

Towards a Generalist Approach in Social Work Practice

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Abstract

Social work practice in Asia has followed the Western model which means the use of the traditional separate methods of social casework, social group work, and community organization. This model, however, has been overtaken by newer ways of viewing social work practice. A major source of influence is social systems theory. In addition, in the case of developing countries, the United Nations' call for a more development-oriented social welfare that is not bound by traditional ways of helping people has led to efforts to improve the content of social work education particularly in the social work practice area. The pursuit of a "generalist approach" in practice is one such effort.

This paper presents a framework for a "generalist approach" in social work. The author contends that a common generic base in social work values and knowledge can and should be taught to social work students.

She presents an outline of what she thinks should comprise this value base and knowledge base that is essential if a "generalist" practitioner is to work with client systems of all "sizes."

(Keywords: social work; traditional methods; casework; groupwork; community organization; systems theory; holistic approach; values base; knowledge base).

Social work as a profession is concerned with the enhancement of the individual's social functioning. Social functioning is the result of person-situation interaction, *i.e.*, the interaction between the individual's coping abilities and the demand of his/her situation or environment. This is achieved through what have been established as the three functions of social work:¹

1. to assist individuals and groups to identify and resolve or minimize problems arising out of disequilibrium between themselves and the environment (remedial or curative function);
2. to identify potential areas of disequilibrium between individuals or groups and the environment in order to prevent the occurrence of disequilibrium (preventive function); and
3. to seek out, identify, and strengthen the maximum potential in individuals, groups, and communities (developmental function).

These three functions are interrelated. In actual practice, many social workers, regardless of field or setting that employs them, usually perform all of these functions.

In some instance, the practice of social work *vis-a-vis* the three functions mentioned calls for work with individuals in a one-to-one relationship; in some instances, for work with a family and other small groups, and in some instances, with larger groups and collectivities such as organizations and communities. Such social work practice is called social casework, social groupwork, and community organization, respectively. In Western countries in Europe and in the United

States, these three traditional methods are practiced separately, which means that a social work practitioner chooses one of these three methods as his/her area of "specialization" and engages in the practice of only that method. A review of the definition of each of these methods will make for a better appreciation of the subject of this paper.

Casework is defined as "a personal service provided by qualified workers for individuals who require skilled assistance in resolving some material, emotional, or character problem. It is a disciplined activity which requires a full appreciation of the needs of the client in his family and community setting. The caseworker asks to perform this service on the basis of mutual trust and in such ways as will strengthen the client's own capacities to deal with his problems to achieve a better adjustment with the environment."² Social groupwork is a method "through which individuals in groups in social agency settings are helped by a worker who guides their interaction in program activities so that they may relate themselves to others and experience growth opportunities in accordance with their needs and capacities to the end of the individual, group, and community development."³ Community organization is "a process by which a community identifies its needs or objectives, orders (or ranks) them, develops the confidence and will to work at them, finds the resources (internal and/or external) to deal with them, takes action in respect to them, and in so doing extends and develops cooperative and collaborative attitudes and practices in the community."⁴

This Western model of social work practice that has different practitioners engaged in doing the three methods has been followed in many Asian countries and continue to be used, almost unquestioningly in some places, even as new ways of viewing social work practice have emerged in the last two decades. The fact is, predictions or expectations related to these traditional methods go back to many decades past.

As early as 1942, Bertha Reynolds could discern "a generic social work that is basic to all forms in which it appears today and that

is not sharply divisible even into the categories of casework, group work, and community organization."⁵ In 1955, Arlien Johnson stated that "the objectives, principles of operation, and ways of working with people are found to have generic content and to be adaptable to many situations and settings.... It may be that eventually the present specializations and designations of methods will disappear in favor of a social work method in which new forms of specialization will emerge that will be based on a broader foundation than any of the methods that has developed to date."⁶ In 1965, Katherine A. Kendall expressed the same idea. In that year's Annual Program Meeting of the Council of Social Work Education, she predicted that by the late 1960s, the familiar curriculum tracts of casework, groupwork, and community organization would begin to disappear. In her effort to fathom the future, she said, "the old curriculum policy of 1962 had worn well and was gracefully retired by 1970."⁷

