5th Edition

Social Work & Human Development

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1: Understanding human development through the life course

Achieving a social work degree

This chapter will help you begin to meet the following capabilities, to the appropriate level, from the Professional Capabilities Framework:

- **Knowledge**
  - Apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory.
- **Critical reflection and analysis**
  - Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision making.
- **Professionalism**
  - Identify and behave as a professional social worker, committed to professional development.
- **Rights, justice and economic well-being**
  - Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic well-being.
- **Professional leadership**
  - Take responsibility for the professional learning and development of others through supervision, mentoring, assessing, research, teaching, leadership and management.

It will also introduce you to the following academic standards as set out in the social work subject benchmark statement:

3.1.4 Social work theory.
3.1.5 The nature of social work practice.

Introduction

In this first chapter, some of the key terms and perspectives that the book will develop in respect of life course development and social work practice are set out. The importance of human growth and development is outlined, in particular how it relates to social work practice. We shall be considering your own life course, how it has developed and how an understanding of this can help you in your social work practice. This chapter will cover why it is important to recognise your personal values and be aware of the impact that these may have on your practice. The critical importance of reflective practice will form an element of this discussion. The chapter will also look at some of the broad debates on human development as an introduction to the next chapter, which will examine in more detail different theoretical perspectives on how human beings become the people they are. It will show how the contribution of other professionals can enhance developmental knowledge, improving the social work response and thereby improving practice. In order to demonstrate the importance of knowledge and skills in human development for social work, this chapter will make the links between practice and public inquiries into health and social care practice in relation to specific cases.

Social work practice involves interactions with and between people, which are influenced by each person's life course and their experience and perceptions about their own life. Social workers need to understand people and how they develop, and place people's life situations in the context of the expectations of normal life course development. This will enable the worker to appreciate that a person's experience, their growth, development and life experiences have a direct impact on who they are and how they see their world.

The social work profession is based on the supposition that people can be helped and supported to change and grow as a result of their experiences. Service users consistently identify the importance of the knowledge, approach, relationships and the personal qualities of social workers (Beresford, 2007; Seden and Ross, 2007; Beresford *et al.*, 2008; Manthorpe and Martineau, 2008; Doel, 2010; Oliver, 2010; Beresford *et al.*, 2011; Winter, 2011). Working with service users involves comprehensively looking at the past, present and future of people's lives (Katz *et al.*, 2012). The life course is conceptualised as a series of age-linked transitions that are embedded in social institutions – for example family, schools, work, church, government – and history, as conditions that influence the life course across time and place (Bengston *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, in order for you to be sensitive and appropriate in your communications with people and in the services you offer and provide, you need to appreciate and understand their life course and what makes them who they are. Understanding how people grow and develop is central to the role and tasks of a professional social worker.

Social work is an activity that requires an ability to thrive and embrace dilemmas, conflicts, uncertainty and not knowing; practice is central to shaping the identity of social work:

Social work derives from the society of which it is part. The preoccupation of social work with people and their social circumstances creates its main occupational risk – a lack of specificity, an inherent ambiguity.

(Butrym, 1976, p. ix)

In acknowledging the constantly changing context of social work organisations and social work practice, Cree and Davis stress that:

the necessary qualities of social workers do not change: their ability to listen to people, to advocate on behalf of others and see them in the context of their whole lives. These are qualities that stand out in social work.

(2007, p. 12)

Life course development and social work practice

Development goes on throughout life. Because human beings are complex, the study of life course development is inter-disciplinary, drawing on many disciplines. These include biology, genetics, history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, medicine and education.

As you learn about human development through this book and your further reading, you will come across a number of terms that may appear to describe similar concepts. In this section you will be introduced to some of the key words that are commonly related to this topic. The interpretation of those words and how they are used in this book will be explained.

Throughout the book a life course perspective is taken. This will be expanded upon in the next chapter when you consider theoretical approaches to the study of human development. Taking a life course perspective means adopting an approach that considers the whole of a person's life as offering opportunities for growth, development and change. You will notice that the words 'life course' are used; however, in other texts you will find the words 'life span' and 'life cycle' applied in similar contexts. Léonie Sugarman (2001) writes from a psychological perspective and adopts the term 'life-span development' as she discusses 'life-span developmental psychology'. Paul Baltes (1987), also a developmental psychologist, describes the concept of a 'life-span perspective'. You will read more about his ideas in Chapter 2. In contrast Erik Erikson (1997), another theorist whose approach is explored in the following chapters, writes about the 'life cycle' from a psychosocial approach. The term 'psychosocial' describes an approach that considers both the individual psychology and the social context of people's lives on their individual development. The psychosocial perspective enables social workers to consider the influences of the relationship between the internal world of the service user and the social environment in which they live (Howe, 2009; Oko 2011). Erikson describes the concept of 'life cycle' as implying '*some kind of self-completion*' (1997, p. 9). The use of the word

'cycle' brings the notion of time and progression to life development, but it can be criticised for implying a circular process whereby in the later years of life there is a return to the dependency of childhood. Development is a lifelong concept and people's life course is rarely linear in its progression; further, our lives are shaped by political, economic, social, cultural and economic factors. Thus from psychosocial and sociological perspectives, the term 'life course' has become favoured and is the term that we shall adopt for the remainder of this book.

