

Social Functioning: *The Core of Social Work*

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Overview

Social work, although a young profession, undoubtedly encompasses a wide range of interests in addition to its multidimensional focus which requires a broad knowledge base and an equally broad repertoire of skills, competencies, and methods. Its scope covers a wide spectrum that spans from the individual, group, and the community, and even extending to the arena of social policy.

Social workers work with adults and children of different economic classes, racial and ethnic groups, cultures, and sexual identifications. They work with hospitals, clinics, social agencies, schools, institutions, and community centers, as well as in environments such as the home and the streets. Their interventions span the realms of prevention and protection, support and rehabilitation. They deal with a myriad of problems — family dysfunction, child neglect and abuse, marital conflict, separation and divorce, adolescent adjustment, problems of ageing, adaptation to physical and mental illness, homelessness, substance abuse, unemployment and job training and child care.

The typical professional social worker is expected to be skillful in fulfilling multiple roles — as an advocate, therapist, counselor, mentor, case manager, group leader, community organizer, agent of change, program developer, and evaluator.

Because social work has become so expansive and at the same time complex as a profession, its practitioners may easily lose focus of its very essence, and may be misled or tempted to dwell in areas outside of its scope. This may also lead to feelings of despair and frustrations for their profession's inadequacy to adequately meet societal expectations.

In addition, the view of social work is continuously changing — sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. (Locke, Garrison, and Winship, 1998) The social worker is a public figure and depending on how the society sees right and wrong as well as how skillful they operate within their theoretical framework, they are likely to be judged according to differing perceptions and standards. Also we have seen how the social work practice has been rather prone to changes and shifts depending on the settings in which the social worker may choose to practice. Social work practice that is not anchored on a clear core foundation may also result to a loss of professional grip.

There is an evident need for social workers to remind themselves of the foundational core of their profession. This is necessary to ensure that all their operations are kept within the actual bounds of their professional field; their practice is guided by a clear and right perception of social work; and they can guard themselves against professional drift leading to loss of commitment, perspective, and competence unique to social work. (Sheafor, Horejsi & Horejsi, 1997) Furthermore, a clear understanding of social work foundation is essential to fully appreciate the profession's strengths as well as its limitations, so that they can promote a solid and convincing image of the profession. (Bartlett, 1970)

This paper aims to extract and condense the core that defines the nature and scope of social work, which all social workers must come to grip with, to have full confidence in the work they do, the role they play, the methodologies and practice they employ, and to effectively fulfill the mission of their profession. It aims to define social work by defining social functioning which is its domain, to identify core knowledge and related concepts that build it up and in the process also identify the professional competencies required of social work practitioners based on the domain, with the end in view of helping them optimally function as social work professionals.

Social Work Defined

There have been many definitions of social work and all seem to be consistent about certain basic elements, as agreed upon by social work educators and practitioners alike. A most recent definition is offered by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in June 2001 which states:

"The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work."

An earlier definition by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW 1999) as found in the revised Code of Ethics for Social Workers states:

"The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historical and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in the social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living." (Social Work Journal, July 1999).

Such definitions consistently support a basic framework: "Social work is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups, or communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and to create societal conditions favorable to their goals." It emphasizes the purpose of social work as existing to enhance social functioning; improve quality of life by implementing and enforcing the society's mandate for safe, effective, and constructive social services; and create changes in the environment that support and sustain social functioning.

The NASW also describes social work practice as consisting of the professional applications of social values, principles, and techniques to achieve one or more of the following ends:

- Helping people obtain tangible resources;
- Providing counseling and psychotherapy for individuals, families, and groups;
- Helping communities and groups provide or improve social and health services; and

- Participating in relevant legislative processes that lead to the match between the person and the society, by focusing on promoting optimal interactions between them.

More recently, the IASSW and IFSW indicate a quite similar yet relevant concern as to how social work must be practiced. Concretely, the following have been identified as the current scope of all social work activities:

- Address the barriers, inequities and injustices that exist in society;
- Respond to crises and emergencies as well as to everyday personal and social problems;
- Utilize interventions such as counseling, clinical social work, group work, social pedagogical work, and family treatment and therapy as well as efforts to help people obtain services and resources in the community;
- Other interventions which include agency administration, community organization and engaging in social and political action to impact social policy and economic development.