These predictions seem to have come true. Although there is appreciation for the contributions of these original methods that have served as pillars for practice, the call is for social workers to accept and encourage the emergence of new, relevant methods for contemporary practice at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.⁸

There is today a strong movement away from the practice of separate social work methods. In many schools, social work practice is no longer taught as separate methods of casework, group work and community organization but as "micro practice" where students learn how to work with individuals and groups, and "macro practice" where they learn about how to do community organization and social planning. In the field of practice, there are now more "social workers" and less "caseworkers," "group workers" and "CO workers," just as agencies are now more identified as "social work agencies" than as "casework agencies," etc. In the social work literature, different terminologies are used, *i.e.*, "integrated practice," "integrated methods," "unitary approach," "generalist approach," and "general method," but the objective is the same - to move away from the traditional separate methods of practice.⁹

All these efforts stem from the common view that most social problems involve different social systems, and that one cannot and should not deal with one system in isolation from other systems. This "holistic" approach to social work practice is based mainly on social systems theory. In social systems theory, all social units - individuals, groups, organizations, and communities are conceived as systems. Each system has an internal organization consisting of subsystems and is related to other systems in its environment (our notion of the individual as a "bio-psychological being" reflects a systems perspective about the individual). Systems theory provides social work with a tool for analyzing and organizing data about clients, and offers many options for intervention. The use of a systems model as a conceptual model for practice allows social workers to focus their attention on the person-situation/environment interrelatedness.¹⁰

Besides the influence of social systems theory, the trend towards a more "holistic" approach in social work practice in Asian countries, particularly the underdeveloped ones, was spurred by the United Nation's declaration of the "social development decade" first in 1960, then in 1970, which brought about an assessment of many of these countries' social welfare goals and programs. In the field of social work, there followed an examination of the relevance of social work education and practice to the realities confronting the majority of people who are the users of social work agency services. Starting in the late sixties, there was already an expressed need to teach and practice social work that is not "methods bound" (*i.e.*, based on the traditional separate methods of casework, group work and community organization).¹¹ This means that the social worker is not in a "straight jacket," confined to work only with one type of client, and, limited to the procedures and techniques of his/her method of "expertise." Rather he/she will work with an individual, a group or a community (which, in the new thinking is not necessarily a "geographic" community but any large collectivity of people such as a hospital ward or a tenement housing area) is necessary, and will use any one of these as a point of entry for helping. One of the major criticisms against the traditional methods is that a practitioner approaches all client problem situations on the basis only of his/her method of specialization.

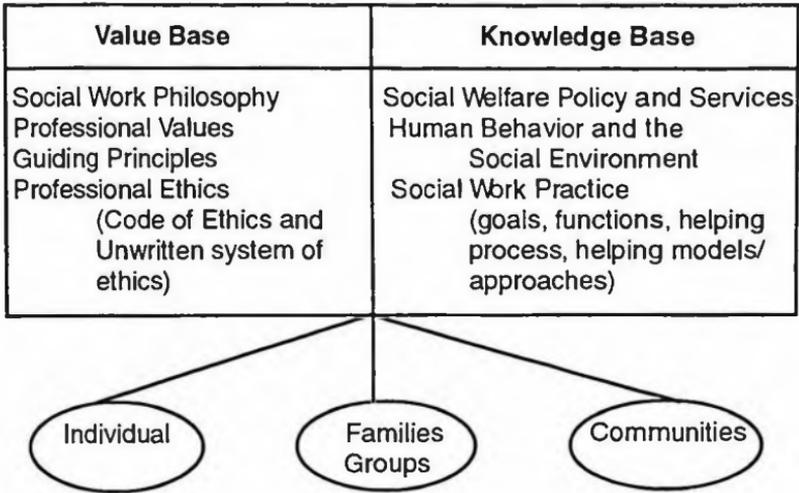
I have been advocating an "integrated method of social work practice" in the Philippines since the late sixties. The first paper I wrote related to the subject, "Social Work Models of Intervention in the Philippine Setting" was an initial effort to develop a set of interventive models that can be applied to all types of client systems.^{1 2} My premise was that there are "models" of helping clients regardless of size, each requiring certain knowledge and skills from the social worker, and that if the latter is competent in the use of these intervention models, he/she will be able to work with any client system. The response to this paper, written paper in 1968, was rather lukewarm. Most of our social work educators were not ready for such a way of viewing practice. Indeed, old habits die hard.