In order to develop your understanding of social work and human development the chapters that follow will introduce you to a range of theories, research and ideas. However, the underpinning philosophy of a life course perspective is emphasised, and its application to social work practice is developed through an understanding of the narrative approach. This narrative approach – or biographical approach as it is sometimes called – focuses on the individual's experiences through their own first-hand account of their life. Narrative social work can be defined as a 'conversation' between theory and practice, which can then lead to development in both social workers and service users (Roscoe *et al*., 2010). Within this book you will develop your knowledge and ideas by studying human life course development in the context of individuality and difference. You will learn about development in respect of people of differences in age, gender, levels of ability, race, ethnic and cultural background. However, where it has not been possible to cover each of these topics in detail, the significance of the narrative approach coupled with a whole of life course perspective is that stereotypical assumptions are challenged and diversity is valued. The narrative approach is explained further in Chapter 2.

Summary of definitions and key concepts

Development A complex, continuous and progressive series of changes that occur as a result of maturation and experience.

Life course The progression and path an individual takes from conception to death.

Life course perspective A viewpoint that considers the whole of a life (from conception to death) as offering opportunities for growth, development and change.

Life cycle An alternative term used to describe the life course; this is now considered to be an out-of-date term.

Life span An alternative term used to describe the life course, often used in developmental psychology.

Narrative or biographical approach A way of working with individuals that focuses on the importance of their own first-hand account of their life, their experiences and the meanings they attach to them. Narrative social work can be viewed as a 'conversation' between theory and practice.

The ideas explained above will be considered in more detail as you progress through this book. In the next section you will consider your own life course, and what this has meant to you from your personal perspective, much as you would take a narrative approach with a service user.

Understanding your own life experiences

To understand the impact of human growth and development on social work practice we will begin by asking you to look at your own life course development. Examining your own life, and the experiences that have influenced it, is an important stage in learning the significance of life course development. By understanding and making sense of your own life experience, you will be able to appreciate the importance of key events in shaping you as a person. We will begin by exploring that development.

Activity 1.1

Think about your own life, your childhood and the time you were growing up. By following the activities below, you will represent your life in a diagram:

- Draw a line to represent the 'ups' and 'downs' of your life so far.
- Now place those life events against the peaks and troughs of your line.
- Consider the line you have drawn, and identify for each of these points the main influencing factors – in other words what made the change happen, and were you able to make choices?

When you have completed this, consider your thoughts and feelings at these times (for example, 'happy', 'sad', 'excited', 'uncertain').
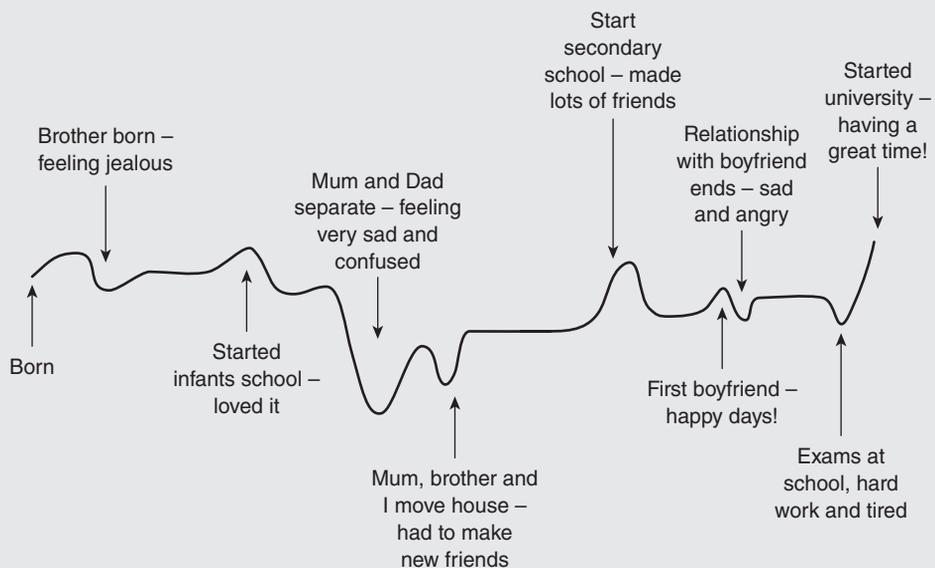
Figure 1.1   Example of a life course line

Comment

Every person completing this activity will have drawn a different diagram. However, if you have the opportunity to compare the life course line that you have drawn with another person, perhaps another student, you are likely to find a number of common themes. Figure 1.1 is an example that we have completed.

You will find the concept of life road maps developed in Chapter 2 of *Social Work Practice* (Parker and Bradley, 2014).

