CHAPTER 8
Empowering Processes for Social Work Practice
Beth Larson, the coordinator of the child welfare reform project, reads her year-end report with great enthusiasm and professional satisfaction. New family services had been implemented, and existing programs had been expanded. In this second year of the project, a new community-based day treatment facility had already served 17 youths, diverting them from residential placements. An early-intervention programming component—front-loading prevention services—had been added to the family-centered program. Support services for foster families had been expanded to provide an allotment for day care expenses, enabling foster parents to be employed outside the home. Several agencies had responded to a request for proposal (RFP) to develop therapeutic foster care components. An emergency fund for families was established that could be accessed at the discretion of caseworkers. Nearly 70 community child welfare practitioners had attended a workshop on designing a new case management system. Finally, a full-time researcher had been hired to evaluate the efforts and outcomes of the demonstration project.

Community leaders had initiated the child welfare reform project to address the problems of a child welfare delivery system that was encumbered by restrictive eligibility requirements and inflexible funding parameters. The project had evolved into a major initiative to provide more accessible, effective, and appropriate services to children and families in the child welfare, mental health, and juvenile court systems.

Beth reflects on the impetus for this reform effort. The project was founded on the assumption that services to families were too often restricted by categorical funding and services and that, if funding and services were decategorized, families could be served better. Guided by a philosophy of family preservation, a decision to provide services locally, and a commitment to strengthening less-intrusive resource options, child welfare practitioners rallied around this innovative concept to redesign the child welfare service delivery system. This restructuring and the new services that resulted did not just happen; they involved the tireless efforts, time, commitment, and vision of many service administrators, providers, and consumers who engaged in systematic planning. They approached their work using an orderly process for resolving service delivery problems in the child welfare field.

In her role as project coordinator, Beth provides direction and staff support to those people involved in the various aspects of the project. Agency administrators and community planners support her work by coordinating the overall efforts of the project. Clients and direct-service practitioners representing diverse fields of practice envisioned an ideal service delivery system. Special-interest groups studied existing barriers. These study groups recommended changes in mental health services, foster care, and day treatment programs. Ad hoc task forces prepared RFPs, established procedures, developed surveys, and planned educational retreats.

All of these groups approached their activities from a solution-seeking perspective. They relied on an organized process that led them through a series of steps. They clarified their purposes, set goals, considered alternatives, agreed on timelines, implemented actions, and evaluated their efforts throughout the planning process.

This chapter introduces empowerment-oriented processes for generalist social work practice. Specifically, it presents

- An empowerment base for social work practice
- An overview of each generic process
An Empowerment-Based Generic Process of Social Work Practice

Words are powerful. Words shape our thinking, inform our interpretations, and predispose our conclusions. It stands to reason that if social work is to be an empowering profession, then the words, labels, and metaphors that social workers draw on to describe their work must promote strengths and facilitate empowerment. The generic approach to social work practice presented in this chapter translates the traditional steps for solving problems into processes that reflect the language of empowerment-based practice (Table 8.1). One transition—the transition from expert professional to collaborative partner—is particularly vital.

From Expert Professional to Collaborative Partner

Both professionals and clients suffer when they have an unrealistic reverence for professional expertise. This view saddles professionals with a false sense of their own omnipotence.

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and traps clients into a culture of dependency on experts (Rappaport, 1985; Holmes & Saleebey, 1993). Essentially, this creates a hierarchy of “information have and have-nots.” Masterful, expert professionals take charge of and act upon ineffectual, passive client systems. Elevating professional expertise diminishes clients’ potential and limits their roles. In sum, it disempowers.

Empowerment presumes active, collaborative roles for client-partners. Paradoxically, “empowering another system” or paternalistically bestowing power on others disempowers those “touched by the star-tipped wand.” Giving power away generates hierarchies of power and powerlessness. Professionals foster empowerment only “by providing a climate, a relationship, resources, and procedural means through which people can enhance their own lives” (Simon, 1990, p. 32). In empowerment-based social work practice, social workers and clients approach their work together as collaborative partners (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2004). For clients, collaboration actualizes empowerment (Table 8.2).

A Generic Approach

Generalist social worker practitioners address problems through policy formulation at the institutional and community levels, resolve issues concerning the delivery of services in agencies and organizations, and work with individual and family client systems to develop solutions for individual and family problems. In fact, the process that social workers use with clients at all system levels and in each field of practice is similar. The processes outline an orderly, empowering approach to working with clients at all system levels. The following sections briefly describe these generic empowering processes.

### TABLE 8.2 Clients’ Rights from an Empowerment Perspective on Practice

**Clients have rights to expect that professionals will**
- Show respect
- Communicate nonjudgmentally
- Demonstrate cultural competence
- Appraise clients of options
- Hold themselves accountable for their actions
- Promote social justice
- Uphold professional codes of ethics
- Facilitate rather than direct processes

**Clients have rights to expect that processes will**
- Support collaborative partnerships
- Provide opportunities to tell their stories from their points of view
- Involve them in determining goals and objectives and developing action strategies
- Provide opportunities to evaluate outcomes

**Clients have rights to expect that, as service users, they will be involved in**
- Program evaluation, research, and planning
- Organizational policy review and development activities
- Staff education and training
- Social policy advocacy and coalition building
Through dialogue, clients and social workers form their partnership relationships, address power differentials, and establish the tone for client-driven services. In the discovery processes, they contextualize personal troubles to include relevant sociopolitical dimensions and expand the arena of potential solutions beyond personal adaptation to include macrolevel change. Finally, processes in the development phase hold opportunities for developing a critical consciousness by reflecting on social injustices and working toward resolutions that include community, organizational, and sociopolitical change. The following sections briefly describe the empowering generic processes associated with dialogue, discovery, and development.

**Forming Partnerships**

The process of forming professional relationships sets the tone for the entire interaction between clients and practitioners:

The core skill of social work is the ability to form a helping relationship. The hallmarks of this relationship are shaped by two radical values: an active belief in the person’s, family’s, or community’s ability to know and choose what is best for them and the belief that the relationship is a collaboration, where both client and worker bring distinctive but essential knowledge necessary for constructive work. These beliefs in discovering, affirming, and building on people’s strengths as important resources in accomplishing the work run directly counter to the view of many other practitioners who see themselves as having the knowledge, and therefore the power, to define the nature of the problem and its treatment. (Weick, 1999, p. 331)

Empowerment-oriented social workers respect clients’ perspectives and recognize the positive contribution of working collaboratively. Factors that influence building relationships include their professional purpose, the nature of clients’ participation, and workers’ use of effective interpersonal skills.

**Professional Relationships**

Professional relationships differ from personal relationships in that the purpose of the social work profession ultimately defines the relationship’s purpose. So, the fundamental purpose of social work—“to promote or restore a mutually beneficial interaction between individuals and society in order to improve the quality of life for everyone” (Working Statement, 1981)—sets the tone for professional relationships. Furthermore, the *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 1999a) defines ethical standards for professional relationships that distinguish them from friendships or casual business ventures.

