

The Generalist Versus Specialist Debate in Social Work Education in the UK

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Introduction

This chapter looks at the ‘generalist *versus* specialist’ debate in social work education, primarily in relation to England, in order to highlight major changes taking place. However, some of the difficulties identified, and the reforms proposed, are relevant to situations encountered in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and also countries outside the UK. The chapter begins with a conundrum that surrounds this debate and the lack of clarity that is evident in relation to how different terms are used and conceptualised, particularly the terms ‘*generic*’,¹ ‘specialist’ and ‘generalist’. It then looks at what is meant by the terms generalist and specialist knowledge and skills and how they relate to one another as ‘two ends of a rainbow of learning’ (Coulshed 1988, p.159).

Early developments in the generalist–specialist debate

Seebohm commission

The debate about whether social work should be taught, practised and organised according to *generic* or specialised principles largely dates back

1 The term ‘*generic*’ is in italics in order to note that, in this chapter, the term ‘generalist’ is the preferred term.

to recommendations put forward by the Seebohm Commission (1968), created to look at the provision of services set up in the post-war period. In the Report that was published, the term '*generic*' was used to describe the organisation of social work into social services departments, and also to describe social work training:

The training is called '*generic*' because the principles and methods taught belong to a whole '*genus*' of social casework, whether practised for instance in hospital, or with offenders, with mentally disordered people or with children and their families. (Seebohm Report 1968, p.171)

In relation to the organisation of social work, at that time staff were employed in separate departments in England and Wales – for example, as child care officers or welfare workers. However, the strict departmental division adopted in some authorities meant that there were gaps, fragmentation and duplication in the services provided, leading to considerable public confusion about which department to approach for help. The findings of the Seebohm Commission concluded that 'a unified provision of personal social services' was needed, which resulted in the passing of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 and the setting up of social services departments in England and Wales. It was a change that called for a more extensive knowledge and skill base and 'sound basic training' for staff working in the newly established unified departments because at that time only a minority of staff were professionally qualified social workers. However, the Report noted that 'specialisation will be necessary...not least to help in the advancement of knowledge' (Seebohm Report 1968, p.162).

The impact of Seebohm was largely organisational in character. The extent to which the recommendations put forward led to an identifiable form of *generic* practice has been questioned (Dickens 2011) but it is certainly the case that some specialist services were provided alongside *generic* services, such as in rural areas. In addition to legislative support for the changes, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) was established in 1970 as the regulatory body for social work education and training – a year that also saw the development of the first '*generic*' qualification, the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW).

The Barclay Report

The next major milestone in relation to the organisation of social work in England and Wales was embodied in the *Barclay Report*, which had the remit 'to review the role and tasks of social workers in local authority social services departments and related voluntary agencies in England and Wales and to make recommendations' (Barclay Report 1982, p.vii). It is interesting to note that this report used the term 'generalist' knowledge and skills, as opposed to the term '*generic*' used in the *Seebohm Report*. In discussions that informed this Report, the relationship between generalist and specialist forms of service provision was the subject of heated debate. The primary recommendation of the Report promoted a community-based approach within social work (Barclay Report 1982, p.50) – that is, a more generalist approach, but with a recognition of the importance of specialist knowledge and skills in relation to certain client groups (Barclay Report 1982, p.154). In one of the two minority reports that formed part of the final publication, Robert Pinker argued that the Report failed to address the issue of specialisation (1982, p.237). Opinions differ on whether the recommendations of the *Barclay Report* had a marked impact on social work, particularly whether it influenced the provision of generalist or specialist services (Payne 2009, p.108; Wilson *et al.* 2008, p.67). This is largely because service provision depended greatly on how local authorities interpreted and implemented legislative and policy requirements (Fuller and Tulle-Winton 1996). This point needs to be emphasised because this variation is still evident today in relation to the 230 councils that operate within the UK.² This has been described as local authorities 'inventing their own policies to determine who gets help' (Jones 2008) – a situation that makes it difficult to identify with confidence the extent to which local authorities provide generalist and specialist services in a particular locality.

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- 2 The number of councils and the populations they serve is broken down as follows:
- 150 in England – (serving approx 51 million people)
 - 22 in Wales – (serving approx 3 million people)
 - 32 in Scotland – (serving approx 5 million people)
 - 26 in Northern Ireland [city, borough and district councils] (serving nearly 2 million people).

