

# Worldviews

## BELIEVE IT OR NOT

### INTRODUCTION

*Believe it or not* explores social work from several different points of view. Brief quotations present examples of different views about social work. Students are invited to consider with which statements they agree.

### Purpose

The reasons why people come into social work are numerous. Some have clear, well-rehearsed positions and others have difficulty identifying their motives and beliefs. Some subscribe to an '-ism' or two, and others have muddled views with no obvious guiding principles. We all have some kind of personal philosophy - ways of looking at the world and explaining it - but are we aware of what these are? The purpose of this activity is to help students get a better understanding of how the way they view the world influences their work; in other words, how beliefs interact with actions.

### Method

This activity is best undertaken by a student and practice teacher jointly, or by a group of three or four students, but can be done individually. Give a clear explanation of the purpose of the exercise, emphasizing the exploratory aspects and making sure the student knows that there is no pressure to take up any particular position.

The student reads the various statements in the *Believe it or Not* activity and writes down responses to each of the statements (if a group of students are working together you can also then ask them to discuss their responses to these statements). Arrange a time when you can exchange comments (probably the next practice tutorial) and suggest that the student makes a few notes ready for this discussion.

Encourage the student to enter a dialogue about the statements and your mutual preferences. It is important to avoid preaching or trying to enforce a consensus; the discussion is an opportunity to share the ways you each view the world, and if these are not clear, an attempt to articulate previously unspoken worldviews.

Help the student to relate worldviews to social work practice. What are the implications of each of these statements for practice? How do different beliefs affect the choices social workers make about what they do?  
(About 1 hour in total.)

### Variations

You can substitute different statements about social work from a wide variety of perspectives. The views expressed in this activity can easily be substituted for different kinds (e.g. Moslem, humanist). Alternatively, you can use different viewpoints about particular aspects of practice (for example child care, work with older people). In many respects, it is irrelevant which views are discussed with the student; the purpose of the activity is to for students to become aware of their own views by looking at the world as others see it.

You can use this activity at an early stage in a student's placement. It is also the type of activity that can be revisited using either the same or different extracts later in the placement to help students identify how their worldview has or has not changed.

A commentary on these extracts and their sources are to be found later. It is strongly suggested that you do not consult this appendix until you have completed the activity and had the opportunity for discussion.

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## BELIEVE IT OR NOT Activity

Consider the following FIVE brief extracts about social work, and ask yourself:

- Which if any of these statements do you agree with, and why?
- What are the ideological beliefs that underpin each of these statements?

### ONE

The ruling class uses social work primarily to support and protect the expansion and legitimation of its power. The social services are provided for the subject class and its casualties, in order to improve the health and social functioning of the labour force, and to mitigate the worst effects of the structural inequalities. Social work is especially important in legitimating the values of the ruling class by its emphasis upon the socialisation process. Paradoxically, social work reinforces the underclass clientele's identity as irresponsible and immature.

### TWO

In so far as there are common elements in social work, they are best described by the notion of *maintenance*: Society maintains itself in a relatively stable state by managing and making provision for people in positions of weakness, stress or vulnerability; society maintains its own members by virtue of social work's commitment to humanist endeavour, and its emphasis on the idea of respect for the client, optimism for the future, and faith in the essential, or at least potential, unity of society.

### THREE

Although feminist theory offers an alternative theory of service delivery and method, it operates itself on a system of received ideas about women - a system without commonly agreed theoretical explanations or practical operational outcomes. Bluntly, feminism is ambiguous; it means very different things to different people. To this end, we would suggest that, like Marxism and the traditional approaches to social work, feminism offers a flawed approach. In particular it assumes a unanimity on the subject - women's oppression - which does not exist.

### FOUR

There is a tendency in the social work profession to disengage social work practice from political debate and political advocacy. Yet, social work in itself is 'undeniably political'. This anomaly is usually couched in a liberal approach to social work, which may embrace the ideology of 'individual freedom' but need not concern itself with societal flaws that are fundamental barriers to individual freedom - barriers like sexism, racism, and other oppressions. A liberal social worker gets so involved in the so-called 'individual freedom'; that s/he tends to accommodate *all* individuals, irrespective of their

socio-economic, educational or cultural backgrounds, in his/her pluralistic view of society. So the result is trying to please *everybody*'.

#### FIVE

Our present model of so-called client-centred social work is basically sound, but in need of a better defined and less ambitious mandate. Social work should be explicitly selective rather than universalist in focus, reactive rather than preventative in approach and modest in its objectives. Social work ought to be preventive with respect to the needs which come to its attention; it has neither the capacity, the resources nor the mandate to go looking for needs in the community at large.

#### THE EXTRACTS

##### Extract one

Leonard, P. (1976). The function of social work in society. In N. Timms & D. Watson (Eds.), *Talking about Welfare* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, page 261.

This extract is an expression of a Marxist analysis of society and social work. The writer sees social work as a mechanism for maintaining the existing order of society - an order that he regards as exploitative of the working class and therefore to be opposed. For a discussion of the practice implications of this view see Simpkin (1983), who advocates trade union activity for social workers.

##### Extract two

Davies, M. (1981). *The Essential Social Worker* (first ed.), Aldershot: Gower, p. 3.

In this extract, social work has a particular function to perform to maintain a stable society. This is a humanistic approach, and - in sociological terms - a functionalist approach. Social work is described as a benign influence, a force that will contribute something positive to the future. Contrast this with the previous extract.

##### Extract three

Rojeck, C., Peacock, G., & Collins, S. (eds.) (1988). *Social Work and Received Ideas*, London: Routledge, p. 113.

This extract does not make a positive statement about any aspect of social work, but criticises feminist thinking directly and Marxism indirectly. It suggests that feminist social work is grounded in an inaccurate sociological analysis.

##### Extract four

Ahmad, B. (1990). *Black Perspectives in Social Work*, Birmingham: Venture Press, p. 44.

This extract is written from a Black perspective and calls for social workers to become more involved with problems at a societal level, rather than focusing exclusively upon the individual. It states that the over-concentration upon the individual has resulted in a social work that is failing.

##### Extract five

Pinker, R. A. (1982) An Alternative View (Appendix B) in Barclay, P. M. (1982). *Social Workers: Their Role and Tasks (The Barclay Report)*. London: Bedford Square Press, page 237.

This extract represents a political view to the right of centre. In the opinion of the writer, social work should have a limited role in society, and should not be overly ambitious in what it seeks to achieve. Hence social work should be 'targeted' on those who are most in need.