You may recognise many similarities that may be linked to events that have occurred at certain ages – for example, we are all dependent upon others for the first few years of our lives, and there may be other similar milestones in our lives, such as starting school, moving to secondary school, or biological developments such as puberty and so on. There will also be differences that may be linked to your history, age, class, gender, culture, disability and/or ethnicity – such as living in the same town all your life or moving around; the influence of family life events such as marriage, children or divorce; the impact of your race and culture on your upbringing and so on. Thinking about your own life, and making sense of the experiences you have had, will be invaluable in gaining some insight into the impact of your life course on your development and growth as a person.

You may feel that you have had a fairly uneventful life, or conversely that a lot has happened in your life. However, we have all experienced changes and obstacles. What you have been doing in this activity is identifying the personal and social impact of life events. These can also be called 'periods of transition', which are phases or stages within a person's life course when people move through life events.

All people will experience transitions in their lives. An example of this might be the impact that arises from choosing to go to university.

Activity 1.2

Think about the impact of making the decision to study at university. What influenced your decision? What impact has this had on your life and life style? What impact do you hope that gaining a qualification will have for your future life course?

Comment

Some of the issues you might have raised may be related to your family, friends, finance, where you live and so on. What will be apparent here is that this decision can be described as a major life decision as it will have been influenced by your past life experience, will have impacted on your immediate experience, and will significantly influence and impact on your future life experiences.

15

Understanding the impact of transitions within a person's life course is important for social work practice in order to help us understand other people's lives. Although people may experience the same life event, their response to the transition and the decisions they make will be different. People will have different perceptions of what is happening to them as they move through a transition in their lives, and thus their response and the learning they gain from it will be different. For example, you may have enjoyed school, tolerated it or hated it. This could be due to your academic ability, the influence of your peers or the attitude and response of a particular teacher. People's response to these transitions may be different – for example, a response to 'hating' a particular teacher may have been that you took no part in the learning or it may have been to work hard to 'show them' what you could do. Biological and historical timings have consequences for our behaviours, outcomes and well-being. Thinking of life development in stages or points of crisis, which we all attempt to move through successfully, can assist us in understanding the challenges faced by people at various points in their lives.

You may be aware of people who have complex life issues but appear to cope with them, and other people who seem to be unable to cope with any issues within their lives. As social workers we need to recognise the opportunities to work with people through transition as an opportunity to grow. We also need to try to enable people to use these events to trigger change and move on and develop. People can have crises and still have happy and fulfilling lives. Additionally, there is the opportunity to support people through, for example: providing services; linking them with other people in similar positions for sharing and support; working with communities to promote change.

Case study 1.1 is an example of a major life transition.

Case study 1.1

Following a violent outburst from her children's father, resulting in her receiving broken ribs and a broken arm, Christine has moved into her mother's home with her children, Ashley (2 years) and Chloe (3 months). Ashley is 'clingy' and demanding. Christine finds it difficult to 'bond' with Chloe; she is fretful and difficult to feed. She is lonely and depressed, missing her friends and home. Christine's mother is very concerned about her daughter, and the children and the consequences for their future. Recently the children's father has been texting her, remonstrating with her to come home, stating that this was a one-off incident caused by stress at work, and would never happen again. He states that he wants to see the children. Christine does not want to return but feels too depressed and 'exhausted' to make any decisions.

Activity 1.3

Think about (reflect on) Case Study 1.1:

- Write down the thoughts and emotions that you have experienced in considering this case.
- How might the individuals involved in this case be feeling?
- Which issues seem to be the significant ones? As a social worker for this case what might you be trying to achieve? What could be the consequences of this for Christine/her children/the children's father/Christine's mother/yourself?
- What do you need to do in order to make things better/improve the situation/resolve the situation/feel better/get on better?
- What broader issues need to be considered if any action is to be successful? What might be the consequences of this action?

Comment

In the above activity you are being invited to reflect on the case which may have raised a whole range of different emotions: concern, shock, anger, helplessness, fear. You may have considered 'practical' aspects of help (e.g. access to legal advice) as well as 'emotional support' issues (e.g. support for Christine in coming to terms with her previous, current and future situation; issues in relation to the psychological, social and emotional welfare of the children). You could have found this a difficult activity, and practically you may be feeling that you need further information, including evidence from research and supervision, and advice from experienced key professionals, to address some of these questions.

Life course development demonstrates some key principles (Bengston *et al.*, 2012). Our lives are embedded in relationships with others and influenced by them. There is an interconnectedness of lives, particularly across the generations; for example, the factors that influenced our grandparents' choices may have an influence on where you live, the work your family is involved in, the language you speak. Historical and social events can create opportunities and constraints that can impact on choices and behaviours, changing the direction of lives.

People make choices within the opportunities and constraints of their own lives – for example, the family, community and cultural aspects that influence and impact on our lives. As social workers we do need to recognise and promote opportunities to support people as active agents in their own lives. For example, as social workers we should respect, uphold, and defend each person's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity and well-being; respect, promote and support

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people's dignity and choice (as far as this does not threaten the rights, safety and legitimate interests of others); and empower people to be involved in decisions affecting their lives (British Association of Social Work (BASW), 2012). Human development, relationships and events have consequences throughout our lives, for example as their being cumulative in providing advantages and disadvantages. Structural inequalities can have a profound impact on people's lives. For example, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report 'Monitoring poverty and social exclusion 2016' (Tinson *et al.*, 2016) identifies the alarming concentration between poverty and disability, the risks of poverty for the growing numbers of people living in the private rented sector, and the continuing rise in poverty for those who work. The Marmot Report, commissioned by the Secretary of State for Health, examines the most effective evidence base for reducing health inequalities in England. Marmot identifies that '*inequalities in health arise because of inequalities in society – in the condition in which people are born, grow, live, work and age*' (2010, p. 16).