(Office for National Statistics 2008)

Ray Jones (2008) has argued that the existence of so many local councils constitutes 'wasteful arrangement' – and a situation that easily gives rise to inconsistencies in policy and practice procedures.

Later developments

In the years between the Seebohm and Barclay Reports, several important developments had taken place. These included major changes in service provision and funding, introduced with the passing of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990; changes in social work education and training with the introduction of the Diploma in Social Work in 1995 (CCETSW 1995); the setting up of the General Social Care Council (GSCC) as the regulatory body for social work training in 2001; the introduction of the new degree qualification in social work in 2003 (Department of Health 2002), and the equivalent Honours degree in Scotland (2004). These later developments also led to the title 'social worker' becoming a protected title; the requirement for all UK social work students and social workers to be registered on the GSCC Social Care Register in England and Wales and the other registering bodies of the four countries of the UK (e.g. the Scottish Social Services Council in Scotland) and the introduction of a new Benchmark Statement for Social Work (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008). These changes largely reflected the commitment of the then Labour government to 'modernise social services' (Department of Health 1998).

The Victoria Climbié Inquiry

Alongside the changes already mentioned, a number of developments were in response to recommendations put forward by Lord Laming following an Independent Statutory Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié, an eight-year-old African child who was murdered by her great-aunt and her aunt's lover in 2000. This inquiry reported in 2003. In relation to this chapter, what is important about the 108 recommendations put forward in the *Laming Report* is the emphasis placed on local authorities providing 'specialist services for children and families' (Laming 2003, p.1). This perspective became the cornerstone of changes indicated in the landmark White Paper *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills 2003), which led to children's and adult services being separated in England into different departments, and the merging of children's services with education. This document emphasised the importance of 'targeted and specialist support' for children, young people and their families (Department for Education and Skills 2003, p.39) – changes that were later enshrined in the Children Act 2004, which outlined the reconfiguration of children's services in greater detail. Much of the specialist emphasis in *Every Child Matters*, and later legislation, is focused on the physical

location of services for children and the importance of inter-agency and interprofessional collaboration (see Barr and Sharland, Chapter 11 in this book). For our purposes, there is little mention in *Every Child Matters* of the relationship between knowledge and skills beyond the proposal to set up generalist training opportunities for people to 'share a common core of skills, knowledge and competence' (Department for Education and Skills 2003, p.92).

The 'Baby P' Inquiry

The next tragic milestone where concerns were raised about the *generic*-specialist foundation of social workers' knowledge and skills came to the fore following the unlawful killing of a 17-month-old baby, Peter Connelly, which led to a second inquiry, chaired by Lord Laming, and the report entitled *The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report*. In his report, Lord Laming questioned the *generic* nature of the new social work degree programmes, particularly the extent to which they prepared students and newly qualified social workers in the area of child protection. Laming concluded that 'without the necessary specialist knowledge and skills social workers must not be allowed to practise in child protection' (Laming 2009, p.5) and, in one of the 58 recommendations put forward, he called for a major change in the relationship between *generic* and specialist training:

At the heart of the difficulty in preparing social workers through a degree course is that, without an opportunity to specialise in child protection work or even in children's social work, students are covering too much ground without learning the skills and knowledge to support any particular client group well... The current degree programme should be reformed to allow for specialism after the first year, with no graduate entering frontline children's social work without having completed a specialised degree including a placement within a frontline statutory children's social work team, or having completed further professional development and children's social work experience to build on *generic* training. (Laming 2009, p.51)

With some exceptions, Lord Laming's recommendation failed to find support (Hunt and Lombard 2009). It was argued that specialising too early could lead to a situation where newly qualified social workers did not have a broad enough knowledge and skills base from which to assess the needs of children, young people and their families. Families can also

include relatives who are elderly, disabled, physically unwell or who have mental health problems, and these characteristics may be among several factors that lead to some children being vulnerable to abuse and neglect. In Scotland, the recommendation resulted in the requirement that social work students on the *generic* social work degree courses should meet the criteria of the *Key Capabilities in Child Care and Protection* (Scottish Executive 2006).