Clients do not approach social workers to seek helping relationships, but rather to address problems. Relationships result from concern, caring, and respect for others through words, actions, and a willingness to listen. A relationship “cannot be manufactured. It begins at the moment that any two people meet. It grows as they work together, but it cannot be forced or hurried” (Keith-Lucas, 1972, p. 48). Professional relationships unfold as the work of clients and practitioners proceeds.
The Nature of Clients’ Participation

Some clients seek social work services voluntarily, others accept the proffered services of outreach efforts, and still others are mandated to participate. These variations have implications for clients’ motivations and for their readiness to participate.

Social workers recognize that at the point of engaging services the self-esteem of some clients is low, and that social stigma associated with the giving and taking of help complicates clients’ responses. Bertha Reynolds (1951) suggested that one obvious answer to the question of why the taking and giving of help is difficult “is that we have a hang-over from the bad old days of a harsh and degrading charity. People who took help should be made to feel outside the normal group, or they would be endlessly demanding. They should not have a status as desirable as that of people who gave—or at least were able to meet their own needs” (p. 25).

Reynolds further distinguishes the status of people who must ask for services because of their dire need from that of people who have the choice of either asking or not. Some endure hardships and want rather than face feelings of stigma. However, when survival needs are at stake, people’s degree of choice or voluntary participation in social services diminishes.

The term involuntary refers to individuals who are mandated or required, sometimes against their will, to participate in social work services. Involuntary clients often experience negative feelings about coercion that social workers must deal with directly. Clients labeled “unmotivated” or “hard to reach” may act indifferently and resist social workers’ attempts to work with them.

Social workers must use professional relationships to enhance clients’ motivation and instill feelings of hopefulness. Regardless of the circumstances that bring clients and practitioners together, empowerment-based social workers strive to establish productive working relationships that reflect partnerships with client systems from the very beginning.

Interpersonal Skills

By attending to clients’ emotional, physical, and interactional needs, social workers enhance the development of effective professional relationships. Mutual trust and confidence are essential ingredients in professional relationships. Among the interpersonal skills necessary for developing professional relationships are accurate empathy, nonpossessive warmth, genuineness, and cultural sensitivity.

Empathy. Practitioners demonstrate empathy by perceiving and responding to clients’ feelings with sensitivity and understanding. Drawing on the definitive works of Truax, Mitchell, Carkhuff, and Rogers, Fischer (1978) asserts:

Being empathic means more than simply understanding another’s world (stepping into his or her shoes); it means understanding and communicating that understanding. Thus, being empathic implies being an active responder rather than a passive listener. In this way, the helping person is a participant in the process, beginning with intense focusing on the verbal and nonverbal cues presented by the client and a continuous sharing with the client of the worker’s understanding of what the client has communicated. (p. 192)
**Warmth.** Social workers communicate warmth to clients through their caring commitment and their unconditional positive regard for clients. Fischer (1978) indicates that nonpossessive warmth refers to the worker’s communication of respect, acceptance, loving, caring and concern for the client in a nondominating way. . . . Thus, the client is accepted as a person with human potentialities: nonpossessive warmth involves valuing the client as a person, separate from any evaluation of his or her behavior and thoughts. (p. 196)

**Genuineness.** Social workers convey genuineness by being spontaneous, unpretentious, and authentic. Fischer (1978) believes that genuineness facilitates helping relationships. Genuineness refers to social workers’ “being themselves,” being “real.” This means, simply, that at any given moment, workers really are whatever their responses denote. . . . In fact, genuineness may be best understood as the absence of phoniness, as nondefensiveness, as congruence, and as spontaneity. (p. 199)

**Cultural Competence.** The racial or ethnic identities of workers and clients, as well as the predominant culture reflected in the service delivery system, affect the development of relationships and, ultimately, the success or failure of interventions:

When people feel predominantly negative about their cultural background their sense of themselves as worthwhile is threatened; when they experience pain, anger, shame, guilt, and other uncomfortable reactions in relation to who they are, these problematic reactions are apt to be mobilized whenever they are in contact with culturally different others. They then become so preoccupied with managing their discomfort that they are not free to interact with others in ways which promote comfortable relationships and respectful interaction. (Pinderhughes, 1997, p. 326)

Positive professional relationships are foundational to the helping process. It is the social worker’s responsibility to initiate and maintain respectful interactions with clients that reflect empathy, warmth, genuineness, and cultural sensitivity.

**Social Work Highlights.** Jodie Princeton, the social worker with the New Parents Outreach Program, and Helen Miles, a perinatal home health aide with the program, visit with Gene and Kendra Bridges. They’re discussing home-based services that will be available when the Bridges’ baby goes home from the hospital. Born prematurely, baby Lisa requires a heart monitor as well as other special medical care.

Jodie and Helen listened closely as the Bridges shared their concerns about dealing with the baby’s medical needs at home. Jodie complimented the Bridges on their attentiveness to the baby during her hospitalization and their decision to seek assistance. The Bridges felt somewhat uncomfortable admitting their nervousness about taking their baby home with the heart monitor. Kendra sobbed, “I feel so inept. It’s so hard to feed the baby. A mother should be able to do this.”

Both Jodie and Helen were reassuring. Jodie commented that requesting help is a positive action that shows the Bridges’ commitment to being good parents. Helen indicated that her role as a home health aide was to support their efforts with the baby, not to take over. The partnership with the Bridges resulted from Jodie’s and Helen’s ability to communicate effectively with the Bridges, showing their respect and understanding.
Articulating Situations

A client engages social work services for a reason. This reason often relates to a problem, issue, or need that the client wants to remedy. Articulating challenges is a process workers employ in their dialogue with clients about the reasons clients seek assistance.

To identify their situations accurately, clients describe the facts, events, reactions, and their previous attempts to deal with the problem. Encouraging clients to express their feelings about their situations and their previous efforts to deal with those situations helps to determine the overall impact of the problem. Empowering social workers frame clients’ concerns as challenges, as challenges imply the potential for overcoming obstacles. Social workers necessarily begin their discussion of situations as clients define them. They examine factors that clients know about and believe are related from their own personal experiences, and what social workers know and believe to be related from their professional
experience. Clients and social workers may discover interrelated sets of issues that they need to consider in the broader context of the social milieu. Different sorts of challenges are likely to emerge at each system level (Table 8.3).

**Cultural Context**

To understand clients’ situations, social workers explore the nature and scope of needs, identify other relevant information, and examine requirements for services and resources.