An important aspect of your practice as a social work student and a social worker is that of 'reflective practice' (Schön, 1983/1987). The notion of reflection is evident in many different disciplines (for example, for education or health professionals). Reflective practice means fundamentally thinking about (reflecting on) your approach before, during and after any intervention. It seems to include such complex activities as 'learning from experiences', 'thinking about', 'turning back on self', and 'deconstructing'. Schön (ibid.) describes technical rationality (rules) and professional artistry (reflection in action), and for him very often the 'theory' or rules espoused by practitioners are quite different from the 'theory' or assumptions embedded in the actual practices of professionals. Reflective practice therefore involves an ability to be aware of the 'theory' or assumptions involved in professional practice in order to close the gap between what is espoused and what is enacted in an effort to improve both. Fook (2002) suggests that reflective practice involves learning from experience by examining fundamental assumptions and reintegrating experiences (as well as reformulating meaning and principles for living), resulting in new guidelines for action.

Case study 1.1 continued

Following a visit by the Health Visitor to support Christine and monitor the children, Christine allowed her to contact the local Family Support Team. The social worker visited and provided support and advice. They have planned together ways in which Christine and her children can move forward with their lives: this has included opportunities to talk about her feelings and

⟶

concerns; seeking legal advice in relation to the children's welfare; identifying a playgroup for Ashley; and help with seeking her own accommodation. In addition the social worker has arranged for Christine to attend a support group at the Women's Centre, providing her with an opportunity to share her experiences with people in a similar position, to learn ways to cope and to develop strategies for the future.

As social workers we also need to recognise the impact of our own role and decisions as they impact on people's lives and major life transitions. Potentially, professional intervention itself can have an impact on a person's life development (for example, where someone who experiences mental ill health is made the subject of a compulsory admission to hospital under the mental health legislation). Whilst this may be in the best interest of their safety and the safety of others, the potential impact on that individual's life and life course could be enormous. Equally, a lack of social work intervention or poor practice, when working with young people moving from foster or residential care to independence, can impede their progress through this important transition period. Therefore the potential for social work interventions to interrupt and damage individual life courses is considerable.

Reflective practice is concerned with thinking about (reflecting on) the best approach before, during and after any intervention. Thus, as a social worker, you recapture the experience, think about your practice in the situation, and then evaluate it. This requires you to be aware of the knowledge, experience and skills that inform your actions and decisions and how you apply them to your practice. Personal and professional values will underpin every aspect of this practice.

The impact of values on understanding human development

As we have seen so far, our own life experiences help us understand a great deal about the experience, shape and course of our lives. This experience has helped to shape the person that we each become and our responses and choices. Our beliefs and values are deep-rooted and impact on the way we live our lives. It is critical that we recognise and acknowledge that impact on our professional practice as it could shape our attitudes and responses to others.

Being aware of the impact of people's life experiences on their values, beliefs and their own identity can also help us make sense of other people's lives and life courses (for example, through understanding and sharing experiences with others, such as the experience of going to school, being a teenager, studying at university and so on). However, we should not make assumptions that our experiences are the same as everyone else's. Everyone's experience is unique and his or her interpretation of it will be different. Whilst our own experiences are

important, this is not sufficient in itself as a criterion on which to base our understanding of others. We cannot assume that we know everything on the basis of those experiences. At a personal level, for example, it may be hard to understand how an adult can sexually abuse a child or how one person can be violent towards another. It is important that we recognise how our own life experiences impact on our understanding of other people's situations and shape our personal values, beliefs and assumptions of others.

To give you an example of how a particular value and belief, which has developed through a person's life course experiences, may impact upon their thoughts and practices as a social worker or student, we shall briefly consider religion. Gilligan and Furness (2006) reported on research undertaken with social work students and practitioners to explore the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. The following research summary utilises short extracts taken from their research findings.

Research summary

As humans, we internalise many of our early beliefs. Our actions and behaviour tend to be shaped by our experiences and to some extent by the dominant religious legacies that have become enmeshed with and translated into the cultural traditions, rituals and customs of communities.

(Gilligan and Furness, 2006, p. 625)

A (further) comparison of responses from students to specific interventions suggests a fairly consistent pattern between particular groups; 64 per cent of the Muslim students considered 'The use of religious or spiritual language or concepts' as potentially appropriate, in contrast to only 25 per cent of Christian students and 36 per cent of those holding no current beliefs. Also, a higher number of Muslim students considered 'Recommending participation in a religious or spiritual program' and 'Participation in a client's rituals as an intervention' as potentially appropriate. This difference seems likely to result from the fact that religious beliefs and customs are central to the lives of Muslims and that they are, as a result, more likely to recognise the potential importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of others. However, while most of the Christian students saw the intervention 'Helping clients develop ritual as an intervention (e.g. visiting graves of relatives, house blessings, etc.)' as potentially appropriate, most Muslim students did not, possibly because of the essentially euro-centric nature of the examples offered.