Social Work Task Force

Twenty-six years after the publication of the *Barclay Report*, and prior to the publication of the second Laming report, a major review of social work was set up in 2008 by the then Labour government. The remit of the Social Work Task Force (SWTF) was to undertake a comprehensive review of frontline social work practice across adult and children's services in England, and to make recommendations for improvement and reform of the profession. In both reports of the Task Force, *Facing up to the Task* (SWTF 2009a) and *Building a Safe, Confident Future* (SWTF 2009b), support for a 'generic degree' was promoted:

A good *generic* degree course should enable all students to develop the knowledge, skills and values in working holistically and safely with the whole range of individuals, families and communities where social work is needed. Splitting the degree would be destabilising and impractical. It would require students to make decisions about their future direction before they may be ready to. The fragility of the profession would be increased rather than reduced by potentially costly and highly time-consuming separation. (Social Work Task Force 2009b, p.19)

Social Work Reform Board and Munro Review

In order to take forward the 15 recommendations of the Task Force, in January 2010 the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) was set up. In a progress report of this Reform Board (SWRB 2010), the same commitment to a foundation degree covering a wide range of subjects and practice skills can be seen, but the terms '*generic*' or '*generalist*' are not mentioned. Instead, considerable focus has been placed on social workers developing their specialist skills and knowledge as a central feature of their ongoing and continuing professional development. Four months later, in May 2010, the newly formed UK Coalition Government invited Professor Eileen Munro to chair the *Munro Review of Child Protection in England*. The

three published reports of this Review (Munro 2010, 2011a, 2011b) all include comments that are relevant to the subject of generalist–specialist practice. For example, Munro cites initiatives that have been developed by some local authorities, such as Oxfordshire County Council, which provides a range of services where ‘All staff working on these programmes have undertaken the required specialist training and are in receipt of high quality supervision and consultation’ (Munro 2011b, p.95). In addition, Munro endorses the recommendations put forward by the SWRB in relation to social work education and training, and continuing professional development as indicated in the *generic* Professional Capabilities Framework (SWRB 2010).

Knowledge and skills that have no name cannot be integrated

A number of difficulties accompany any discussion about the nature and relationship of *generic* or generalist and specialist practice. First, in many social work texts an inconsistency is evident in the way that authors describe or define different terms. Here I agree with Sheldon who stated ‘It is often surprising how little definitional work has gone into concepts which are in everyday use in social work’ (Sheldon 1995, p.10). Areas of practice that are not named cannot be integrated – irrespective of whether these relate to knowledge and skills, or *generic*/generalist and specialist practice. Second, while it is accurate to state that social work draws on a wide range of subject areas, few texts attempt to name the subject areas that this knowledge base is thought to include. Third, there is a tendency to link ‘knowledge and skills’ together – as if engaged in some inseparable marriage where one is glued to the other. Yet both have distinct features that need to be separated out in order for their different features to be brought together in ways that lead to a coherent and reasoned integration. Fourth, the term ‘*skill*’ is often used interchangeably or used to replace the term ‘*intervention*’. In the conceptualisation I am putting forward, a skill is summarised as an action that we can learn and an intervention is how we put that learning into practice. Fifth, there is still a tendency for the area of social work skills and interventions to be neglected – both in terms of the coverage of skills and interventions in social work texts and in relation to research. It is a situation that calls for us to be rigorous in our use of specific terms, which is a theme covered in the following section.

Defining key terms: Eclectic, generic, generalist and specialist

The following account describes a number of conceptualisations in an attempt to be rigorous and consistent and coherent in the use of these terms.

Eclectic

Where *genericism* relates to knowledge and skill, I want to suggest that the term '*eclectic*' better describes the areas of knowledge, and wide range of theories, that social work draws on. These are often adapted in order to relate abstract theories to the situations encountered in practice. The adaptability and transferability that eclecticism embodies is taken up by Drury Hudson:

True eclecticism requires the ability to be fully informed in relation to a variety of theories and to be able to switch from one practice theory to another in an effort to meet the particular demands of each unique problem, situation, or client. (Drury Hudson 1997, pp.38–39)

However, it is important to identify the knowledge and skills that are included within the phrase 'the eclectic nature of social work's knowledge base' (Loewenberg 1984, p.310). Elsewhere I have identified 11 knowledge disciplines that social work draws on and adapts, plus 80 generalist skills and interventions (Trevithick 2012). In this task, I have defined a number of key terms, such as 'knowledge', 'theory', 'skill', 'intervention' and transferability, in order to provide a degree of conceptual consistency in the use of these terms. The perspective I have adopted states that all actions are intellectual in character. They may reflect particular areas of knowledge or specific *skills* and *interventions* – but, whatever form they take, an intellectual element is always a feature, which makes it important for social workers to claim the rich intellectual heritage that informs our work. In order to bring theory and practice into a close dialogue, I define an *intervention* as '*knowledge, skills and values in action*' (see Trevithick 2012).