**TABLE 8.3 Typical Concerns at Various System Levels**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual, Family, and Small-Group Concerns</th>
<th>Marital and family problems</th>
<th>Advocacy needs</th>
<th>Lack of resources</th>
<th>Violation of legal or civil rights</th>
<th>Need for developing living skills</th>
<th>Need for developing socialization skills</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal adjustment</td>
<td>Interpersonal conflict</td>
<td>Life transitions</td>
<td>Access to services</td>
<td>Need for protective services</td>
<td>Need for information and referral</td>
<td>Need for developing parenting skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital and family problems</td>
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<td>Inadequate role performance</td>
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<td>Need for information and referral</td>
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<td>Victimization</td>
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<td>Access to services</td>
<td>Lack of opportunities</td>
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<td>Stress</td>
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<td>Need for protective services</td>
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<td>Advocacy needs</td>
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<td>Need for information and referral</td>
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<td>Lack of resources</td>
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<td>Violation of legal or civil rights</td>
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<tr>
<th>Formal Group and Organizational Concerns</th>
<th>Staff burnout</th>
<th>Employee productivity</th>
<th>Job placement</th>
<th>Membership participation</th>
<th>Utilization of resources</th>
<th>Grants management</th>
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<tr>
<td>Employee relations</td>
<td>Staff burnout</td>
<td>Employee productivity</td>
<td>Job placement</td>
<td>Membership participation</td>
<td>Utilization of resources</td>
<td>Grants management</td>
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<td>Affirmative action</td>
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<td>Employee counseling needs</td>
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<td>Administrative policy changes</td>
<td>Staff burnout</td>
<td>Employee productivity</td>
<td>Job placement</td>
<td>Membership participation</td>
<td>Utilization of resources</td>
<td>Grants management</td>
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<td>Strategic planning</td>
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<td>Coordinating efforts</td>
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<td>Development of volunteers</td>
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<td>Public relations campaign</td>
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<td>Management decision making</td>
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<tr>
<th>Community and Society Concerns</th>
<th>Lack of affordable housing</th>
<th>Public health issues</th>
<th>Health and human service reform</th>
<th>Legislative needs</th>
<th>Community education</th>
<th>Legislative reform</th>
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<tr>
<td>Economic development</td>
<td>Lack of affordable housing</td>
<td>Public health issues</td>
<td>Health and human service reform</td>
<td>Legislative needs</td>
<td>Community education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Public health issues</td>
<td>Health and human service reform</td>
<td>Legislative needs</td>
<td>Community education</td>
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<td>Intergroup tension</td>
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<td>Health and human service reform</td>
<td>Legislative needs</td>
<td>Community education</td>
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<td>Reallocation of resources</td>
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<td>Health and human service reform</td>
<td>Legislative needs</td>
<td>Community education</td>
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<td>Coalition building</td>
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<td>Legislative needs</td>
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<td>Social policy change</td>
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<td>Community education</td>
<td>Legislative reform</td>
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<td>Conflict of interest</td>
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<td>Health and human service reform</td>
<td>Legislative needs</td>
<td>Community education</td>
<td>Legislative reform</td>
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<td>Social Work Profession Concerns</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary relations</td>
<td>Needs of oppressed client populations</td>
<td>Social work image</td>
<td>Theory development</td>
<td>Communicating results of research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary relations</td>
<td>Needs of oppressed client populations</td>
<td>Social work image</td>
<td>Theory development</td>
<td>Communicating results of research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional monitoring</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary relations</td>
<td>Needs of oppressed client populations</td>
<td>Social work image</td>
<td>Theory development</td>
<td>Communicating results of research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer review</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary relations</td>
<td>Needs of oppressed client populations</td>
<td>Social work image</td>
<td>Theory development</td>
<td>Communicating results of research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gaps and barriers in services</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary relations</td>
<td>Needs of oppressed client populations</td>
<td>Social work image</td>
<td>Theory development</td>
<td>Communicating results of research</td>
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<td>Social service delivery network</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary relations</td>
<td>Needs of oppressed client populations</td>
<td>Social work image</td>
<td>Theory development</td>
<td>Communicating results of research</td>
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Taking cultural variations as well as historical, physical, developmental, emotional, demographic, and organizational factors into consideration, social workers consider the uniqueness of expressed concerns as well as their common characteristics. To this end, although drawing upon generalized knowledge, effective social workers maintain their perspective about the uniqueness of specific persons or social structures in particular situations.

Cultural contexts are particularly significant, as culture uniquely defines the transactions between people and their social and physical environments. Cultural diversity can be a source of both personal strengths and environmental resources and barriers. Cultural factors social workers and clients might consider include such characteristics as cultural beliefs and traditions, definitions of roles and authority, and construction of social support networks. Additionally, clients and social workers need to analyze environmental issues related to power and powerlessness in personal, interpersonal, and sociopolitical domains (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1999; Solomon, 1976). For example, they might explore how factors such as prejudicial attitudes, social stratification, unequal access to resources and opportunity structures, and other discriminatory behaviors affect clients’ personally, interpersonally, and in the context of their transactions with their social and physical environments.

**Social Work Highlights.** Jim Brown serves as chairperson of the Homeless Coalition, a representative group of agencies that offer shelter facilities, work with clients who are homeless, and deal with housing issues. The group is surveying area shelters to determine their capacity and to gather statistics on daily usage. Members of the Homeless Coalition assert that the needs of the homeless population outstrip the capacity of the local shelters. After the information is gathered, Jim will analyze it and organize it according to clients’ demographic profile, type of shelter, eligibility restrictions, and waiting-list information. The coalition will examine the data for patterns and trends and use the data to inform donors about gaps and barriers. The data will be useful in establishing priorities for the future work of the coalition.

**Defining Directions**

Social workers and clients need to have some direction for their work together. In the process of defining directions, social workers and clients clarify the preliminary purposes for their working relationship and respond forthrightly to preemptive crises.

Defining directions provides a purpose for social workers’ and clients’ activities. A purpose orients social workers and clients to the clients’ situations, as challenges and strengths are more evident in the context of goals. Practitioners can frame their responses in ways that are directed toward goals, focus their attention on discovering resources that will facilitate reaching goals, and use clients’ goals as guides in their quest for relevant information. Research has pointed to a relationship between setting goals, believing it’s possible to attain these goals, and gains in performance (Bandura & Cervone, 1983). Determining goals and believing in their possibility energizes behavior.

At this point in their work together, the directions social workers and clients define are preliminary. Preliminary goals frame assessment activities, whereas specific goals and measurable objectives are integral components of a subsequent element in the process—the
Preemptive Actions

Sometimes clients’ circumstances or behaviors require immediate, preemptive actions. For example, issues of safety, lack of food or shelter, immobilizing emotional crises, threats of suicide, and evidence of abuse or neglect all call for immediate actions on the part of social workers. Agency protocol, supervisors’ recommendations, and legal advice provide direction for preemptive actions.

Social workers act to ensure clients’ safety and well-being without demolishing clients’ sense of power and control. Even in the context of preemptive actions, practitioners work with clients as partners.

Referrals

In talking with clients about their goals, social workers evaluate how well clients’ situations match the purpose of the agency, the resources that are available, and criteria for eligibility. Sometimes referrals to other service providers are necessary when clients’ needs extend beyond the scope of the agency’s programs or the expertise of the social worker or require resources in addition to what the initial agency can supply (Table 8.4).