Hence, the practice of social work requires knowledge of human development and behavior, social, economic, and cultural institutions; and the interactions of all these factors.

In addition, Zastrow (1999) quoting Barker, defines the scope of the social work practice by defining who the social worker is and what s/he does. "A social worker is someone who helps people increase people's capacities for problem solving and coping; helps them obtain needed resources; facilitates interaction between individuals and between people, and their environments; builds organizations responsible to people; and influences social policies."

In essence, the central mission of social work is to help people change so they can fit and function more comfortably within their environments, and help to modify those environments to be more supportive of the people. The job of the social worker is to improve the social functioning of people by helping them as they strive to prevent and solve problems that are social, relational, or interactional in nature.

Social work as a profession and field of study serves the following purposes:

- Promotes, restores, maintains, and enhances the social functioning (of individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations) by helping them to accomplish tasks, prevent and alleviate distress and use resources;
- Plans, formulates, and implements social policies, services, resources, and programs needed to meet basic human needs and support the development of human capacities;
- Advocates and initiates social-political action to empower groups at risks and promote social and economic justice;
- Develops and tests knowledge and skills necessary for the practice of the profession.

Given the foregoing definition and purpose of social work, one vital concept that constantly and consistently stands out is **social functioning**. It is clear that this fundamental concept is what provides essence to social work, gives meaning and reason to the profession, as well as direction to the practice. It is clear that all social workers need to have a good grasp of this concept and always anchor their practice on it. Social functioning is the hub of social work and every theory or application social workers use should emanate from and support it. All other concepts or principles of social work are one way or another tied to this core concept. It clearly sets the boundaries of social work and distinguishes it from all other professions.

The Scope and Nature of Social Work

To understand the scope and nature of social work, it is necessary to establish a common framework, purpose, knowledge base, commitment to certain values and ethics, and a set of recognizable skills that define social work. To capture the wholeness of the scope and nature of social work and present it in a single paper is simply impossible. But when its core elements (or building blocks) are clearly understood, connected to one another, and related to the big picture, a common ground for all those who attempt to study and practice social work is established.

Social work, like other professions, extends far beyond being an academic pursuit, it is an applied practice, hence its knowledge and professional roles and values have to be expressed in action. All the many approaches used by social work practitioners are somehow integrated components of gathering or exploring data of a case, assessing and evaluating the

case, and applying the appropriate intervention. This is the commonly held framework of action of social work. There is also a great body of knowledge, the multifarious skills, and the values and ethics to be applied by the practitioners in their multiple roles. Understanding these basic components and how they interrelate will lead social workers to fully understand the context of their work, appreciate both its diversity and limitations, objectively view their roles, and consciously practice within the nature and scope of social work.

Some may encounter along the way certain unclear points or unfinished preferred outcomes or even seemingly conflicting theoretical viewpoints in social work (as in all other professions), but will definitely find a clearly evident foundation that resonates throughout its historical development, to guide them through.

As early as the conception of the profession, social work has been strongly established on certain philosophical, ideological, scientific foundations which clearly define its scope and nature. While it has evolved into a very comprehensive and complex discipline with a solid knowledge and values foundation continuously reinforced by expanding theoretical formulations that are hinged upon dynamic societal needs and demands, it has also consistently retained a basic core. A good understanding of this core is essential to understanding social work.

Social Functioning Defined

While there is no single clear-cut definition of social functioning to totally capture its meaning, nor is there a specific model that prescribes the individual's functions in society. This is because models of social functioning are shaped by culture and values and hence, difficult to define without a context. There are however various supporting concepts that collaboratively build it. (Bisman, 1994)

According to Longres (Sheafor, Horejsi, and Horejsi, 1997), social functioning is "social well-being, especially with regard to the ability of an individual to meet the role expectations associated with particular status or role." Karls and Wandrei also define it as "a client's ability to accomplish the activities necessary for daily living... and to fulfill major social roles as required by a particular subculture or commu-

nity." Bartlett defines it as "the relation between the activity of people and the demand from the environment," focusing attention to what goes on between people and environment through the exchange between them, and stressed the need to consider both elements as composites of a single concept.