Generic

As already stated, the term *generic* has been used to refer to different aspects of social work. Baker takes up this point in an early publication on this subject:

The concept of *generic* social work practice is full of appeal and can be variously interpreted. Here it refers to one social worker who is trained, able to understand, and appropriately respond to, a wide range of individual, family, small group and community needs. (Baker 1975, p.193)

A different version places the emphasis on the application of knowledge, skills and values. For Stevenson, the term '*generic*' 'rests on the assumption that social work has a common basis, in which values, knowledge and skills can be applied to a range of situations' (2005, p.570) – a perspective shared by Wilson *et al.* who describe the term '*generic*' as 'a common foundation to all social work practice' (2008, p.698).

Generalist

I want to suggest that the term 'generalist' is a more accurate term than '*generic*' to describe the acquisition and application of a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills that can be used to address the range of different situations regularly encountered in social work. As such, generalist knowledge and skill embody a 'foundation upon which specialisations that have professional and intellectual coherence can be built' (Stevenson 2005, p.581). This foundation has the advantage of being more transferable than the more in-depth knowledge and skills that are central to specialist practice. Indeed, even as a specialist, it is very likely that a practitioner will use a number of generalist skills because of their *transferability*. For example, specialist services invariably draw on a range of generalist skills, such as welcoming skills, listening and observation skills, the skills that are central to information gathering, or when reading an individual's non-verbal form of communication, and so forth. It is also important to stress that within this generalist category advanced levels of knowledge and skills can be acquired.

The use of the term 'generalist' has another advantage because, like the term 'specialist', it is regularly used in other disciplines, particularly medicine and nursing, although in medical practice this includes a clinical dimension, such as whether and how to give an injection. In social work, the implementation of generalist knowledge and skills is almost always focused on the use of communication skills, which can take the form of verbal, non-verbal, writing or action skills. These are used in a range of different contexts and often outside a clinical context – making it difficult to include an independent evaluation of the quality and relevance of the knowledge and skills that shape a particular intervention.

Specialist

This more accurate definition of generalist knowledge and skill allows us to contrast this with specialist practice:

Specialist *practice*...can mean either a division of labour or superior knowledge and skill about a client group, problem area, methods or settings. The specialist practitioner can be at the front line or specialism can extend up the organization. (Parsloe 2000, p.145)

In the emphasis that I want to put forward, the acquisition of 'superior knowledge and skill' is not only acquired through extensive practice experience but through additional training. This may be in relation to a particular theory or practice approach, or in relation to a specific client group or particular problem area. It constitutes learning that is consolidated through critical reflection, ongoing and relevant practice experience and access to regular quality supervision. Some examples of specialist training include training that is focused on different practice approaches, such as cognitive-behavioural approaches, or solution-focused work. For example, the ability to use the technique of *systematic desensitisation* calls for specialist training and a sound understanding of the principles that underpin cognitive-behavioural approaches. However, the interpretation placed on people's thoughts, feelings and actions from a cognitive-behavioural approach is likely to be different from the interpretation put forward by a generalist practitioner. These different perspectives can be beneficial but can also lead to tensions. Specialisation also runs the risk of practitioners becoming over-focused on a particular approach at the expense of keeping abreast of a more generalist perspective.

In social work, the extent to which statutory and non-statutory agencies promote specialist services can vary but, in general, they can often be found in areas such as mental health, fostering and adoption, services for people with disabilities, palliative care and some children's services – often in response to the specific needs of a particular group of people. However, the setting alone may not be a good basis on which to judge the level of specialist expertise or proficiency because some practitioners may acquire specialist training yet fail to demonstrate 'superior knowledge and skill'. This may be due to a lack of rigour in the qualification process or it could reflect a situation where practitioners have become de-skilled because they have been unable to retain the level of practice needed (Carey 2008; Dustin 2007).

Of central importance in the debate about generalist–specialist knowledge and skills is the extent to which the problems presented – and the needs of service users – can best be met. From this perspective, the use of generalist and specialist knowledge and skills can overlap and complement one another, with both indicating the ability to deploy interventions along a continuum that represents basic abilities to more advanced levels of competence. Thus, it is possible for a generalist practitioner to have developed an advanced level of generalist knowledge and skills and for a skilled specialist practitioner to be less competent in a generalist capacity – although together they are likely to constitute a formidable multi-level knowledge and skills mix. Given this continuum, it may be valuable to introduce a term to reflect the acquisition of in-depth generalist knowledge and skills in relation to a particular area of practice, such as the title *advanced* generalist practitioner or generalist–specialist practitioner.