Social Work Highlights. Marvella Crawford, the social worker at Run and Play Day Care Center, was called to the prekindergarten classroom by the teacher’s aide to talk with four-year-old Guy Smith about the bruises on his forehead and cheek. When Marvella commented softly to Guy, “Oh, you have some bruises on your face,” Guy immediately responded, “My mother didn’t do it!” Marvella then asks, “So, tell me, how did it happen?” Guy told Marvella that he didn’t remember getting hurt yesterday. Taking note of Guy’s first response, Marvella, a mandated reporter for child abuse and neglect, follows agency policy and reports her suspicions about these unexplained bruises to the state child protection agency.

TABLE 8.4 Elements of Referrals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practitioners refer clients to other professionals and agencies when</th>
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<tr>
<td>■ The service needs of the client system exceed the scope of the agency mission</td>
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<td>■ Clients require specialized services that go beyond the skill repertoire of the social worker</td>
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<td>■ Organizational restrictions and eligibility requirements limit service access</td>
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<tr>
<th>Social workers initiate effective referral processes by</th>
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<tr>
<td>■ Discussing the need and reasons for the referral with the client system</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Screening services for the best referral fit</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Following agency referral protocols</td>
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<td>■ Making the actual referral</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Transferring the client’s records</td>
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<td>■ Arranging for follow-up</td>
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</table>
Identifying Strengths

Empowerment-oriented social workers reorient the way they respond to clients to make strengths the cornerstone of their work. Narrowly focusing on clients’ problems excludes from view the resources of their strengths. Emphasizing what clients are doing wrong decreases their sense of competence and heightens their defensiveness and vulnerability. This, in turn, cuts off exchanges of information and curtails clients’ resourcefulness. Focusing on strengths provides clients with a reservoir of resources for generating solutions and enhances their participation in the social work process (Table 8.5).

The strengths perspective is “more responsive to the humanistic, ethical, and political considerations that characterize the helping process” (Goldstein, 1990, p. 267). Identifying clients’ strengths and resources activates their potential for change. Among the possible strengths clients and social workers consider are the client system’s

- Outstanding qualities
- Demonstrations of power
- Alliances
- Distinctive characteristics
- Relationship with environmental systems
- Available resources
- Contributions to the social and physical environments
- Adaptability to change
- Cultural strengths (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2004)

**TABLE 8.5  Principles for Promoting Client Strengths and Competence**

*Social workers should foster relationships that*
- Reflect empathy
- Affirm clients’ choices and self-determination
- Value individual differences
- Emphasize collaboration

*Social workers should promote communication that*
- Respects dignity and worth
- Considers individual differences
- Remains client-focused
- Upholds confidentiality

*Social workers should seek solutions that*
- Encourage clients’ participation
- Apprise clients of their legal rights
- Reframe challenges as opportunities for learning
- Involve clients in decision making and evaluation

*Social workers should reflect standards of the social work profession in actions that*
- Adhere to the profession’s code of ethics
- Involve them in professional development, research, and policy formulation
- Redress discrimination, inequality, and social justice issues
**Social Work Highlights.** Billy Maxwell smiled coyly at Jack Reed, the school social worker, as Jack entered his office. Billy, perched on the edge of Jack’s chair, announced that he was social worker for the day. Looking directly at Jack, without missing a beat and sounding just like the principal, Billy said, “I think we need to have a serious talk today, young man.” Billy waved his hand to a chair, indicating that Jack should take a seat. Seating himself, Jack asked, “Well, what am I in trouble for this time?” Billy rolled his eyes and exclaimed, “Oh, brother!” A sarcastic, “Oh, brother!” is Billy’s all-too-frequent trademark expression of disgust with his teacher, classmates, or the principal.

Billy’s classmates like him, except when they’re the target of his sometimes unkind wisecracks. His teacher describes him as an impulsive, interruptive influence in the classroom. The principal has Billy pegged as a troublemaker. His parents see him as “all boy.” In his work with Billy, Jack does not discount Billy’s inappropriate actions in the classroom, nor does he take lightly Billy’s troublesome behavior on the playground. Jack’s approach to working with Billy takes into account the difficulties Billy presents at school, acknowledges those times when Billy is doing things right, and builds on the strengths of this gifted, creative, articulate, likable seven-year-old.

**Assessing Resource Capabilities**

Assessing resource capabilities, or assessment, is the dynamic process of gathering information in order to understand clients’ challenges. Together, practitioners and clients explore the particulars of the situation, the potential effects, and the resources necessary for implementing solutions. The purpose of assessment is to understand the problem and ascertain ways to reduce its impact. Empowerment-based social work practice reframes assessment from a process that gathers information to detect problems to one that focuses on gathering information to discover resources that will strengthen solutions.

**Competence Clarification**

Competence generally refers to the abilities and potential of human systems to negotiate favorably with their environment. In other words, competent human systems are able to care for their members, interact effectively with other systems, and contribute to the resources of their social and physical environments (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2004). In successful systems, members contribute to the well-being and overall functioning of the system and benefit from membership in that system. Likewise, competent systems share a similar relationship with their environments; they supply and access resources through reciprocal exchanges.

Competence clarification can extend to all system levels. For example, in assessing the competence of a community, practitioners look for evidence that the community responds to the needs of its members, draws on the resources of its members, distributes community resources equitably among its members, ensures an overall sense of security and well-being for its citizens, and contributes to the larger region of which it is a part.

As such, competence clarification views environmental resources as instruments of help rather than as merely influences on help (Maluccio, 1999). Maluccio’s guidelines for competence clarification include (1) clarifying the competence of the client system, including capabilities, strengths, resiliency, and resources; (2) clarifying the environment,
including the availability of resources and supports, and the presence of barriers, risks, and obstacles; and (3) clarifying the goodness of fit or balance between the requirements for and the actual availability of resources.

Social Studies

Social studies help to define the pertinent problems, issues, and needs inherent in the situation and to heighten one’s awareness of clients’ strengths (Table 8.6). Concerns raised by client systems, whether at the micro-, mid-, or macrolevel, must be examined in the context of the larger system of which the client system is a part and the smaller, internal structures that make up the social system. The problem an individual presents (private trouble) may be the result of a larger community situation (public issue). Likewise, a community or organizational problem affects the individual members of the community or organization. The challenge for social work is to merge the “twin images of individual and social need into one” (Schwartz, 1969, p. 357).

At all system levels, social studies individualize information about clients in order to identify problems. Examples of social studies include case histories, social histories, situational analyses, social surveys, community surveys, policy or program analyses, and social research.

Cultural Considerations in Assessments. As clients and social workers gather information for social studies, they explore the cultural context. Culturally competent practitioners form questions from general information about cultural values and patterns to ask about specific aspects of culturally based traditions, values, and beliefs (Congress, 1994). People identify with their cultural or ethnic group to different degrees and ascribe various levels of importance to their cultural heritage. Factors to consider include length of residence in the community; circumstances of immigration; traditions about holidays, religious rituals, and health practices; and values about community, family, work, education, and help-seeking.