(ibid., pp. 631–632)

In summarising the findings of their research into the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice Gilligan and Furness state that:

there is a clear need for all social work practitioners and educators to give greater priority to exploring the potential significance of religious and spiritual beliefs in their training, in their professional practice and in the lives and perspectives of service users and colleagues. Social workers need to be able to respond appropriately to the needs of all service users, including those for whom religious and spiritual beliefs are crucial. 'Culturally competent' practice depends, amongst other things, on an understanding and appreciation of the impact of faith and belief.

(ibid., p. 617)

In a later research study with social work students undertaken by Mulder (2015), he highlights that a lack of knowledge can generate religious discrimination, potentially restricting the quality of service delivery. Participants also noted the need for cultural competence in working with populations of diverse spiritual and religious traditions and practices.

The significance of taking account of and valuing difference in people's life courses, cultures, own beliefs and experiences was highlighted through the report into the death of Victoria Climbié.

Case study 1.2

Victoria Climbié died on 25 February 2000, aged 8 years and 3 months. Her aunt and partner were subsequently convicted of her murder and are serving sentences of life imprisonment. A number of professionals had contact with Victoria, her aunt and partner, including Social Services. On 20 April 2001, Lord Laming was appointed by two secretaries of state to conduct three statutory inquiries. Together they would become known as the Victoria Climbié Inquiry (Laming, 2003). This report has raised significant practice issues and has also been the conduit for a widespread reform of services for children and families (see *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES, 2004)). Evidence from the Victoria Climbié Inquiry indicated that a lack of understanding of cultural difference, by a range of different professionals, contributed to the death of this child (Laming, 2003, cited in Gilligan and Furness, 2006, p. 634).

Cultural competency is a balance between ethnocentrism and cultural relativism (Korbin, 2007). 'Ethnocentrism' is the belief that your own cultural beliefs and practices are preferable and superior to all others. The danger here is that there is an assumption of a single standard for practice and that it imposes the beliefs or behaviours of the dominant culture on all

the population. We may therefore misidentify cultural practice as poor practice. Cultural relativism is the belief that every culture must be viewed as equal to all others and that culturally sanctioned behaviours cannot be judged by the standards of another culture. We therefore may assume that all behaviours and beliefs are culturally relevant.

Cultural competence in life course development allows us to keep a focus on the needs of the service users. We need to be able to distinguish between a healthy child or adult and one whose development is being impaired because of their circumstances (for example, because of abuse or neglect). Further, whilst we need to be sensitive to, acknowledge, respect and take account of culture and diversity, we also need to see past this to identify any actual or potential impairment to health and development. In complex circumstances, such as were identified in the circumstances that led to the death of Victoria Climbié, this can be challenging; however, being culturally sensitive and competent as a professional social worker is essential.

Cultural competency evolves over time through the process of attaining cultural knowledge, and becoming aware of when cultural mores, values, beliefs and practices are being demonstrated; sensitivity to these behaviours is consciously occurring, and one purposely utilises culturally-based techniques in practice with service users and in service delivery. Cultural competence involves such things as developing relevant knowledge and skill; being sensitive, open-minded and respectful; seeking appropriate advice and support; and being aware of the impact of oppression, racism and racial abuse on others and how to challenge this.

Case Study 1.3 highlights the case of Steven Hoskin, who was murdered by people who targeted him because of his learning disability.

Case study 1.3

In July 2006, Steven Hoskin was found dead at the bottom of a 100-foot railway viaduct in St Austell, Cornwall. On the night of his death, he had been tortured by five people for hours before his death, suffering various injuries inflicted upon him. His murder was a culmination of an ongoing series of abuses occurring over a period of months. Steven was a 38-year-old man with learning disabilities and numerous agencies and organisations came into contact with him throughout his lifetime. He had serious mental health issues and was in contact with a number of agencies as a result. He was also regarded by several agencies not as a vulnerable adult but as a perpetrator of anti-social behaviour and worse. He had been charged and convicted of assault, and was known to be verbally abusive when drunk. There were complaints from neighbours about noise emanating from his bedsit. He was experienced as being at the heart of many and repeated social and health problems where he lived (Flynn [for Cornwall Adult Protection Committee], 2007).

Case Study 1.3 provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the importance of safeguarding vulnerable adults. Everyone has the right to live as independently as possible, and being able to take risks is part of everyday living. Individuals are an active force in constructing and shaping their own life courses through the choices and action taken; this can be referred to as 'human agency'. But social workers have a significant role in ensuring that safeguarding processes are in place to prevent vulnerable individuals coming to harm. Grant (2012) reminds us that taking a life course perspective with vulnerable adults incorporates the key dimension of 'temporality' (timing in life course) into practitioner thinking, in which we need to take account of individual biographies in understanding their present experiences, as well as consideration of the past and its potential impact on the future. This means it is important to examine the factors that shape the evolving experience across the life course. As such we need to develop a capacity for *anticipatory thinking and intervention* (Grant, 2012, p. 230) when safeguarding individuals.