When to specialise?

In the past, there has been a lack of clarity about at what point – if at all – social workers should specialise, and how this might link to the notion of professional development and career progression. Again, considerable variation can be seen in the approach adopted by different local authorities in relation to the provision of specialist services and the opportunities available for staff to pursue specialist training, including applying for post-qualifying programmes. Part of this ambivalence is due to the fact that there has been little research into whether the different generalist or specialist practices have different or better outcomes (Parsloe 2000, p.145). According to statistics published by the GSCC in their 2010 Annual Report, in England there were 331 approved university post-qualifying courses (GSCC 2010, p.5), covering five specialist areas: children and young people; adult social care; mental health; practice education; and leadership and management (GSCC 2010, p.25).

This wide variation in the opportunities available led the SWTF to call for a ‘single, nationally recognised career structure’ that would include a national framework for the continuing professional development of social workers. This proposal is represented in a Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers, which aims to ‘set out, for the first time, consistent expectations of social workers at every point of their career’ (SWRB 2010, p.3). This new structure is designed to incorporate a new single, modular Master’s-level post-qualifying award in specialist practice

as an integral part of a 'hybrid model' – that is, one that 'supports social workers to access a wide variety of learning and development opportunities, dependent on individual learning needs and styles, throughout their careers, with national recognition and portability' (SWRB 2010, p.34). It is proposed that this Framework will be used to inform the standards of education and training and the development of a new curriculum framework, designed to promote high quality education and training. According to the GSCC 2010 Annual Report, there were 271 approved degree courses in the United Kingdom (GSCC 2010, p.5). It is too early to speculate what the changes to the curriculum framework might mean for these courses because, like local authorities, these programmes have been in the position to exercise considerable variation in how they interpret the requirements laid down for social work education and training. An example is the wide variation that is evident in the recruitment and selection processes that different programmes adopt. It is interesting to note that, in relation to England, three separate documents indicate the requirements laid down in relation to social work training – namely, the Benchmark Statement (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008), National Occupational Standards (Training Organisations for the Personal Social Services 2002) and Department of Health requirements (Department of Health 2002). With regard to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, these requirements are integrated in a single document. These include *Raising Standards: The Qualification Framework for the Social Care Sector in Wales* (Care Council for Wales 2003); *The Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (Scottish Social Services Council 2003); and *The Northern Ireland Framework for the Degree in Social Work* (Northern Ireland Social Care Council 2003). All mention – mainly only once – the term 'generic' but with no detailed account of what the term means.

An important feature of the new proposed structure for England is that 'there should be progression routes available to high quality, specialist social workers which do not remove them from the frontline' (SWRB 2010, p.7). The importance of social workers being able to 'extend and deepen' their specialist skills and knowledge (SWRB 2010, p.33) is featured strongly in the recommendations, which includes social workers being able to access 'regular and appropriate social work supervision' and also the opportunity to access research and practice guidance (SWRB 2010, p.20).

The burden of a vast knowledge and skills base

The vast knowledge base or knowledge ‘pile’ both generalist and specialist areas of practice cover is not without its difficulties and presents a situation where an ‘unrestrained freedom to choose from a large number of different theories...[can] put too large a burden on the individual social worker’ (Loewenberg 1984, p.310). This problem is rendered more complex where new theories continue to be added, sometimes with little attempt to shape these in ways that can ‘guide practice decisions’ (Reid 1978, p.378) and the situations regularly encountered in direct practice. Munro tentatively takes up this point:

Children need social workers to have a wide range of knowledge, skills and values. In looking in more depth in what is required, the review has been struck by the scale of relevant skills and knowledge required/necessary and questions how much an individual can achieve...the review questions whether it is realistic to expect each frontline worker to cover such a wide range of skills and knowledge... (Munro 2011a, p.50)