TABLE 8.6 Social Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Among the questions in a social study are the following:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>■ How does the client system define the problem?</td>
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<td>■ What are the boundaries of the problem?</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ What is the client system’s perception of the intensity of the problem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What is the client system’s perception of the duration of the problem (long-term, short-term, crisis)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ What attempted solutions have been forged?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Who else is affected by the problem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ How does the problem affect the social functioning of the system that it impinges upon?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What environmental opportunities, barriers, or constraints affect social functioning and the resolution of the problem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What value issues are involved?</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ What client strengths or competencies can be directed toward change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What resources are available?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What is the client’s perception of social work intervention and the helping process?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What has the client’s past experience with the social service delivery system been like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Does the client believe that there is hope for resolution of the problem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ How motivated is the client to change?</td>
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Social Work Highlights. Carmen Molina is a social worker at Pleasant Valley Nursing and Retirement Center. She is preparing to complete a social history and a mental status assessment with a new resident at the facility, Olivia Smith. Carmen reads the resident’s chart, which includes background information and medical information. The face sheet of the resident’s chart highlights intake data such as admission date, reason for admission, names of family members, and church affiliation. Carmen will use this information as a basis for framing her questions to complete the social history. Carmen likes having some background information available to prompt the resident’s recall and to focus the interview. She also knows that residents’ social networks are treasure troves of strengths. She often works out eco-maps or genograms with residents (see Figures 8.1 and 8.2).

Up until recent hospitalization, Olivia lived with her daughter Simone. Lisa moved back home after her divorce.

A genogram illustrates the structure and interrelationships within a family. Genograms incorporate information from at least two generations, including names, ages, and dates of marriages, divorces, and deaths. Sometimes workers and clients annotate genograms with other descriptive information, as well.

FIGURE 8.1 Genogram for Olivia Smith
The nursing home uses the social history and the mental status assessment to formulate care plans with residents and their families. The social history chronicles the resident’s life. Questions relate to significant life experiences, family history, educational background, employment experiences, hobbies, and personal preferences. The mental status assessment apprises the staff of the client’s level of cognitive functioning and awareness as to time and place. Carmen shares the information from these psychosocial assessments at interdisciplinary team meetings to inform staff about residents’ needs.

**Framing Solutions**

Social work practitioners and clients work together to develop solutions. They draw upon each other’s knowledge, skills, and resources. Social workers bring to the relationship professional knowledge and skills pertaining to human behavior, the social environment, the service...
delivery system, and practice methodologies. Clients—whether they are individuals and families, formal groups and organizations, or communities and societies—bring their own experiences and resources, such as personal life experiences, familial relationship patterns, organizational leadership styles, community initiatives, and societal orientations toward values. Framing possible solutions is a process through which social workers and clients draw upon their mutual resources to transform goals and objectives into plans of action.

**Goals and Objectives**

Clients’ goals are statements that specify what the clients hope to achieve through the helping relationship. Typically, the overall purpose forms the long-range, or outcome, goal. Short-term objectives specify steps that will lead to accomplishing the long-range goal. Goals and objectives are the index by which clients and social workers measure change and evaluate success.

Social workers and clients use a technique called partializing to separate the overall goal into workable, manageable parts. This technique enables workers and clients to focus on specific aspects of difficulties that they can address, rather than feeling overwhelmed by seemingly insurmountable tasks. In other words, taking small steps leads to the resolution of the more comprehensive goal. “A partialized problem is quite often one one can do something about when one is helpless before the whole. If one can start work on even a little bit of the whole, one may gain courage to tackle a little more” (Keith-Lucas, 1972, p. 58).

**Clients’ Roles in Setting Goals.** Social workers and clients work together to specify goals to achieve solutions to the defined problems, issues, and needs. Very likely, clients have ideas about how their problems should be solved or what services they need. Frequently they are accurate; sometimes they’re not. The goal-setting process involves negotiating agreements about the course of action. Empowering social workers fully consider the clients’ perspectives. If the resulting goals differ from clients’ initial plans, the differences need to be accounted for and mediated.

Accomplishing tasks and attaining goals serve as mileposts of achievement. As clients achieve accomplishments, their sense of competence increases, as do their motivation levels. However, clients must “own” the definition of their difficulties and the goals and assume responsibility for activities that lead to achieving their goals if they are to view themselves as responsible for changing and, thus, competent.

**Plans of Action**

Plans of action translate goals into strategies that work toward solutions. The following guidelines for formulating action plans ensure that these plans reflect social work values from an empowerment perspective:

- Maximize clients’ involvement in all aspects of developing and implementing the plan of action.
- Recognize the interrelationships among social systems in selecting change strategies.
- Build on clients’ strengths and promote clients’ competence.
Foster a critical awareness of the interconnectedness between the personal and political, and identify strategies that promote social justice.

Create feedback loops for continuous assessment of progress and outcomes.

Plans of action often include ways to access the formal provisions of the social service delivery system as well as the informal resources in clients’ social networks. Formal provisions involve the myriad of services available to the client in the social service delivery system itself. Plans of action also incorporate informal helpers such as clergy, teachers, family, friends, and neighbors. Formal and informal helping networks play distinct roles, and each is essential for its own unique contribution.

Social workers and clients select from a variety of roles and strategies that facilitate addressing issues at multiple system levels. Table 8.7 highlights these roles within the context of social work functions—consultancy, resource management, and education. Chapter 9 presents them in detail.

Cultural Considerations. Ethnically sensitive social workers consider cultural aspects when determining alternative solutions with ethnic minorities. Culture may be a positive reinforcement and resource for coping during times of stress or crises. At the same time, one’s cultural past could be a negative source of conflict (Lum, 2004). In other words, the client’s cultural background may be a strength or a limitation depending on the impact of the client’s cultural differences on the particular situation. Social workers explore issues of that diversity with their clients to determine how cultural diversity affects problems and their various potential solutions.

Social Work Highlights. Parents United is a support group for family members of children who have autism. At the group’s third meeting, social worker Marcia Ostrander from

**TABLE 8.7 Social Work Roles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Actions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consultancy for Problem Solving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabler</td>
<td>Empowers clients to resolve problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Fosters organizational development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planner</td>
<td>Coordinates program and policy development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleague/monitor</td>
<td>Acts as mentor and guide for support and professional acculturation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broker/advocate</td>
<td>Acts as intermediary between individuals and resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convener/mediator</td>
<td>Assembles groups and organizations for resource development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>Stimulates and energizes social change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalyst</td>
<td>Stimulates interdisciplinary cooperation for resource development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Identifies vulnerable populations and provides education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainer</td>
<td>Instructs or educates through staff development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outreach worker</td>
<td>Conveys public information about social issues and social services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research/scholar</td>
<td>Engages in discovery for knowledge development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Child Development Services reviewed the goals group members had agreed on at their last meeting. The group had selected three broad goals: to educate the community about autism, to advocate for educational resources in the school system, and to form a local chapter affiliated with the national autism organization. At this meeting, the parents will begin to formulate concrete objectives and identify tasks and activities.