Social functioning draws attention to the match or fit between the needs, capacities, and activities of the individual and the opportunities and demands of his/her social environment by looking into the quality of transactions between them. This dictates that social workers not only help people adjust to their reality but they also help to change the social realities people face, making them both people changers and system changers. (Sheafor, Horejsi and Horejsi, 1997)

The overriding philosophy of social functioning is directed towards achieving a bottom line goal that is threefold: (1) an optimally social functioning person; (2) an environment that supports, sustains, and promotes the optimal social functioning of the person; (3) balanced reciprocal interactions between person and environment. All three are interrelated, with each one affecting and being affected by the others.

Furthermore, Horejsi (1976) presents social functioning as a relationship among and the summation of five factors: (1) **motivation** - what people want and how much they want it; (2) **capacity** - internal resources that people bring to the change process which include his/her physical, emotional, psychological, or intellectual fitness or maladaptiveness to deal with and work out possible solutions for his/her problems; (3) **opportunity** - conditions of the environment that invite and support change such as the availability of support groups and other external resources; (4) **service** - professional actions aimed at the motivation, capacity, and opportunity brought by the client which includes the interventions of the social worker and the social services within and outside of the social agency; and (5) **problem** - the situation that the client and social worker are addressing.

As social functioning is the very *raison de etre* of social work, in addition to serving as the distinguishing mark of the profession, it dictates what the profession's spectrum should constitute. If a social worker, or any student of social work for that matter, is to have a panoramic view of social work as a profession and field of study, one needs to have a good understanding of social functioning.

Key Concepts that Serve as the Building Blocks of Social Functioning

Person-In-Environment (PIE): The Locus of Social Functioning

Basic to the social work approach to help the individual increase his ability to cope with his environment is the idea of Person-In-Environment or person-in-situation, as a basis for understanding the total person — how and why s/he behaves the way s/he does. The person is a multi-dimensional entity, a bio-psycho-social-spiritual being who is a product of his/her past experiences, being shaped by present socio-politico-economic realities, and equipped with capacities, potentials and motivations for becoming. S/he responds within the context of his/her environment. An increasing volume of literature points out that human behavior is not only a function of factors inherent in the individual determined alone by environmental factors but is a consequence of the composite interaction between the individual and his/her environment.

The person's environment/situation is made up of both *objective* (external) and *subjective* (internal) elements. The *external* element refers to variables such as physical characteristics of the environment, geographical location, weather and climate, natural resources, and socio-political-economic-cultural conditions while the *internal* element refers to the perceived situation, as sensed and interpreted in the mind of the individual, and his thoughts and feelings about the environment, which uniquely define his/her situation. The person behaves according to the internalized effects of both environments, and any intervention the social worker proposes should take these into serious account. As the environment has significant emotional and psychological impact on the individual's view of his external environment and reciprocally responds to it based on this view, the social worker's stance is that of understanding the realities of the conditions that may have given rise to the behavior, and not blaming the person for his/her behavior. The Person-In-Environment/Situation underlines the importance of conceptualizing the person in an interactive context versus seeing him/her in a vacuum.

Another related concept lends additional light and clarity to the person-in-environment/situation framework. Martin Bloom explains "the distinctive emphasis of social work" (the person in his/her environment/situation) using what he calls the *configural approach* that looks at the person (or group) who is the target of social work efforts, within the context of his/her various environments, each interacting with the others. (Bloom, 1990)

His model places the person at the center surrounded by the various environments which s/he is a part of: **primary groups** (those that are currently most important to him/her and have the greatest influence over his/her life such as family, friends, work groups, etc.); **secondary groups** (those that have specialized claims on certain parts of his/her interests and work such as the workplace, school system, etc.); **socio-cultural contexts** (ethnic heritage and the societal order in which s/he lives); **physical environment and historical age** (actual setting and time wherein s/he functions).

Bloom presented a theoretical framework that shows the configuration of factors that need to be considered in the study of any human problem or change. The framework also clearly points out that the person's behavior needs to be taken in a much larger context that includes the various environments wherein s/he is functioning. All these factors influence the individual and the individual may influence all of these other factors to some degree as well. Bloom proposes that social workers need to think about helping within such a broad framework because all of the factors are potentially important.