I have considerable sympathy with Munro’s position. If asked to identify the theories that I might exclude, I would not include any in-depth coverage of practice approaches, such as cognitive–behavioural approaches, client-centred, psychosocial, solution-focused, ecological approaches, etc. Instead, I would confine the coverage of specialist practice approaches at undergraduate level to their theoretical roots or ‘parent’ theories (e.g. humanist, behaviourist, psychodynamic) and to identifying the contexts – within and outside social work – where these specialist practice approaches are most commonly used. For example, this teaching could focus on students being familiar with person-centred concepts such as *unconditional positive regard* or *congruence*, and how these terms link to humanist psychology and research findings that indicate where a person-centred counselling approach is likely to be an appropriate practice choice. This change in emphasis would mean that training in specialist practice approaches would be undertaken after qualification, as a feature of continuing professional development – leaving social work training programmes with more time to focus in greater detail on perfecting and integrating students’ generalist knowledge and skills in ways that are research based and that ‘speak’ to the situations regularly encountered in social work. Proposals put forward by the SWRB provide an ideal opportunity to implement a greater concentration on skills development – an area of practice has not yet become a ‘skills and interventions pile’.

One way to approach this growing body of knowledge would be for the social work community to arrive at some kind of consensus that attempts to identify those theories that are considered most relevant to contemporary practice concerns and to eliminate those 'specialist topics that workers will not often encounter' (Munro 2011a, p.50). If we are unable to do this, there is the risk that the government will enact this change, which is what in effect happened when the Department of Health stipulated the five key areas of 'specific learning and assessment' that had to be provided on social work education and training programmes in relation to a new degree (Department of Health 2002, p.3).

In addition, a different strategy to ensure that social work's knowledge base does not become an overwhelming 'knowledge pile' would be to categorise subjects and themes in order to provide a 'users' map of the knowledge-base of professional practice' in social work (Eraut 1994, p.50). The Knowledge and Skills Framework that I have developed is designed to meet this need (see Figure 8.1) and also to integrate knowledge and skills in a coherent conceptualisation.

Knowledge and skills framework

This Knowledge and Skills Framework attempts to order the growing number of theories and perspectives that abound in social work – and to link these in ways that integrate theory and practice. It categorises knowledge in terms of three domains – *theoretical*, *factual*, and *practice knowledge*. A perspective that underpins the need for a framework of this kind is the lack of clarity that exists about what constitutes the knowledge and skills base of social work – a situation where 'there is no universally accepted idea of valid knowledge, skills or expertise for social workers' (Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse 2005, p.2). The Framework emphasises the importance of thinking, sometimes referred to as critical thinking, and critical reflection or reflexivity (Sheppard 1998). Its first two domains, on *theoretical* and *factual knowledge*, are concerned with knowledge acquisition, or *knowing that*. Its third domain, *practice knowledge*, is focused on the skills and interventions that translate knowledge into practice, or *knowing how* (Ryle 1949).

Historically, the main skills or interventions used in social work have been grouped under the heading *communication skills* (Koprowska 2010; Lishman 2009). However, this has tended to mask the range of interventions that fall within this heading – interventions that may be verbal or non-verbal in character, or involve a different range of activities that fall within the realm of action skills, including those involving the written word.