As a starting point, Marcia suggested working on their community education goal. Group members shared a lot of ideas for a media blitz, including getting the message out through public service announcements, seminars and workshops, feature articles in the local newspaper, and radio and television talk shows. The group agreed that the objective—"the Parents United group will arrange for five media exposures within the next three months"—was indeed attainable and realistic. Members identified what needed to be done to make this possible. To start with, Gina Stand will contact the national autism society to obtain literature and brochures. Nora and John West will prepare a press package. Alan Bates will construct a list of contact people in the local media. The members of the Parents United group are framing solutions. They identify desired outcomes, consider alternatives for achieving their goals, and detail a plan of action.

Implementing Action Plans

To implement action plans, practitioners work with client systems and with other systems related to clients’ situations. In general, implementation processes fall into three categories: activating resources, creating alliances, and expanding opportunities.

Activating Resources

After social workers and clients determine their overall course of action, it’s time to place their plans in motion. The process of activating resources does just that. Activating means initiating actions that will lead to achieving the outcome goals.

Although activating resources is a process that initiates plans of action, this does not imply that social workers direct or control these activities, or that social workers initiate activities that “do to” or “do for” clients. Although social workers may act as catalysts for change, activating resources is a cooperative venture in which both social workers and clients participate.

Ways to Activate Resources. Activating resources includes intervention activities to empower client systems with their own personal resources and increase their access to the resources that already exist in their social environments. In activating resources, clients make connections with necessary interpersonal and institutional resources, and social workers consult on strategies and work with clients to manage resources. Possible strategies and techniques include

- Enhancing personal efficacy
- Fostering interpersonal competence
- Promoting consciousness-raising
- Building on strengths
- Motivating change
Drawing upon cultural resources
Exercising personal power (Miley & DuBois, 1999, p. 7)

An enhanced sense of competence and personal self-efficacy is certainly a significant component of empowerment. However, a singular focus on individual competence falls short of the concept of empowerment as both personal and political. Limiting activities to the personal arena of efficacy and adaptation disregards the transactional nature of empowerment. Some even argue that narrowly focusing on the personal domain misses the point of empowerment entirely (Breton, 1994).

Emphasizing the development of a critical consciousness ensures that the interconnections between the personal and the political are made (Breton, 1994; 2002; Gutiérrez, 1994; Lee, 2001; Simon, 1994). Consciousness-raising contextualizes experiences, reduces self-blame, and “helps group members to take account of the nature and impact of their own choices and actions and to take responsibility for them” (Simon, 1990, p. 35). Critical reflection leads to an understanding of the social origins of personal actions and the recognition that institutional structures and policies can be altered. Moreover, dialogue within a group context forms a base of solidarity among group members that can result in collective actions that lead to changes in social policies and social structures.

Creating Alliances
Alliances are powerful resources that can energize change. Through the process of creating alliances, social workers and clients add to clients’ resource pool of connections with social support networks and community resources. They also draw upon the benefits of social workers’ associations with other professionals.

Ways to Create Alliances. By creating alliances, social workers and clients align the efforts of clients in empowerment groups, strengthen the functioning of clients within their natural support networks, and organize the service delivery network. These alliances bring emotional support to clients and build bases of power. Key techniques include

- Forming empowerment groups
- Developing a critical consciousness
- Aligning natural support networks
- Creating responsive social service delivery systems
- Constructing client-service alliances
- Maximizing interpersonal power (Miley & DuBois, 1999, p. 8)

Many practitioners conclude that working with clients in groups enhances their experiences of empowerment (Breton, 1994; 2002; Gutiérrez, 1994; Lee, 2001; Simon, 1994). Work in small groups “is the perfect environment for raising consciousness, engaging in mutual aid, developing skills, problem solving, and experiencing one’s own effectiveness in influencing others” (Dodd & Gutiérrez, 1990, p. 71).

Creating alliances also extends to community coalitions, interagency networks, and case management teams. Composed of professionals, client advocates, and service consumers, these alliances have the potential to form a base of power to engage in collective
Community Action

After completing a practicum in special education as an undergraduate, I considered becoming either a special education teacher or a social worker. After my summer job experience at a state hospital school, I knew exactly what direction my career would take. I wanted to be more than a classroom educator; I wanted to be in a position where I could change systems. As a reform-minded social worker, I believe I have made a difference in the lives of the people with whom I have worked in several fields of practice—mental health, disabilities services, domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy, and, now, in a community action agency. As a master’s level social worker, I have been able to combine direct practice work with supervisory and management experiences in each of these positions.

The lessons I have learned about organizational restructuring, fund raising, and public relations carry over to my job as a director of a community action agency that serves a multi-county area, employs over 250 persons, and serves more than 20,000 clients a year. Our agency is a “one-stop-shop” for implementing the state mandate to work with people who are poor. This community-based agency is an original Community Action Program (CAP) agency initiated by the antipoverty programs of the 1960s. The agency’s mission is linked very closely to breaking the cycle of poverty. However, whereas antipoverty programs should be preventive, in reality, they are reactive to the conditions of poverty. The programs and services our agency offers include early childhood education, energy assistance, medical assistance, transitional housing, congregate meals, programming for older adults, economic development, food pantry, furniture and appliance replacement, and housing weatherization to name a few. Although these services help our clients out with the increasing costs of living, they are designed to lift people out of poverty.

Our small professional staff is complemented by a large number of paraprofessionals. As an agency, we have an assertive staff development program that emphasizes training in service delivery and ethics. The service delivery and ethical issues faced by our largely paraprofessional staff are no different from those faced by credentialed and licensed practitioners—boundary issues, confidentiality, nonjudgmentalism, acceptance of clients, and client self-determination. Through a variety of staff development opportunities, we educate workers about empowerment and strengths, the perspectives that are foundational to our agency mission and philosophy of service delivery.

As an agency director, I am challenged by a dual role. One role is to ensure that the agency is fiscally solvent. Because our agency is largely funded by state and federal grants, I am involved in grant writing. I have found that as a social work administrator I need to be grounded in budgeting and accounting principles so I can work with the agency’s fiscal director to understand and direct how funding flows through the agency. My other role as an administrator is to be involved in changing social policies that impact the clients served by our agency. Public policy issues affect every client with whom we work and pervade every program that we offer. For example, because many of the families we serve are eligible for TANF, they face economic uncertainty now and in their future. The opportunities and resources available to them hinge on the outcomes of the TANF reauthorization and state-level decisions about implementation. In addition, the recent discussions on changing the funding base of the now federally funded Head Start programs to block grants to states will inevitably impact the families and children currently served by the Head Start programs that we administer in our multicounty catchment area.
social action, advocate for policy change, and realign fragmented service delivery. Involving clients in these service delivery alliances ensures their representation and safeguards their rights.

Expanding Opportunities

Whereas activating resources taps resources that are currently available, expanding opportunities creates additional resources, particularly in the social and physical environment. “Practitioners should become experts in methods of environmental modification, use of existing community resources and natural helping networks, [and] creating of new resources that may be needed by their clients” (Maluccio & Whittaker, 1989, p. 176). Empowerment-oriented social workers develop strategies related to service delivery, social policy, and economic development to redress the injustice of limited opportunities.