In addition, Norton (1978) identifies two distinct sets of influences that make up a person's social environment: the **nurturing** environment and the **sustaining** environment. The **nurturing** environment (or immediate environment) is composed of people with whom a person interacts with frequently and often in an intimate manner (e.g. family, friends, close associates at work or school). It is and through these relationships that a person develops a sense of dignity, belonging, and self-worth. A person's **sustaining** environment is made up of people s/he encounters, the wider community and broader society such as people who represent political organizations, economic resources, labor unions, the media, educational systems, health and care facilities, and human services programs (the social worker is also a part of this sustaining environment). The social worker is there to ensure that the individual is accepted, respected, and valued within both environments. This is done by changing aspects of either or both environments such that the interactions between the person and his environment lead to experiences that help him maintain his/her dignity and self-worth, as well as empower him to make reciprocal positive contributions to his/her environment.

As PIE operates on the notion that problematic conditions can be changed based on the individual's unique strengths, limitations, and environmental situation, rather than on external standards of normalcy, social workers need to look at the problem at hand in a context that takes into account

the different elements of the social situation affecting the person's social functioning. This calls for the application of core skills and competencies as well as the demonstration of basic values advocated by the profession in order to accurately identify and analyze the total configuration of the person's system, thereby successfully provide the appropriate intervention based on that system.

The system certainly accounts for pathological and physiological factors but they are not accorded undue extra focus, instead are taken in proper context, where other factors that make life difficult for the person are addressed as well. This is done in order to help him/her comfortably walk through the course of self-actualization and capacity building.

The Dual Focus of Social Functioning

Throughout its history, the several attempts made to describe social work's nature and purpose all pointed to social functioning as its central object. All interventions provided by the social workers are to support the restoration, promotion, maintenance, and enhancement of social functioning. This means inducing change not only in the person but also in the situation/environment, as well as the interactions between them.

From its beginning in the nineteenth century, social work has maintained this dual focus of concern. Bartlett, Germain, Hollies, and Reynolds all spoke of focusing on the duality of the person and the environment and the interaction between them. One stream emphasizes the personal needs of individuals, families, and groups. A related stream emphasizes social reform and social justice. (Social Work Journal, July 1999)

Social functioning is defined simply as the relation or match between the person and the environment. (Bartlett, 1979; Macht & Ashford, 1992) It naturally draws attention to two main areas of focus — the person (or group) who seeks to develop his/her problem solving, coping, and developmental capacities and the environment which influences him/her to respond or behave the way s/he does. These two inevitably give rise to a third area where both are inextricable components of a composite focus — the relationship or the quality of transaction that transpires between them.

Helping individuals and groups improve their social functioning and prevent social problems from negatively affecting them requires the social worker to maintain focus on how people interact with the relevant people and social systems surrounding them. This necessitates the social worker to simultaneously address both person and environment.

Social workers must attend to the several interrelated dimensions of the person: biological, intellectual, emotional, social, familial, spiritual, economic, communal and so on. This focus on the total individual is the concern of the social work profession – such as, the individual's capacity to meet the basic physical needs, the person's levels of knowledge and skills needed to cope with demands and to earn a livelihood, the person's thoughts about himself and others, and his/her aspirations and goals, etc.

The concern for the person's environment considers the multitude of physical and social structures, forces, and processes that impact on humans and all other life forms. While there seems to be a preponderant focus on the person's *immediate environment* — those systems, structures, and other factors that most frequently and most directly affect a person's day-to-day social functioning which includes the person's family, close friends, neighborhood, workplace, and the services and programs s/he uses, social workers are reminded to also be as concerned with the person's *distant environment* e.g. seeking to change damaging social values, correct human rights violations, address unjust political and economic structures, deal with problems of biological well-being, all of which may affect the near environment. Concern for factors in both environments is the key to fulfilling the mission of social work. (Sheafor, Horejsi and Horejsi, 1997)

Various well-meaning attempts to emphasize the simultaneous dual focus of social functioning may have led some to make a distinction between social work as a cause and social work as a function. The fact is, social workers do both, and the debate as to whether the profession should focus on individual change or on environmental change results largely from an incorrect formulation of the focus. Putting the central focus on the interaction between person and environment corrects this polarized or dichotomous thinking that encourages a focus on one side or the other of the person-in-environment/situation. Social workers direct change strategies toward individuals and environments, and the interaction between the two.