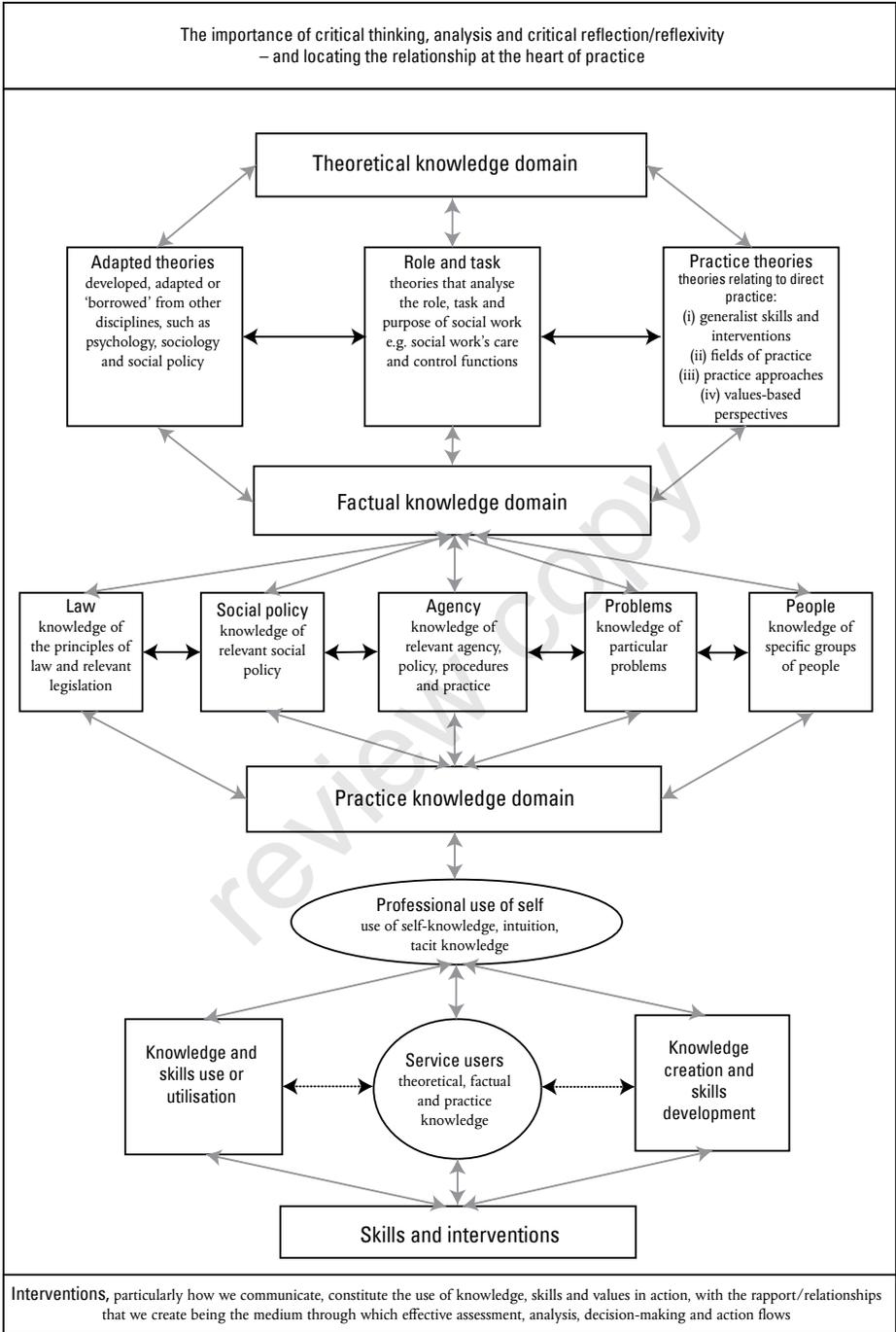


FIGURE 8.1 A GENERALIST KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS FRAMEWORK: INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK

A central feature of the Framework is an awareness of how practitioners present themselves as 'professional social workers', such as how the use of self-knowledge, including intuition and tacit knowledge, are used to inform practitioners' communication with clients. From this perspective, the skills learnt – and interventions used – constitute 'knowledge, skills and values in action' (Trevithick 2012).

A further feature of this Framework recognises the knowledge that service users, carers and other interested parties bring to the encounter – and how these areas of knowledge can also be conceptualised in terms of the *theoretical*, *factual* and *practice knowledge* that these individuals have acquired. As such, it represents 'a model in which interpersonal skills, grounded in theory and knowledge, are at the heart of the enterprise' (Stevenson 2005, p.581). It is interesting to note that the headings and sub-headings that feature in this framework are consistent with themes covered in the proposed Professional Capabilities Framework (for further coverage, see Trevithick 2008, 2012).

How to assess the quality of knowledge and skills acquired

The task of setting out 'consistent expectations of social workers at every point of their career' (SWRB 2010, p.3) is an important but formidable one. It may not even be possible given the rapid pace of change in relevant knowledge, law and social policy. It is a task that I believe calls for social work knowledge and social work skills to be assessed and evaluated differently. The main reason for suggesting this separation is because some students and practitioners can demonstrate the intellectual capacity for abstract conceptualisations, analysis and synthesis, yet demonstrate limited abilities in the area of social work skills and interventions, particularly communication skills. The opposite can also occur with some students and practitioners being highly intuitive and proficient in their ability to engage and communicate with others, yet indicate limited ability when attempting to grapple with complex theoretical conceptualisations. The task of social work education and training, and continuing professional development, has to be one that leads to the integration of knowledge and skill, but I would argue that to achieve this end calls for an evaluation process to be introduced that has the capacity to identify progress in these two areas.

