not negatively affect your professional social work practice and developing a professional identity as a social worker. Even if you are a limited user of social media, you should have sufficient knowledge of social media to understand how client problems may manifest in an Internet environment. For example, assume you are working with a teenager who is being harassed/bullied at school because he openly identifies himself as being gay. How might your approach be different if the harassment were also occurring through electronic means—text messages or Facebook? Again, this text does not contain the individual answers to problems such as this, but we strongly encourage you to consider ways of using this book to help you explore possible problems and solutions when faced with the challenges involving technology.

Suggestions to the Social Work Instructor

As previously stated, we have worked in earnest to ensure that this text provides you with what we believe to be the essential knowledge and skills necessary for the development of generalist social work practice. In our approach, we have attempted to promote a general fund of knowledge regarding generalist social work practice along with the identification of core technical skills. Throughout the text, we have created various reflective activities and ethical challenges, which we believe are essential for students'

professional growth and development. However, these embedded activities and challenges alone will be beneficial only to the extent that the students are also actively making connections with the practice-based experiences they are involved in while in field placement. Therefore, as an instructor, we strongly encourage you to expand upon or adapt these activities as you see fit, particularly so these activities align with your local context/services.