The research, case studies and examples shown in this chapter provide powerful lessons for us to reflect upon. Within our practice we need to ensure that we balance our personal beliefs and values about how we should live our lives – such as those based on religion and culture – with those of the service users and carers we work with. Further, we need to recognise how life course considerations may support an understanding of the context in which abuse takes place, the impact of time (past, present and future) on the life course, and the safeguarding practice that might then need to follow.

Ways of explaining human life course development

So far in this chapter you have considered how your own life course experiences may have influenced your growth and development; you have also explored the significance of personal beliefs and values in understanding the individual and the critical importance of developing skills in reflective practice.

Case study 1.4

Kayleigh is 14 years of age, living on a large inner city estate which has a reputation for anti-social behaviour from young people, with use of alcohol and other drugs. Kayleigh helps her mum as much as she can in caring for the home and looking after her younger brothers and sister. Kayleigh's teachers describe her as very able and, up until recently, she has been progressing well in her studies. Over the last few months her school attendance has

→

23

become sporadic; she complains about being bored and has begun to stay out late into the night. Sonia, her mother, is a regular user of alcohol and other drugs, supporting her habit by dealing in soft drugs. Sonia's mother died five years ago of causes linked to her alcohol dependency. Kayleigh's father, John, has been in and out of prison for most of Kayleigh's life, and is currently serving an eight-year jail sentence for drug offences. John's mother supports Kayleigh and her mother as much as she can, but she has poor physical health. John's stepfather has a history of violence towards his mother and now lives in another part of the country with a new family.

Activity 1.4

Think about the range of responses that Kayleigh's situation raises from you and answer the following questions:

- How do you feel about Kayleigh and her situation?
- What might Kayleigh feel about her life?
- What might Kayleigh's family feel about her?
- How might the public/society feel about Kayleigh/young people and alcohol and other drug use?

Comment

While you will have had to make judgements based on very limited information, it almost certainly will have raised a range of different views and dilemmas for you. Your response to this activity will not only be concerned with considering your professional response and values, it will also be influenced by your personal values and beliefs (for example, some people may feel that Kayleigh's behaviour is a 'cry for help'; others may feel that there are aspects of 'normal' behaviour for young adolescents, especially those with Kayleigh's background and circumstances; others may feel this is unacceptable behaviour that needs to be dealt with by public agencies such as the police). As a professional social worker you will need to think about how you can balance the support, care and rights of young people against your responsibility and accountabilities to the community and wider society.

Within Case Study 1.4 there seems to be some indication in Kayleigh's background that certain of her characteristics are part of her biological make-up. We also need to consider how individuals are influenced by their upbringing and surroundings.

Case study 1.4 continued

As a child Sonia attended a special unit for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Sonia and her younger brothers and sisters spent periods of time in care because of their parents' neglectful behaviour, linked to their mental health issues. John's own background was more stable until the death of his father in a car accident when he was three years old, and his mother's marriage to his stepfather when he was seven, who was physically and emotionally abusive towards his mother. At 14 years of age John spent increasing time away from home, with groups of other young people, including Sonia, becoming involved in drug use and dealing. At the age of 15 Sonia gave birth to Kayleigh.

Following this Sonia and John began to live together, living in a series of bed and breakfasts and a hostel for homeless people. In order to survive and have money for their increased drug use, John would steal and Sonia would work occasionally as a prostitute. Sonia suffered from serious postnatal depression after giving birth, which deepened into clinical depression when John was imprisoned for two years for a drug-related offence, when Kayleigh was six months old. Sonia's depression has been accompanied by binge drinking, leading to various periods of outpatient treatment and hospitalisation. Kayleigh was placed in the care of a series of relatives. Her parents finally obtained a council house when Kayleigh was three years old. By the age of 5 Kayleigh had two brothers and a sister. Although her parents are still together, they have a volatile relationship. The family continue to have an erratic lifestyle, largely due to her parents' drug and alcohol use. Since John was sent to prison, Sonia has been earning money to fund her drug and alcohol use through prostitution in her own home; one of the men recently tried to kiss Kayleigh and this has frightened her. Kayleigh has being attending school on a regular basis and is considered an 'able' student; lately her attendance has been giving cause for concern. She is a member of a local 'gang', a group of young people who are involved in shoplifting from local shops, using alcohol and experimenting with 'soft' drug use. They hang out at a local park, verbally abusing and bullying the children who come to play there.

Activity 1.5

Now you know more about Kayleigh's situation, list possible explanations for her behaviours.

Comment

You may have come up with a number of ideas. Your thoughts are likely to arise from two main perspectives. Perhaps you thought that Kayleigh's behaviour was caused by some natural, inborn predisposition for bad behaviour that was part of her individual make-up. Or perhaps you thought that her childhood, background and upbringing had led to some of these behaviours.