Today, with the wide acceptance of systems theory which emphasizes interaction and interdependence, and following many workshops and papers written on the need to rethink and modify the teaching of social work practice, the picture is changing. The need to teach a "generalist approach" instead of the traditional separate methods of social casework, social group work and community organization is generally accepted in the Philippines although the how of doing this has not been agreed upon. Additionally, the term "generalist approach" seems to be more acceptable than "integrated method of social work practice," which was what I initially used,¹³ apparently because the word "method" is reserved for the three traditional methods. I have no objection to the more popular term, but hope that before long we in social work will have no more need to qualify our method or approach as "generalist," "integrated" or "unitary" because we know we have a common method of helping people.¹⁴

I shall now present a framework for social work practice which has served me well in my teaching since my interest in the "integrated method of social work practice" started in the late 1960s. This framework contains what I think should be the values and knowledge base/foundation for every "generalist" social work practitioner. It can therefore be used as a guide in developing a generalist-oriented undergraduate social work curriculum, in both a developed (*e.g.*, Japan, Singapore) and underdeveloped or developing country (*e.g.*, Philip-

piners, Sri Lanka). It is my belief that adequate grounding in these values and knowledge foundation will sufficiently prepare students for gaining competence in social work with a client system regardless of size. For lack of space I shall describe this framework only briefly.

Framework for Generalist Social Work Practice



Value base

It is doubtful that we can really teach attitudes, and yet we are convinced about the great need for future social work practitioners to have the "right" attitudes or feelings about people and their problems, about their rights as well as responsibilities in society about the goals of development, about professional relationships, etc. What I believe we should emphasize, therefore, is the teaching of our professional philosophy and values, using whenever appropriate, instructional methods that can impart content in more meaningful ways. We hope, or perhaps, we should expect, that as a result, students who already have the kind of attitudes essential for practice will get reinforcement in their attitudes, or derive additional inspiration and challenge. For others, we hope that the effective teaching of philosophy and values will mean change or modification of their attitudes.

Among the most important ideas/concepts that should be included in the teaching of social work's philosophical base are the following:

1. The philosophy of social work rests on the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of the human being, from which belief emanate the practice principles we adhere to, *i.e.*, acceptance of people as they are; individualization of clients; participation of the client in the helping process; self-determination as a right of the client; confidentiality; non-judgmental attitude; and worker self-awareness.
2. The ultimate value of social work rests on the conviction that it is good and desirable for people to fulfill their potentials, to realize themselves, and to balance this with equal effort to help others do the same, which is a value not unique to social work but held by a democratic society.¹⁵
3. There are values held in common by the entire profession and they constitute a minimum commitment for the social worker.¹⁶
 - a. Each person has the right to self-fulfillment, deriving her or his inherent capacity and thrust toward that goal.
 - b. Each person has the obligation, as a member of society, to seek ways of self-fulfillment that contribute to the common good.
 - c. Society has the obligation to facilitate the self-fulfillment of the individual and the right to enrichment through the contribution of its individual members.
 - d. Each person requires for the harmonious development of her or his powers socially provided and socially safeguarded opportunities

for satisfying her or his basic needs in the physical, psychological, economic, cultural, aesthetic and spiritual realms.

- e. As society becomes more complex and interdependent, increasingly specialized social organization is required to facilitate the individual's effort at self-realization.
- f. To permit both self-realization and contribution to society by the individual, social organization must make available socially provided devices for needs satisfaction as wide in range, variety and quality as the general welfare allows.

I think the teaching of social work ethics should form part of the philosophical base of social work practice. Social work ethics would cover such areas as relationships with clients, with professional colleagues and the profession itself, and one's agency. A country's professional Code of Ethics for social workers would of course be the major instrument for teaching ethics, but the unwritten rules of conduct and duties of a social worker should be given as much attention in social work education.