Many suggest that by seeking ways to redress the injustice of inadequate opportunity structures, social workers are restoring the original intent of the profession. For example, Specht and Courtney (1994) charge social workers to remain faithful to the purpose of the social work profession by reinstating their social function of linking clients with resources; renovating the delivery of services; and participating in activities that involve advocacy, social action, community education, and social change. The NASW (1999a) Code of Ethics summons social workers to seek social changes that extend opportunities and resources to all citizens, particularly those who are disenfranchised and oppressed.

Empowerment-based social workers define their role as one “to open up options, to help clients expand their choices, or to help them become free to consider multiple paths” (Hartman, 1993, p. 504). Nevertheless, Hartman suggests that clients face many obstacles in their search for resources and options, including limitations in social institutions, economic policies, political practices, ideologies, and the traditions of history. Pursuing ways to enhance clients’ access to resources and environmental opportunities is imperative.

Ways to Expand Opportunities. Expanding opportunities fulfills the professional mandate to ensure a just distribution of societal resources by creating needed resources through social reform, policy development, legislative advocacy, and community change. Social workers join with clients to expand societal resources and develop new opportunities. Practitioners and clients work to redress social injustice and to develop just social policy. Potential techniques and strategies include

- Recognizing environmental opportunities and risks
- Engaging in community empowerment and development
- Promoting social activism and social advocacy
- Championing social justice
- Exercising sociopolitical power (Miley & DuBois, 1999, p. 8)

Social action operationalizes sociopolitical empowerment. Social workers have long favored collective action as a strategy to reallocate power and resources, to redress social inequities, and to benefit disenfranchised and oppressed populations. In empowerment-based social work practice, social action should not be construed as the exclusive domain of the macro-
practitioner. Social workers who work primarily with microlevel clients serve as advocates to speak on behalf of clients to influence changes in social policies and work in collaboration with clients so that they themselves may speak in their own voices to effect social and political change. Clients, in this regard, are both subjects and claimants (Simon, 1994; Weil, 1996).

**Social Work Highlights.** Paul Ware reviewed his notes for the public testimony he was about to present at the legislators’ forum on homelessness. Paul works at a large urban shelter for homeless and displaced families. Paul will address the group about the unique school issues experienced by children who live in shelters. The transient nature of their lives complicates the continuity of their education. The local school principals are bickering among themselves about which schools these children should attend. Paul’s experience with children whose education is disrupted by constant moves and shelter stays shows that their school records are often incomplete and the documentation of their academic progress is fragmented. Too often, this results in children’s being placed inappropriately in classes below their academic level when they change schools.

Paul is speaking as a representative of parents at the shelter who want their children to be able to remain in the neighborhood schools they attended before they were displaced from their homes. Parents see the need for their children to have continuity in their education and stability in that part of their lives. They seek legislative action to create exceptions to residency requirements of school districts. Paul testifies and advocates to expand his clients’ opportunities.

**Recognizing Success**

Have clients achieved their goals? Has the action plan made a difference? Have social workers and clients focused on strengths, and have their activities empowered change? Are strategies effective and efficient? These questions, as well as others, focus attention on evaluating social work practice and participating in research.

In the context of empowerment-based social work, research and evaluation strategies are not merely mechanical techniques for measuring outcomes. Evaluation and research validate clients’ achievements and substantiate the usefulness of social service strategies, programs, and policies. Naming these facets of the process for social work practice recognizing success emphasizes the motivating effect of crediting participants for the outcomes of their actions.

Practice evaluation and research occurs in many ways at several different levels. Evaluation plays an integral role in practitioners’ day-to-day work with each client system. Specifications of grants as well as program planning processes necessitate social workers’ involvement in broad-based program evaluation processes. Social workers who develop expertise as research specialists use the tools of formal research to evaluate theories, practice methods, and particular strategies to strengthen the social work profession’s scientific knowledge base. Competent professionals hone their skills in the methodologies of evaluation and research.

**Types of Practice Evaluation**

Through evaluations of their practice, social workers assess outcomes and measure the effectiveness of strategies. Empowerment-based practice evaluation emphasizes progress,
empowerment-based practice evaluation examines obstacles as a way of learning what else needs to be done—or what needs to be done differently—to accomplish the agreed-upon goals. Progress evaluation, outcome assessment, and program evaluation are three main types of social work practice evaluation (Table 8.8).

Progress Evaluation. Action plans are blueprints for action that specify strategies and activities for accomplishing clients’ goals. However, given the dynamic nature of humans and their social environment, no plan can forecast the accomplishment of outcomes un-

BOX 8.3

Reflections on Empowerment

Action Research
An exclusive domain of professional knowledge undermines the legitimacy of clients’ views on their own situations and their opinions about the effectiveness of programs and services. Having expert knowledge gives voice to professionals and silences consumers. In short, theoretical prescriptions create hierarchies that leave professionals in charge and relegate clients to one-down positions. “An ethic of inclusion guides empowerment-oriented [social workers] to redress issues of exclusivity” in their research endeavors (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2004, p. 412).

Action research, also known as participatory action research, community action research, and collaborative research, involves clients as full participants in research processes and theory development (DePoy, Hartman, & Haslett, 1999; Fleming & Ward, 1999; Healy, 2001; Reitsma-Street & Brown, 2002). Egalitarian by definition, service user groups identify action research as a means to realizing empowerment (Beresford & Evans, 1999; Evans & Fisher, 1999). According to Brown (1994), “participatory research is an empowering experience for participants, a process that validates their realities and their rights as people to be heard, respected and recorded as a part of history” (p. 295). As such, action research is particularly applicable to population groups whose power has been diminished by discrimination and oppression (Parsons, East, & Boesen, 1994; Sohng, 1999).

Elements of action research include dialogue, investigation of contexts, opportunity for dialogue and critical reflection, and collective actions for organizational and social change (Brown, 1994). Consumers are involved in all aspects of action research—from defining the problem, to involving stakeholders, to designing and conducting the inquiry, to analyzing and reporting results, and to taking action.

Action research is helpful for creating organizational and community change. For example, continuous cycles of action research have been applied to assess changes in social work practice that accrue from education on working in partnerships with service users (Fisher, 1994). In another example, a collaborative research team of stakeholders and university personnel identified problems with helping adolescents with special health care needs make transitions to adulthood, developed a strategy to research the issues, gathered information through focus groups and surveys, analyzed the data, and recommended actions for implementation in programs and services (DePoy, Hartman, & Haslett, 1999). Implementing social action research is complex; however, its base of grassroots involvement holds opportunities for active participation by clients or stakeholders in building a base of knowledge and refining programs and services.
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equivocally. In many ways, when social workers and clients implement their plans of action, they are really experimenting with potential solutions. It stands to reason, then, that social workers and clients need to determine what’s working and what’s not so that they will know how to continue their work together.