These two explanations are examples of opposing theories that attempt to account for individual behaviours and qualities. This is known as the 'nature or nurture' debate.

The 'nature' viewpoint argues that our genes predetermine who we are and our characteristics are inherited. We have inborn biological characteristics that are hereditary from our birth-parents at the point of conception. There is certainly significant evidence to suggest that some of our characteristics are inherited, such as intelligence and personality. However the danger in adopting this perspective is that it assumes change is not possible – we are the way we are and there is little we can do about this.

The 'nurture' viewpoint argues that fundamentally our environment, the influence of culture and social context, experiences and the way we are brought up influence our development – the complex forces of the physical and social world that influence our biological make-up and psychological experiences before and after birth. Evidence can be found of this in patterns of family behaviour (for example, whether family members are 'introvert' or 'extrovert', the way they demonstrate affection to one another and others). Yet does this argument stereotype individuals and families into certain 'types'? For example, in some 'extrovert families' there may be an individual who is extremely introverted.

Activity 1.6

You may wish to reflect on your own background and family and consider which aspects of your/your families' personality reflect 'nature' or 'nurture'. How might you account for 'differences' between family members? Can you identify ways in which your upbringing influences your values and beliefs?

Case study 1.4 continued

Jill is Kayleigh's aunt, her father John's sister. She is married to a software development consultant and they live in a pleasant home in the suburbs of the city. Jill and her husband have offered to care for Kayleigh. They have an active lifestyle and, although they have no children, appear committed to Kayleigh and supporting a change in her behaviour, believing that their lives and lifestyle can present a positive model for her.

Comment

This case example raises a number of fundamental questions: are people's behaviour and actions predetermined? How do we 'inherit' our behaviour? What effect does the environment we grow up in have on our behaviour and actions? Some people would argue that genes and the family we come from will determine the way we make choices and therefore the causes of our behaviour are predetermined, such as the way we live our lives. Others would argue that it is 'free will' – that we change by our own efforts.

The issues this case raises show that it is too simplistic to argue from one point of view. It is most likely that a complex interaction between a range of factors contributes to who we are, for example:

- the genes that we inherit;

- our physical appearance and characteristics, such as the way we look;

- our behaviour, which may attract a favourable or unfavourable response;

- the way we are brought up, such as by a range of carers;

- environmental factors, such as the area we live in, the food we eat;

- our cultural background and appearance;

- cultural stereotypes, such as those associated with age, the social class we are judged to come from;

- cultural values: each culture has certain values associated with different ages;

- role changes: attitudes towards different ages are greatly influenced by the roles that are played, such as for those who have retired, social attitudes are less sympathetic;

- our personal experiences;

- the choices we make;

- the opportunities that come our way;

- the impact of other people on and in our lives.

As you have been thinking about Kayleigh, her behaviours and her family, you have been examining different aspects of her situation and this shows how difficult it can be to understand people's life courses, the influences upon them and the complex events they may have been through.

The exploration of these 'nature' and 'nurture' theories in this chapter has introduced you to one of the fundamental broad debates on human development. Within Chapter 2 of this book we shall be looking in more detail at the key theoretical models used to help us understand development across the life course and consider how theory is applied to social work practice. One of the benefits of looking at different theoretical ideas is that it gives us a wider perspective, taking us beyond our own particular life experiences.

Interprofessional practice

We have seen, therefore, that social workers need to be open to a range of interpretations, critical approaches, theories and debates in relation to life course development in order to understand their use in practice. Social work practice within a human life course development context is no different. The logical consequence of taking this approach and developing an understanding of theories from a range of disciplines is that social work practitioners

will take a holistic approach to their practice. This means taking account of every aspect of an individual's life – in other words, building up an understanding of the whole person. A truly holistic understanding of an individual's circumstances can only be achieved by working in partnership with other professional disciplines, with service users and their carers. Interprofessional practice will enable us to bring together a range of knowledge and understanding about all the different aspects of a service user's life, and thereby ensure a holistic approach to practice.

We have already highlighted the case of Stephen Hoskins (Flynn, 2007). The review into his death highlighted the complexity of the case and the various interventions by professionals. Professionals' systems failed to bring together this information into a coherent 'whole' that could be communicated between the different agencies to ensure a shared assessment and understanding of Stephen's needs.

The importance of taking all perspectives into account has been highlighted by a number of inquiries into the serious harm or death of children. This has been highlighted by the Victoria Climbié Inquiry that was referred to previously:

> It is deeply disturbing that during the days and months following her initial contact with Ealing Housing Department's Homeless Persons Unit, Victoria was known to no less than two further housing authorities, four social services departments, two child protection teams of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), a specialist centre managed by the NSPCC, and she was admitted to two different hospitals because of suspected deliberate harm. The dreadful reality was that these services knew little or nothing more about Victoria at the end of the process than they did when she was first referred to Ealing Social Services by the Homeless Persons Unit in April 1999.