Knowledge Base

The knowledge base of social work encompasses the concepts and theories, skills and attitudes necessary for effective, efficient practice. Broadly speaking, therefore, the knowledge base of social work includes its value base or foundation which has been presented. However, I am now using the term "knowledge base" to mean the body of theory which social workers apply in their practice and which come from different sources: (1) knowledge generated and tested in the basic disciplines (psychology, sociology, etc.) which are learned in "General Education" courses and later reinforced through appropriate additional courses (sometimes called "elective" and "co-nates") when the student is already taking professional social work

courses; (2) knowledge from other professions (like law, medicine and public administration); and (3) knowledge from the profession itself.

Three areas denote substantive knowledge in social work and undergraduate courses in social work are organized along these three areas: Social Welfare Policy and Services, Human Behavior and the Social Environment, and Social Work Practice. (A fourth area, Field Instruction, focuses on the student's application and integration of what has been learned in these three areas).

The following is an outline of the content of the knowledge base of social work:

1. Social Welfare Policy and Services

The key word for this area is "social welfare," and the objective is to help students acquire a knowledge of the general policies, conditions, laws, institutions, programs, and a broad range of services which are relevant to social welfare in present day society. Students are expected to learn the nature of social work functions and contributions in relation to social welfare problems and corresponding programs and services.

Theme: Society responds to a variety of human needs and problems through the institution of social welfare.

Area Content: (1) Needs, problems and social provision; (2) Goals/motivations for social welfare; (3) Social welfare and administration and research as a base for sound planning; (4) Fields of social welfare, policies, programs and services; (5) Social work in social welfare.

II. Human Behavior and the Social Environment

This knowledge area focuses on knowledge about the person as a biopsychosocial being, the interaction between him/her and the

physical, social, cultural, political and economic forces in the environment which affect or influence him/her and his/her behavior.

Theme: The person is a biopsychosocial being; internal and external forces influence his/her behavior and condition.

Area Content: (1) Concepts of social functioning, social reality, social change, disequilibrium, (2) *Selected behavioral/social science theories:* psychoanalytic and ego psychology; systems theory, role theory, communication theory, small group theory, culture theory, learning theory, and organization theory.

III. Social Work Practice

This area is primarily concerned with helping the students learn and apply the methods and skills for professional social work practice - the "what to do and how to do it" aspects. The term "Social Work Practice" is preferable to "Social Work Methods" (what this knowledge area used to be called) which means casework, group work, and community organization.

Theme: Social work is a problem-solving activity that takes place within a meaningful client-worker relationship.

Area Content: (1) The social work profession: its goals and functions (including a review of its historical development, bringing the students to where it is today; the priorities in the light of a given country's situation); (2) The value base of social work (although the teaching of professional philosophy and values described earlier should be built into all the curricular areas, its teaching should be given emphasis in the Practice Area since it is a major aspect of generic work practice): philosophy and principles, values, professional ethics and standards; (3) The Problem-solving Method: the knowledge and skills involved in the problem-solving steps/processes, *i.e.*, Assessment, Goal and Action-Planning, Intervention, Evaluation and Termination; and (4) Helping Models/Approaches applicable to (a) all types of client systems (*e.g.*, the crisis-centered approach; the problem-solving approach); (b) individuals and small groups (*e.g.*, the task-

centered approach); (c) small groups (e.g., the developmental approach, the mediating approach); and (d) communities (e.g., the community development model; the social action model).

The foregoing is not an exhaustive presentation of the attitudes, knowledge and skills base for a generalist approach to social work practice. It is also not a proposal for a pattern for undergraduate social work education for any region or country. My purpose is to make all of us who are engaged in social work education realize that a reorientation and reordering of the traditional way of teaching social work practice (i.e., through the separate methods of casework, group work and community organization) can be done. We should do it if we want our students to practice social work in a way that is relevant and responsive to the needs and problems of the people they are working with.

NOTES

1. Commission on Social Work Practice, National Association of Social Workers (1958). "Working Definition of Social Work Practice." *Social Work* 3(4), pp. 5-8.
2. Report of the Working Party on Social Workers in the Local Authority Health and Welfare Services (London: HMSO, 1958), pp. 182-183.
3. Harleigh B. Trecker, **Social Group Work Principles and Practice** (New York: Association Press, 1955), p. 39.
4. Murray Ross, **Community Organization: Theory, Principles and Practice** (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p.39.
5. Bertha Reynolds, **Learning and Teaching in the Practice of Social Work** (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1942), p.5.
6. Arlien Johnson, "Development of Basic Methods of Social Work Practice and Education," **Social Work Journal**, 36, July, 1955, p.109.
7. Katherine A. Kendall, "To Fathom the Future," **Journal of Education for Social Work**, Vol. 3, 1, 1967, p.2.