As they implement plans, social workers can ask several questions that evaluate progress:

- Are they following the plan?
- Are clients and social workers fulfilling their parts of the agreement?
- Is the plan working? Are some parts of the plan working better than others? Are some parts at an impasse?
- What actions have the most positive effects? The least?
- What actions require maximum input, yet realize minimal results?
- Does the plan meet or fall short of expectations?
- Are clients playing an active role? What factors enhance or limit clients’ participation?
- In what ways have clients’ goals changed? What are the implications of these changes for the overall plan? (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2004)

Evaluating progress provides information that allows social workers and clients to monitor their progress and update their plans.

**Client Outcome Assessment.** Through client outcome assessments, workers evaluate the degree to which clients achieve their stated goals and the effectiveness of the strategies employed. Two evaluative questions are “Did the client system reach its goals?” and “Did the social work strategies produce the change?” Outcome assessment evaluations also provide information about the degree of change and its stability, unintended or unanticipated consequences, and the efficiency of the change activities. Effective client outcome assessments hinge on plans that incorporate measurable objectives. Questions that gather client outcome assessment information include:

- To what degree did the client system achieve its goals?
- Did the intervention cause the change?
- What other factors may have affected the level of change?
- What factors could enhance sustaining these gains?
- Do results call for additional interventions?
- How should social workers modify their strategies?

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**TABLE 8.8** Types of Practice Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Progress evaluation</td>
<td>Monitoring the effectiveness of the ongoing work of social workers and their clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome assessment</td>
<td>Measuring clients’ achievement of goals and social work methods’ effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program evaluation</td>
<td>Investigating the effectiveness of specific services in achieving the overall goals of programs, expectations of grant requirements, or the agency’s mission</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Social workers rely on information from outcome assessment to refine their practice. Final evaluations involve a systematic review of both what worked and what didn’t. Outcomes may have been intended or unintended, anticipated or unanticipated, and positive or negative.

**Program Evaluation.** Through program evaluation, social workers attempt to address the question: Is this program accomplishing its goals? They may use several different strategies to evaluate programs. For example, they might compile outcomes for each client in a program to determine whether the program met its goals. Consumer satisfaction surveys ascertain clients’ perspectives about workers as well as about particular programs and services. Surveys of former clients and referral agencies yield important information about the effectiveness and reputation of the program. In reviewing case files, social workers examine clients’ progress in relation to program goals and the agency’s mission. Finally, formalized internal reviews by peers and supervisors evaluate agency effectiveness. Combining several types of program evaluations provides a more comprehensive view of program effectiveness.

Program evaluations assess the effects of programs on clients, agencies, and the general public. Researchable questions that social workers might ask in evaluating programs include:

- Did the program result in the anticipated change?
- Does the program demonstrate cultural sensitivity?
- Has the program achieved the objectives set by funding organizations?
- Are the program objectives consistent with the agency’s mission?
- Is this program feasible?
- What are the program’s strengths and weaknesses?
- Is there an adequate number of staff?
- Is the program accessible to potential clients?
- Have public attitudes or awareness changed as a result of the program?
- Does the program respond adequately to a community need? (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2004)

Program evaluation data assist professionals in refining agency policies, allocating resources, planning for programs and services, and reformulating program priorities. Evaluation research identifies programs that require modification and strategies that merit replication.

**Social Work Highlights.** Social worker Deanne Rivers-Bell reviews goal attainment scales with her clients. Deanne works at an after-school day treatment program for preadolescent boys with conduct disorders. Her six clients identify problematic behaviors and thinking errors associated with those behaviors. Their goals reflect increasing their effectiveness in interpersonal relationships and communication, managing impulses, and channeling their anger in socially appropriate ways. Each youth defines specific objectives along with observable behaviors that will indicate progress.

Deanne and her clients continually monitor improvement throughout their participation in the program. Daily recordings maintained by the boys log their activities.
and behaviors. Deanne plots this information on a graph for each boy. At weekly group meetings, her clients review the scales to recognize their successes and identify areas for continued improvement.

**Integrating Gains**

Describing the ending of the social work process as one of integrating gains underscores the fact that change is an ongoing process that continues after the professional relationship between client and social worker ends. In fact, the success of the whole process hinges on the nature of its ending. Effective endings provide springboards to the future by recognizing achievements, consolidating gains, and building a sense of competence.

A number of factors influence the process of ending social workers’ and clients’ work together. Agency purpose, parameters of programs and services, and reimbursement policies are among these factors. For example, inpatient hospitalization is limited in time and mandates short-term crisis intervention and discharge-oriented services. On the other hand, child protective services often involve long-term, open-ended provisions for service, given by a succession of providers because of staff turnover. Sometimes program services specify a time frame—for instance, a 28-day drug treatment program or an 8-session parenting class. The cost-containment policies of some insurance vendors may limit the number of contacts, thus defining the parameters of the intervention plan. Additionally, in working toward constructive endings, social workers consider such factors as the reasons for ending services; the client’s and their own reactions to separations, loss, and transitions; evaluation outcomes; and ways to sustain gains in the future.

Endings are also beginnings! Considering the reciprocal nature of transactions, both clients and social workers have opportunities to benefit by integrating what they have learned into their bases of knowledge and storehouse of strategies for future actions.

**Social Work Highlights.** Social service providers, law enforcement officials, representatives of civic organizations, community leaders, and concerned neighbors recognized a need for a neighborhood youth center on the lower east side of the city. Youth in this particular neighborhood did not have organized community activities and were at risk of gang participation and delinquency. Juan Rameriz, a community action organizer and social worker at the Neighborhood Development Corporation, served as the chairperson of the committee that was raising funds to secure facilities and hire program staff for a neighborhood youth center. The program was based on a national neighborhood club model.

After ten months of intensive planning, organizing, and fund raising, the committee announces the acquisition of a building for the youth center and a commitment of start-up funds from community donations and a local foundation to hire a program coordinator. A ribbon-cutting celebration brings closure to this aspect of the project. All the people associated with this project, including city officials, police officers, volunteers, agency representatives, and neighborhood families and youth, will participate in a ceremony to celebrate the success of this endeavor and to launch the next phase, refurbishing the building and implementing the programming components. Juan acknowledges that to bring closure to this part of the work is important because accomplishments fuel commitment. Some of the
original committee members will continue with the project, although new volunteers will be needed as well.

Looking Forward

In competence-centered social work, practitioners focus on the capabilities and strengths of client systems throughout the intervention process. The generalist orientation is well suited to this approach. A focus on competence necessitates that practice interventions consider the person in the situation—and, specifically, barriers to social functioning—and that the interventions be driven by client needs rather than by a particular practice methodology. Generalist social workers are proficient in assessing problems for micro and macro implications and in utilizing system-level intervention methods for work with individuals, groups, organizations, and communities.

Chapter 9 presents a framework for generalist social work practice based on three functions of social work: consultancy, resource management, and education. Building on the tenets of empowerment and competence, the chapter presents social work roles and describes practice strategies for social work with individuals and families, groups and organizations, and communities.