(Laming, 2003, p. 3, para. 1.16)

Davies and Ward (2011), in their review of research on identifying and responding to child maltreatment, highlighted studies which demonstrated that proactive social work can be very effective, with better outcomes for children where there is evidence of careful assessment, thoughtful planning and proactive case management. They highlight the importance of theories of child development as a central element, particularly in demonstrating the consequences of maltreatment on children's mental and physical health, learning and education, socialisation and life chances (ibid., p. 5).

We have provided this example to demonstrate one aspect of the significance of interprofessional working. It can be seen that there are many different professional perspectives and areas of knowledge which need to be brought together and co-ordinated. Within social work, therefore, if we are to ensure good practice, we need to work across disciplines, taking account of all aspects of an individual's life course in developing a holistic approach to social work practice.

Reflection point

- What do I know, or can I do now, that I did not know or could not do before I did this section of studying?
- Is there anything I do not understand or want to explore further?
- What else do I need to know to extend my professional development and learning in this area?

Chapter summary

Life course development is about each one of us and our life experiences from birth to death. It is important that social workers understand about human growth and development and the impact that this has on individuals, their experiences, and their own interpretations of their lives.

This chapter began by introducing you to some of the terms that are used in the study of human life course development. We also explained the importance of taking a life course perspective and supporting this with the application of a narrative approach to practice. These concepts are core features of the book and are revisited in its later chapters.

Social workers need to understand their own life course development and the significance that this has had on the values and beliefs that they have developed themselves. This will enable individual professionals to be aware of the significance of taking a non-judgemental approach to practice. Social work practice must take account of individual, social and cultural differences, otherwise it risks being oppressive and discriminatory. Therefore, social workers must also use their background knowledge and skills to enable service users to express their own interpretations of their life courses and their impact on the situations in which they find themselves.

As well as an awareness of the course your own life has taken, social work practitioners need to have a wide range of knowledge from a span of theoretical disciplines to ensure that all aspects of an individual's make-up are considered and appreciated when working with them. In this chapter, we have shown how a number of formal inquiries into health and care practices, following specific incidents of concern, have identified how knowledge and understanding of human development and growth can improve social work practice. By using appropriate skills, involving service users and working in partnership across professional disciplines, poor practice and resultant mistakes can be reduced and the overall understanding of individual service users' needs will be greatly enhanced.

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In the next chapter we shall explore theoretical perspectives in more depth, outlining the models commonly used by social workers and other professionals when working with people in a variety of settings. We shall develop the concepts outlined in this chapter and begin to compare and contrast these models and apply them to familiar social work practice situations. This will form a link to the subsequent chapters which will deal with more specific areas of social work practice, with Chapters 3 and 4 focusing on social work practice with children, young people and their families, and Chapter 5 exploring social work practice with adolescents. Chapter 6 will develop your knowledge of life course development in early and middle adulthood, and the final chapter will concentrate on practice with older people and their families.

Further reading

Gaine, C (2010) *Equality and Diversity in Social Work Practice.* London: Sage.

This book acts as a guide for students in developing an understanding of different social and cultural groups, illustrating how the social work value base can be a central part of such understanding.

Horner, N (2016) *What is Social Work?* (5th edn). London: Sage.

This social work text explores the foundations of social care in the UK, how it evolved and why. It answers key questions on mental health, working with older people, working with families and children, directions for social care, and the implications of interprofessional working.

Howe, D (2008) *The Emotionally Intelligent Social Worker*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

David Howe explains the theory of emotional intelligence, its vital practical value and the importance of understanding and managing emotions for effective professional practice.

Parrott, L (2014) *Values and Ethics in Social Work Practice* (3rd edn). London: Sage.

This text identifies current issues in social work and applies an ethical dimension. These issues are then investigated further within an anti-discriminatory framework and against the background of the code of practice for social care workers and employers. Traditional value perspectives are clearly explained and current developments in virtue theory and the ethics of care for social work are also introduced.

Ruch, G, Turney, D and Ward, A (eds) (2010) *Relationship Based Social Work*: *Getting to the Heart of Practice.* London: Jessica Kingsley.

This book provides a thorough guide to relationship-based practice in social work. Relationship-based practice is founded on the idea that human relationships are of paramount importance and should be at the heart of all good social work practice.

The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) has excellent e-learning resources, allowing you to explore social work issues and the issues raised in this chapter in more depth. You can find them at www.scie.org.uk. The following are particularly relevant:

Adult Safeguarding Resource: A key theme of this resource is that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Safeguarding is also something that requires extremely sensitive handling.

Interprofessional and Inter-agency Collaboration (IPIAC): This resource explores the nature of interprofessional and inter-agency collaboration and improving collaborative practice.

The following journal articles examine life course perspectives and harm and abuse:

Bowes, A and Daniel, B (2010) Introduction: Interrogation harm and abuse: A life span approach. *Social Policy and Society*, *9 (2)*, 221–229.

Daniel, B and Bowes, A (2011) Re-thinking harm and abuse: Insights from a lifespan perspective. *British Journal of Social Work*, *41 (5)*, 820–836.

Johnson, F, Hogg, J and Daniel, B (2010) Abuse and protection across the lifespan: Reviewing the literature. *Social Policy and Society*, *9 (2)*, 291–304.