Social workers focus on problems that fall into three areas: (1) problems and needs **associated with tasks involved in life transitions**; (2) problems and needs **associated with tasks in using and influencing elements of the environment**; and (3) problems and needs **associated with interpersonal obstacles** that impede the work of the individual (or group) as s/he deals with transitional and/or environmental tasks. All social work models consistently focus on the transactions of individuals and their environments with both individuals and their environments in a constant state of reciprocity, each shaping the other. Social work interventions are directed toward the interface of the individual and environment or at problems of living generated from the person-in-environment/situation interaction. Social functioning demands that social workers maintain both orientations and possess interceptive skills for individual change and social change, as they direct change strategies in the interaction that occur between them.

The duality of social functioning then is really not so much between person and environment, as most social workers tend to think. It is between **person-in-environment** (as a composite) and the transactions or interactions between **person and environment**. The person-in-environment concept necessitates the social worker to look at the person not separate from the environment, or when directing change in the environment, to do so in the context of how it will redound to benefits to the person. Person and environment are never to be taken separately from each other, but always as interrelated components of a single compound.

Hence, this duality demands that the social worker address with at least equal attention issues regarding the interactions between person and environment. While so many proponents of social work have time and again underscored the significance of and the need for focusing on this latter part of the duality, a lot of social workers still tend to focus on just either the person or the environment, tending to neglect to directly change the interactions between the two.

The Ecological Systems Perspective: A Knowledge Base for Understanding Social Functioning

A re-look at the ecological systems perspective which blends the **ecosystems perspective** of Bertalanffy and **concept of ecological environment** of Bronfenbrenner, further defines the foundation upon which the social worker is to anchor his/her practice. (Compton & Galaway 1999)

The **ecosystems perspective** of social functioning holds that all things living or nonliving can be regarded as a system and all systems have properties that are capable of being studied; and change occurs because of the transactions between systems or between parts of a system. In contrast to the reductionist view that sees change by understanding the whole by breaking into parts, this perspective looks at the system as a whole and the relationships and interactions it has with other systems. (Brandell, 1997) This perspective presents a way of organizing information rather than explaining observations which focus on the interactions between systems.

In social work, the most elemental social unit is the person. The interaction between social units which demonstrates functionally interdependent, and reciprocal relationships creates a social organization which itself has functional and reciprocal relationships with its social environment. All individuals and social organizations have some type of functional and reciprocal relationship with the social environment, thus systems are interactive.

The ecosystems perspective recognizes that system growth derives from the ability of the system to import energy (or system input) from other systems. However, there are other times when the system exports (system output) more energy than it is able to import. Systems rely on flow of energy, with outputs relying on fresh imports to create a balance or be functional. A functional system interacts dynamically with the larger environment, a need that supports the survival of the system. Because of this cause-and-effect relationship between the system and the environment, both are constantly changing. The ability of the system to adapt to its environment through changes in its structure leads to states of equilibrium and homeostasis, both of which relate to differing types of balance.

The **ecological environment concept** which goes beyond the linear cause-and-effect relationship between social units within the system views that there are a number of additional environmental factors in human social systems that affect the dynamics within social systems, referred to collectively as **ecological environment**.

In essence, this view states that human development cannot be isolated from, but must be taken within the context of the individual's relationship with the environment. Each individual's environment is unique, and that the person's development is profoundly affected by events occurring in his environment which is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the nest.

The blending of these two led to the ecological systems perspective by Germain (1984) which examines transactional relationships between systems. Germain strongly advocates to look at the biopsychosocial development of individuals (and groups) within cultural, historical, communal, and societal contexts – a perspective that requires looking at all events within the person's life.

This perspective characterizes the nature of relationships between systems as transactional and reciprocal between entities, or between their elements, in which each changes or otherwise influences the other over time. Such relationships are not linear, but are circular i.e., both systems in the interaction affect each other. It views individuals as both the cause and effect of their situations, and since the person is in a dynamic environment, each change s/he makes causes a reactive change in the larger system.