Knowledge acquisition

One research-based approach to knowledge acquisition that could be valuable when attempting to assess the extent to which social work students have developed the ability to 'analyse and synthesise knowledge gathered for problem-solving purposes' (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008, p.11) could be the work of Bloom and his colleagues. Their first text, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (Bloom *et al.* 1956; Bloom 1994), continues to be influential in the area of education and also used in the context of professional training programmes (Bloom 1994). This hierarchical classification³ was developed in order to assess changes in terms of students' intellectual capabilities. Briefly, a key focus of this work was to provide a tool that could classify educational objectives and identify how to enable students to progress from basic knowledge acquisition by rote, described by Howe as 'performing surface responses' (1996, p.92), to the complexities involved in evaluation and synthesis. A different conceptualisation that attempts to identify the stages of learning can be found in the work of Biggs and colleagues who developed a taxonomy entitled SOLO, which stands for 'Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome'. This was developed in order to provide 'a systematic way of describing how a learner's performance grows in complexity when mastering many academic tasks' (Biggs and Tang 2007, p.76). (For an example of the use of SOLO, see Platt 2011.)

Skill acquisition

A publication that is focused on skill acquisition can be found in the work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) in their seminal text (1986) *Mind over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer*. This describes a five-stage model of skills development that ranges from *novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient to expert*. This conceptualisation has been influential in relation to professional development in nursing (Benner 1984) and social work (Fook, Ryan and Hawkins 2000; Sheppard *et al.* 2000, p.468), particularly in relation to the role of intuition and tacit knowledge in reasoning processes, a point taken up by Munro:

The work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus on how people develop expertise shows how they build up intuitive understanding and tacit knowledge. They may use procedures to get started as novices but need to move beyond this to achieve mastery. Social

3 A classification system is called a 'taxonomy' because it adheres to a set of key principles arranged in a hierarchy.

workers in a culture where procedural compliance is expected, and deviation is met with blame, are discouraged from building up that expertise. (Munro 2011a, p.62)

Over the years, my interest in the work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus has focused on attempting to identify teaching approaches that could enable students to develop their communication skills. This work has highlighted the importance of listening, observation and language skills, and the importance of students being aware of the 'default' positions they adopt in relation to their facial expression, body language, tone of voice, speed of speech, choice of words, and other verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. Its aim has been to encourage the development of responses that are not rule based, distant or superficial in character, which is often demonstrated by first-year students (*novice*), but instead to encourage and demonstrate a more *proficient*, flexible, situation-specific, spontaneous and intuitive understanding – skills that involve the capacity to test hypotheses and to work with the clues that are evident in the communication taking place.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at a range of different influences that have shaped the generalist–specialist debate. In this coverage, I have identified the lack of clarity and rigour that is evident in the use of key terms and stressed the importance of separating out – and naming – the specific features that are included under the heading *knowledge and skills*, or generalist and specialist practice. I have argued that theoretical and factual knowledge and practice skills that are not identified and named cannot be integrated – nor can they become a feature of generalist and specialist practice in ways that represent 'two ends of a rainbow of learning' (Coulshed 1988, p.159). In an attempt to address this lack of conceptual rigour, I have formulated a *Knowledge and Skills Practice Framework* designed to integrate knowledge and skills and to represent a conceptual map upon which 'professional and intellectual coherence can be built' (Stevenson 2005, p.581).

The importance of this generalist–specialist debate links to *The Munro Review of Child Protection* and the attempt to understand why 'previous well-intentioned reforms have not resulted in the expected level of improvements' (Munro 2010, p.3). Past events are also important because at this point in time, we appear to be suspended between two trends. On the one hand, like the pre-Seebohm era, we may be quickly approaching a situation where the majority of employees working with vulnerable people

are unqualified workers. This development is fuelled by financial restraint and cut-backs – and by policy developments that fail to recognise that the problems presented in social work are becoming more entrenched, complex and intractable in character. More than ever, it is a situation that calls for practitioners to draw on in-depth knowledge and skills and to have the confidence, competence, organisational support and professional autonomy to work effectively in situations of complexity and uncertainty.

On the other hand, the work of the SWRB recognises the barriers to effective practice and is deeply engaged in taking forward the fifteen recommendations of the SWTF and the work that is central to ‘building a safe, confident future’, that includes a single, nationally recognised career structure for social work. The proposals that underpin the Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers have yet to identify where the line between generalist and specialist training will be drawn. My own view is that the focus of social work training and education should be changed in order to concentrate on enabling students to perfect their generalist knowledge and skills in key areas. This would include a strong focus on integrating the link between theory and practice and the transferability of knowledge and skills across different contexts and degrees of complexity.

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