8. Maria O'Neil McMahon, **The General Method of Social Work Practice: A Problem-Solving Approach** (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1990).

9. To appreciate this ongoing effort in developing a more relevant methodology for social work practice, refer to the following:

- Helen Northen, "An Integrated Practice Sequence in Social Work Education," paper presented at the 16th Annual Program Meeting of the Council for Social Work Education, Minneapolis, Minnesota, January 24, 1968.

- Lola Selby, "Steps and Process Toward Change in the Teaching of Methods: One School's Experiment," paper presented at the Annual Program Meeting of the Council for Social Work Education, Denver, Colorado, January, 1965.

- Philippine School of Social Work and UN ESCAP, Proceedings of the Seminar-Workshop on "Integrated Methods in Social Work and Social Work Education," Manila, Philippines, June 3-28, 1974.

- Howard Goldstein, **Social Work Practice: A Unitary Approach**. (University of South Carolina Press, 1973).

- Thelma Lee-Mendoza, "The Integrated Method of Social Work Practice," in **Philippine Encyclopedia of Social Work**, 1977, pp. 178-187.

- Louise C. Johnson, **Social Work Practice: A Generalist Approach**. Massachusetts: (Allyn & Bacon, 1989).

- Maria O'Neil McMahon, **The Generalist Method of Social Work Practice: A Problem-Solving Approach** (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1990).

10. The context for the use of a system model for practice is the job "assignment" of social workers for which they are able to be held accountable, *i.e.*, the enhancement of the social functioning of individuals. Social functioning is the result of the people's coping and environmental demands and social workers' helping relationships with people are focused on problems of social functioning.

11. See Social Welfare Board and SWA-UNICEF-Assisted Social Services Project. **Report of the First National Workshop on Social Work Education** (Tagaytay City, Philippines, 1967) p. 16. Refer also to the International Association of Schools

of Social Work (IASSW). **Report of the International Congress of School of Social Work** (Manila, Philippines, 1970).

12. See Social Welfare Board and SWA-UNICEF - Assisted Social Services Project. **Report of the Second National Workshop on Social Work Education** (Silang, Cavite, Philippines, 1968).

13. See Thelma Lee-Mendoza "Integrated Method of Social Work Practice," in **Philippine Encyclopedia of Social Work**. Department of Social Services and Development and the Philippine Association of Social Workers, 1978. (pp. 178-186).

14. It is significant that the need to move away from the traditional separate social work methods has been clearly and continuously expressed in the social work literature of the country (*i.e.*, United States) from which these methods originated. For example, consider the following statements: (1) "... the present conceptualization of social work methods seems to be gravely misleading ... both social work education and practice have been confused and disturbed by an inappropriate methodological framework ... this appears to have retarded concentration on the characteristics of many of the problem areas confronted by social work methods, and has slowed or even prevented the conscious acquisition of a whole set of potentially useful, but thus far unused (in a systematic sense) techniques." (see Herbert Bisno, "A Theoretical Framework for Teaching Social Work Methods and Skills, With Particular Reference to Undergraduate Social Welfare Education," in **Journal of Education for Social Work**, Vol. V, No. 1 (Fall, 1969), pp.5-17); (2) "The small voluntary agency finds that it cannot afford a variety of specialists, and the large public agency has learned that to be effective it cannot separate individual and family improvement from societal change. For those who seek the world in holistic terms, the generalist has come to represent a promising solution." (See Maria O'Neil MacMahon, **The General Method of Social Work Practice: A Problem-Solving Approach**. Prentice Hall, Inc., 1990 (p. 329).

15. See "Working Definition of Social Work Practice," in **Social Work**, National Association of Social Workers (USA). April, 1958.

16. See Werner V. Boehm, "Objectives of the Social Work Curriculum of the Future," in **Curriculum Study**, Vol. 1, New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1959. (pp. 43-44).