The ecological system perspective of social functioning points the social worker to direct his/her practice to deal with *changing the simultaneous transactions between persons and environment by matching the coping behavior with the impinging environment*. This extends from the growth and development of individuals on one hand, and improvement or amelioration of the environment on the other.

The Person as A Biopsychosocial Being

Social functioning in social work is a technical term that refers to any biological, psychological, or socio-cultural response pattern that results from the interactions between individuals and their environments. To understand the individual's response pattern, the social worker needs to consider all possible facets that make him/her as a total being.

There are mounting studies that point out the interrelatedness of the various aspects that make up the person, the resultant effects of his/her behavior towards his/her environment, and the differential effects of environment on individuals.

Biological Aspect

The biological aspect includes multiple systems that support the biological integrity and functioning of the human organism — biochemical, cellular, organic, physiological and nervous systems. All social workers need a general knowledge of basic biological functions and the impact that disturbances in these systems have on the person's behaviors. Particularly because biological development is in many ways more clearly defined than other aspects of the individual, this knowledge is very useful to social workers in better understanding human behavior.

Psychological Aspect

The psychological aspect involves all conscious mental functions that affect the individuals' ability to mobilize their internal and external resources to satisfy personal needs and avoid internal and external threats. These include information processing, motor control, communication, attitudes and emotions, internal controls and aspirations, social competence, and coping techniques, all of which are manifested in an individual's behavior. Social workers must learn to identify the behavioral manifestations for each of these psychological functions and how these functions are influenced by biological and social factors.

Social Aspect

The social aspect refers to all the social systems within which an individual lives, relates, and is influenced. It consists of all interpersonal, familial, social support, institutional and socio-cultural systems that influence his/her behavior. Social workers must acquire knowledge of how individuals relate to family, friends, enemies, authorities, school, job, the social service system, majority culture, and other systems. They must also assess how these social relationships act on the individuals' achievement of their life tasks.

Spiritual Aspect

The spiritual aspect refers to activities related to the individual's search for meanings to life and existence, which involves both *transcendence* (experience of existence beyond the physical/psycho-

logical) and *immanence* (discovery of the transcendent in the physical and psychological world). Today, there are mounting relevant social work experiences and literatures that link spirituality and behavior, which for the most part many social workers (or practitioners of other disciplines) can no longer ignore or discount, as was their tendency to do in the past. Social workers must also consider this aspect of the individual in working with him/her, as this has definite effects on his/her behavior. (Decker, 1995)

Understanding the Role Theory

Individuals are connected to social systems through the roles they play in them. Roles are at the same time an element of the individual and an element of the social system. They represent the joint boundary between the two, the point at which person meets environment.

Roles are acquired, maintained, and changed through a series of transactions between individuals and social systems. A person's role in any situation is defined in three ways: from the perspective of the expectations of others for people in that role (prescribed role), the expectations of the person taking the role (perceived role), and that person's actual behaviors (enacted role).

George Mc Call and J. L. Simmons (1996) describes five overlapping transactions that affect the person's role: (1) **recruitment** – processes by which the individual's participation in a social system is determined by deciding criteria for membership in statuses and roles; may be *ascriptive* (by birth), *conscriptive* (by law), or *achieved* (by merit); (2) **socialization** – processes through which individual participation is defined and refined as individuals learn to function as system members, such as processes by which people become aware of the expectations of others and learn the attitudes, knowledge, and abilities necessary to comply with those expectations; (3) **interaction** – processes through which participation in the system is implemented that allow members to influence one another and shape and reshape social systems; (4) **innovation** – processes through which a person's participation in a system is altered or changed, which may be *externally imposed* (as in changes in the physical environment force system members to rethink the ways they relate to their environment), or *internally planned* (as in conditions within a society force new laws into being); (5) **social control** – processes in which a person's participation in a system is limited or constrained. This may be implemented through positive (rewards) or negative (punishments) means.

Social workers who occupy many different positions and work with or on behalf of many different client populations and around many different problem areas need to have a systems approach that considers the concept of roles in their practice.

Before a systems analysis can be undertaken, the social worker must be able to clearly distinguish the system to be assessed. This is referred to as the **focal system**. Usually, this is the **client system** (or the person receiving the service), but it is also possible to assess the **target system** (the system to be influenced, changed, or altered). In many situations, the client system and the target system are one and the same, that is, the person receiving the service is likely to be the target for change. It is also possible that the target system will be some other persons or groups or conditions.

From a person-in-environment/situation perspective, the assessment of individuals focuses on the roles they occupy and the role transactions in which they are involved. These are essential considerations in analyzing the problems and needs of individuals in relation to the role transactions in which they are involved. The social worker will work at the boundary between the person and her social environment (role) in order to help bring about the best fit.

The Concept of Social Justice As The Societal Goal

Most social workers may somewhat be idealistic in that they want to envision the society as just and humane, and strongly maintain that individuals have certain basic rights. In short, they seek social justice, an ideal condition in which all members of a society would be able to share and enjoy the same rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits. Compton and Galaway (1999) point to the dual focus on people and environments as a necessary element of empowerment and a condition requisite to individual and social change. A focus on the person-in-situation interaction would therefore not only help clients obtain social services to which they are entitled to or help them adjust to the environment, but more importantly social workers must try to deal with the relevant people and institutions in the clients' environment that are contributing to their difficulties.

All considerations of social justice are founded on a core belief that every human being has an intrinsic value or worth that need not be earned or proven, nor is a function of one's race, nationality, gender, IQ, income, social status, education, political affiliation, occupation, or other external characteristics of life circumstances. (Sheafor, Horejsi & Horejsi, 1997)

Of course, social justice is a complex ideal and there are always varying perspectives on what constitutes fair and what steps are necessary in order to achieve it. Social workers (and others) need to work for social and economic justice and needed reforms in ways that recognize and consider legitimate differences of opinion, as they maintain respect for those who disagree with their ideas as to how best to attain a just society. They also need to be especially sensitive to the nature of social injustice which may result from a multitude of complex and interrelated economic, political, historical, and social forces. They must be open to the possibility that they may, in some way unintentionally contribute to or perpetuate expressions of social injustice.

Moreover, because social workers at times cannot not become involved in issues that have direct impact on social policies and reforms which have resultant effects on people and the environment, such as politics, economics, etc., they need to constantly examine their own beliefs and values and make difficult decisions about where they stand and be prepared to face the consequences that may result from their involvement in them, as this is an integral part of social work. Central to the understanding of the concept of social justice is a knowledge based on social and economic conditions and realities and the critical awareness of the social work profession in the delivery of social services within a larger socio-economic and political context.

As we work with our clients we are often faced with a myriad of problems spanning from a microscopic view of personal and interpersonal difficulties to a wider range of issues and problems rooted in broad social, political and economic contexts. 'Social working' cannot be justified as effective if the profession and/or the social worker are not able to situate, understand and carry out changes in the socio-economic or structural context of individual problems, much more, draw an analysis as well as initiate intervention on how power arrangements and societal forces create conditions that generate stress, deprivation and other forms of individual problems. A clear understanding of the concept will help develop the social workers' critical analysis of class inequality, sexism and other forms of oppression and their impact on social work practice.

The task at hand may be overwhelming and social work involvement (whether political or otherwise) can be tiring and frustrating, as some have already experienced, and may lead social workers to develop attitudes that prevent them from faithfully pursuing their mission. In order to continue functioning towards the attainment of desirable social and community change, social workers need to continuously strive to develop personal qualities of hopefulness, patience, perseverance, and tolerance.

Implications of Social Functioning to Social Work Practice

The domain of social work is defined by social functioning. Understanding this core foundation will help the social worker to identify and implement appropriate methods and tools for effective social work practice, keep a proper perspective of his/her tasks and functions as a practitioner, and never lose sight of his/her objective or mission in the course of his/her practice.

There is no single explanation that will give social workers a panoramic view of the rather vast spectrum of social work or social functioning. One must learn and understand several interrelated concepts that build up social functioning, in order to understand the true nature and scope of social work.

The strong dual orientation of social functioning with simultaneous focus on person-in-environment and the interactions between the person and environment necessitates the social worker to give at least equal attention to the latter. Hence, the social worker needs to develop personal qualities and abilities (knowledge and competencies) that will help him/her identify and implement the best change strategies that will provide optimum benefits to the person in environment.

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